Serrated Palmyra Leaf, Bamboo Baskets and Brocade Saris: Life and Stories of Two Writers From SPARROW Archives

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C S Lakshmi, 2017

Bama

Urmila Pawar

*When **Bama,** [Bama is the pen name of Faustina Mary Fatima Rani] the much celebrated Dalit writer who writes in Tamil, published her first novel entitled* Karukku*, I did not understand the title for the word also stood for freshness and also when slightly altered it meant the pre-dawn darkness heralding the dawn. I had never seen or touched a serrated palmyra leaf and did not know that its serrated edges worked like a saw and could cut through one's finger. Much later, I went to a village and happened to touch a palmyra leaf and it cut my finger deeply and it hurt. Bama had played with palmyra leaves in her childhood and often they hurt her fingers. Later incidents in her life cut her heart like the palmyra leaf. It is thus that the palmyra leaf became the metaphor of her life and the title of her autobiographical novel.*

Bama began to write her autobiographical novel at a time when she had just left a nunnery she had joined much against the wishes of her family, for she felt the caste system existed there too and her dreams of serving the poor did not really work out. Feeling totally abandoned she went to a Chrisitian priest she knew who was a family friend. She had no money; not even change of clothes and tears just would not stop flowing. Her friend told her to write it all out and get over it. Karukku *revealed the uneven roads she and her people traverse, the rocks, thorns and boulders they cannot cross, the springs, the swampy grounds they cannot walk on, the quicksands that pulled them in, the stench of excreta that was part of their life but also the smell of food prepared on special occasions like when some money came in, that remained a part of all other experiences.*

She could not write the book in a chronological manner. Thoughts tumbled out along with tears and the narration went back and forth almost like the movement of a saw. When it was published it was just a book of some 99 pages. But it shook the Tamil literary world with its language and directness. I was then doing my research on the social history of women in Tamil Nadu and when I saw the book I began to look for sources I had not consulted for I felt I had only half the picture. After its publication many came forward to offer affection and love and many friendly hands were extended towards her. But Bama kept aloof. It took her many years to accept me as her friend and knowing that she needed that many years I waited. Once we were together in a women writers' conference and I wrote her a note about something and she replied, "Yes, sparrow" referring to my organisation SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) and making me a sparrow. After that she invited me home and then came and spent a day at my place in Mumbai and is now one of my closest friends. When I visited her I took the opportunity to do a long interview with her, excerpts of which we used in a book brought out by SPARROW. I cannot forget how she spoke about her life and her mother in that interview. It is this aspect of the relationship with the mother, not only of Bama but all the other writers I am going to write about in this article that I find the most important motif in their lives.

The interview with Bama happened over a whole day. At the end of it we spent the night mulling over what had been spoken, prepared a meal next morning and what we shared has become a very precious part of our friendship. I give below some excerpts from what she spoke that day that was recorded to be used for public consumption in a book we were publishing then, which has since been published:

Bama: I was born in a village called Pudupatti in what is now called Virdudhunagar district. My father was in the army. My mother was a daily-wage labourer. We were six children. My elder brother, elder sister, myself, then the fourth was a sister and the last were twins, a brother and a sister. When we grew up there—that Dalit area—our street was called *Cheri Theru*. Our village was divided into various caste-based sectors. The Dalits live at the end of the village in one pocket. It has been so from the beginning. When I was growing up, I would keep thinking of this arrangement—that these people stay on one side of the village and the upper castes on the other side. At that time, if you see, all the important roads were in their area. Our road was the last, at the end of the village. So to go to the post office or school or temple or to the market, wherever we wanted to go, it

had to be through their area. But there was no need for them to come to our area because there was nothing here. Then there were not many educated people in our area. Many were illiterate. So most of them were labourers, working for daily wages. There were many such people there. Now there are a few educated people. But in our times, most of them were landless agriculturists. So they would work in the fields that belonged to upper castes. And their lands lay close to where they lived. So for any kind of activity that was the main place. These were the surroundings in which we lived. I studied up to Eighth Standard in my village. There are two schools there. One is a convent school run by nuns. Another… was run by fathers (monks).

I was not very conscious of these caste differences, like upper caste and lower caste, when I studied there. That was because many children from our area studied there. There was a separate school for Naidus in their area. So they would study there. They would not come to this school to study. And we also would not go there. So all that I knew was that that was their school and this was ours….

I don't remember when it was, whether I was in Sixth or Seventh Standard. After passing through the main streets, there was a large open space just before entering our street. It belonged then to a Naidu. There was a cement platform there and he was sitting there, on a gunny bag. We were coming from the main bazaar. A man from our street was holding a packet in his hand. He was holding it by the jute thread that had been used to tie the packet. It was swinging from side to side. I was initially amused to see it. I was thinking, 'Why is he holding it this way? If the thread gets undone, the packet will fall'. Because the paper in which the thing was wrapped was oozing with oil. We could make out that he was carrying some vada or bhajji. Had it been some small boys [who were carrying it that way], it was okay, but a grown-up man like him! It would take him five minutes to reach his destination. He must have been holding it that way from the moment he had bought it. So we kept laughing at him. We ran behind him telling one another, "Look at the way this old man is carrying the paper parcel." When he came to the spot, he bent double and in a servile manner, held it in his left hand and offered it to that Naidu. He unwrapped the parcel and began eating it. But this old man went away to attend to his work. So I went home and told my elder brother, "This old man was holding the packet by the string and it kept swinging from side to side. He seemed to be having fun." It was he who said, "It is not a game or anything. He is not supposed to touch it. If he has bought it for the Nayakkars, our people are not supposed to touch it or hold it in their hands." "Why shouldn't we touch it?" [I asked]. "Because they say we are dirty people. So if we touch it, it will get soiled. That is why he held the packet by its string," he said. Then I thought how could it be? Only if one touches the vada, will it get soiled. But it is wrapped in a paper and inside the paper is a banana leaf in which the eatables are placed. When I said so, he said, "Yes, even that should not be touched by us." That was the first time that I got very angry. Not only must this old man go all the way to the shop but he must also bring it back without touching it and hand it over to this man. Where is the need for this? Why can't he go and buy it? I was furious. That was the first time I understood the contempt with which the upper caste looked at us. I understood the extent of untouchability prevalent in the society.

After I finished the Eighth Standard… I went to a boarding school in the next town to finish my studies. Then when I used to come home for holidays, I would go with my grandmother to work—work meant pulling out the groundnut plants, after the peanuts had been picked. The plants have to be pulled out and the peanuts left have to be picked. I have gone to do such work. It was there that I had direct contact with the landowners. Do you know what they would do? They would not allow us to come near them. There would be a considerable distance between them and us. My grandmother would overdo it. What she would do was the height of servility. She would walk with exaggerated humility. Then those Nayakkar lads would come. They were very fair. They would also dress nattily and would look handsome with their well-combed hair. But we were not like that. We were after all labourers. So we would not be so clean or so well-dressed. Even the women from those streets were like that. They would always be well-dressed, their hair well-oiled and plaited with a little flower tucked in it. I would feel jealous whenever I saw them. If you see in our street, they would pull up their un-oiled hair and tuck it up. They would look as though they were always hard at work, like toilers. That is, you can see the contrast between our street and their streets—the difference between those who toil and those who don't do much manual labour. And these boys… My grandmother was, after all, much older than them. But they would address her in the singular and talk in a very rude manner. Talk to her disrespectfully. They would behave like that. But it did not appear as if my grandmother found their behaviour offensive. She would be telling us, "Do this, do that, don't touch that, don't touch this, don't go too close to them." She would keep admonishing us. It was then that I realised that only two things mattered—one was caste and the other was money…

In the later journey of her life which finally led to her becoming a teacher, nun and later a writer and a teacher, Bama constantly experienced the crippling effect of both caste and money. And the one person who helped her to overcome these two factors was her mother, an uneducated woman, an agricultural labourer whose dream was to see her daughter as a teacher. When the convent where she studied urged her to go to college, Bama left on her own because the rest of the family was against it. She did not go back home to pack her bags, afraid that she would be stopped from going. Her mother went back and two days after Bama had spent her time in the college, wearing the same clothes and feeling awed by the other girls from affluent families, her mother came one evening. Bama came running to see her mother. Her

mother stood there before her, tired and sweating because of the long journey, with unkempt hair and a crumpled sari. They hugged each other and cried. Her mother had pawned her earrings to buy her a trunk and a few clothes. They spent the night not in a room but in the cramped shelter meant for watchmen to stand. When she spoke about this Bama became emotional.

Bama: My father's name is Susairaj. My mother's name is Sebastian Amma. My mother was a very simple but a deep philosopher. I have learnt a lot from my mother. She was not educated. She only knew to sign her name. She did not know much besides that. But I have learnt a lot about the philosophy of life from her….

…So after I finished my SSLC, my father said that I should not study any further. I was not allowed to go to college. I did not know what to say. I remained at home. I did not know how to proceed, whom to approach to continue my studies. At that time, the Sister who taught me in tenth standard came to visit a church in the next town. So my mother and I decided to go and meet her. She asked me, "What are you doing now?" I replied, "I am doing nothing." She scolded my mother. She asked, "How could you keep a girl who has scored such high marks idle at home?" My mother said that my father was against it. At once she said, "We will send her. Will you go?" she asked me. She wrote a letter but she did not send me home. She sent me to Tuticorin in the very same dress that I had worn. She took me there. My mother returned home on her own. At first she refused to go back. "No, I won't go. My son is at home." My elder brother was at home. "He will get angry with me if I go home without her. I will go home and bring her back." But I pleaded with the Sister, "Don't send me home. They will not allow me to return." She agreed. I was not even conscious of the fact that I was going all by myself. All I wanted was to somehow study further. I spent the night in their convent and next day she sent me with a letter. I did not know about Tuticorin. She told me where to get down and where to go. I have never travelled long distance before that. I got down at Tuticorin and I saw large buildings all over. The college and all that were new to me. It was the first time for me. I felt awkward to even enter the building….

I did not know what I was going to do. I went and enquired about the office. It was near the Principal's room. I went and gave the letter. They admitted me. I had scored very good marks in SSLC.

C S Lakshmi: Which college is that?

Bama: St Mary's college. It was run by Sisters (nuns)…. Then my mother, what she did was—my father had ordered her to bring me back. He shouted at her, "Whose permission did you take to send her there? Will that Sister pay the fees and the hostel charges? She has gone there on their advice. Bring her back." But when my mother went and spoke to that Sister, she repeated her old warning. She said, "We will not send her back. And if you insist on bringing her back, we will dismiss your older daughter from her job." My mother knew she was defeated. She had only one piece of jewellery [called] *pampadam* (a type of earring). She did not sell it. But they did that other thing…

C S Lakshmi: Pawned it?

Bama: Yes, pawned it and with that money, she bought a trunk for me and collected all my clothes from the house. My mother is illiterate, she does not know much about the outside world. She has never travelled far from the house. She came to Tuticorin to see me. She reached Tuticorin in the evening. We both began weeping on seeing each other. It was somehow very sad to see her. She looked pitiful and helpless.

C S Lakshmi: What a wonderful mother!

Bama: There was never much cash at home. She went to a shop and bought a long skirt and dhavani for me. I was moved by her gesture.

C S Lakshmi: In such a big town and a strange place? But your mother had so much of faith in your education, isn't it?

Bama: Yes.

C S Lakshmi: Because she had defied her husband and her eldest son to come there to see you.

Bama: Yes.

C S Lakshmi: Did you understand the importance of her action?

Bama: I did not realise it. I realised it much later. Not just then. At that time I only thought of the hardships she must have suffered to come here. A feeling of pity welled up in my heart.

C S Lakshmi: You must have felt sad to see her in such a state.

Bama: I felt very bad. It was because of her that I am in this position. That day she came and gave me everything…

Bama finished college and trained to be a teacher but early in life as a young girl, she had had dreams about becoming a nun for she admired a nun in her school. She spoke about this in the interview:

C S Lakshmi: …there were many nuns among those who had helped you.

Bama: Yes.

C S Lakshmi: Did you admire them?

Bama: Definitely. Not only that, I wanted to become a nun after I finished S S L C.

C S Lakshmi: After S S L C?

Bama: Yes. I used to adore the Sister who taught me in the tenth standard. It was a romantic admiration. She used to wear a habit. I was very poor in Maths. But she taught only Maths. I would get only ten or twelve marks in Maths. But I liked her a lot. She would come walking in the space between two rows of benches. As soon as I knew that she was approaching, I would push and push until I reached the edge of the bench so that she would brush against me.

C S Lakshmi: So much of admiration?

Bama: I would long for such things. Her habit should touch me. Things like that. Not that I was crazy or something. And if her habit touched me, I would boast about it. But she was aware of it. She had noted all that. So, she really liked me….

And since I liked that Sister so much, I thought of becoming a nun. I told my mother. At once, my mother took me to see that Sister, because I wanted to be a nun like her. But that Sister knew about how I felt for her. So she said… "Let her not join the nunnery now. If she is still determined to become a nun, even after finishing college, then you are welcome." My mother told her, "She does not know how to cook. So if she gets married, she has to do the cooking. She is scared of that, that is why she is opting to become a nun."

C S Lakshmi: Who will choose to become a nun because she is afraid of cooking!

Bama: That's what my mother said. I retorted: "No, it is nothing like that. I always wished to become a Sister". The Sister asked, "Why? Why do you want to become a nun?" But I could not give a suitable reply at that time. Then she said, "Finish your studies. Then we will think about it" So, I dropped my plan to join the nunnery. But I was very devout—I would count the beads of the rosary daily— I was very pious. I would do the Retreat very sincerely….

…Then while studying in college, some cracks began to appear in my devotion to god. And that was after watching those Sisters. Until then, those Sisters in my high school those foreign Sisters, I felt, seemed to be a very pleasant and lovable sort. But in this college, it was not so. These Sisters discriminated on the basis of caste or I suspected it was so. By then I was a bit more mature, isn't it? What they would do is, they would oblige students who were well off and rich and give them permission to go away. But they would not be so obliging with us. They showed such differences in treatment. I began loathing them for their prejudiced behaviour. I was no longer so keen to become a Sister…. It was only after that, that I entered with more fervour into conversations about a husband, child, and how many children should one have—trivia like that.

C S Lakshmi: Others girls must have imagined about the sort of man they would love to marry. What sort of a man was your dream guy?

Bama: Someone very fair.

C S Lakshmi: Fair…

Bama: That is how I thought then. He should be very fair and well educated, have a good job and shower love on me. I had such cravings. Actually I had created a person in my own imagination. He did not resemble anyone I had met. But my husband had to be like that….

Bama did become a nun although her family advised her against it. She worked as a teacher for a while before she decided to join an Order. But after becoming a nun and being a devoted one at that, she felt that as a nun she was not able to help her own people. It was not an easy decision to take to come out and the writing of Karukku *happened in a spontaneous, unplanned way:*

Bama:… At that time, I knew that the Order that I was going to enter, did not quite measure up to my expectations. So I was in two minds. So a part of me was cautioning me, not to go.

C S Lakshmi: But still you felt you had to go.

Bama: Yes, had to go.

C S Lakshmi: Did you think that by joining that Order, you could change things there?

Bama: No, I never thought of changing anything. I wanted to work for my people…

…I worked that whole year. Then I resigned and wrote to this Order….

C S Lakshmi: Is it a large Order?

Bama: Yes. So, Mark (a family friend) came with me. He left me there and went away. Then I stayed here. Then they had an English course for those who did not know the language. I was not in that. I was teaching English. I knew the language well. Then I stayed there for one year. No, I stayed here for sometime. Then they transferred me to Jammu….

After becoming a Sister, I was transferred to Madras. But I was very happy on the day I became a Sister. A feeling as if a long awaited desire had been fulfilled….

I was definitely happy. It was like a total commitment, total surrender to the cause of Christ and the Kingdom of God. Just that feeling. Because I was very sincere. Because if you see the person of Jesus and his values, it is really revolutionary…. What we had been taught in the beginning carried a different message. They had taught us about the meek and humble side of Jesus. But when I read the Bible and read about such qualities of Jesus, I was really drawn towards Jesus and his values. The charismatic man and his mission for the poor, the outcast. These things had really affected me a lot. Therefore, I was really waiting, waiting to practise what I learnt. I was in an expectant mood. I was hundred percent sincere. I decided to become a nun only after I was totally convinced about it….

…[But] I had no contact with ordinary people. It was only teaching and teaching. I would muse: did I become Sister to teach English and Maths to these upper-class children? I felt I was wasting my life. By that time I was thirty-three or thirty-four. Then I decided I would leave. The urge to leave was as strong as the urge to join the convent….

… Then I returned. I think it was a Friday. The train reaches Trichy on Sunday or Monday. The train that left Jammu, the same one. In that train… when I was travelling, I felt numb. Because this was an important point in my life. I was neither worried nor happy. I just travelled, immune to everything around, like a block of stone. That is how I returned.

C S Lakshmi: Were you in that nun's habit?

Bama: No, only in a sari.

C S Lakshmi: You changed into a sari, is it?

Bama: No, no. A Sister's sari.

C S Lakshmi: You were wearing the same sari, is it?

Bama: Where will I go for another sari?

C S Lakshmi: That's true.

Bama: You can wear saris in three colours.

C S Lakshmi: A cream-coloured sari.

Bama: A type of saffron, another one in grey and the third one in blue. I wore a grey-coloured sari. I returned in that sari. Until I reached Trichy, I just sat there; only when I was getting down in Trichy, did I feel sad. I was in a state of confusion—what am I going to do? I did not know. I even thought I should have continued my journey. I did not know what the future held for me. I got down at Trichy. Actually, I was not my confident self at that time. Because I was jobless and penniless. I had no savings. I had not paid any heed to my family's plea not to join a nunnery. And here I was returning defeated. I could see clearly that my future was bleak. I did not know what I was going to do. I came straight to Madurai. Mark was in Madurai at that time. I went straight to him.

C S Lakshmi: Did you travel to Madurai from Trichy by bus?

Bama: Yes, by bus. By the time I reached, it was night. I could not even weep; I was in a benumbed state. Then they gave me food. I had a bath since I had been travelling by train for three days. After that, they did not ask me anything seeing my condition. They obviously thought after a night's sleep, they could ask me. There were four or five people there—Fathers. It was the Social Work Centre. But I could not sleep a wink that night. All of them had gone back to their rooms. I remained sitting. What shall I do? Where can I go? I have no job. I did not know what I was going to do to get my next meal. How long can I remain a burden on these people? I was also not in a position to ask for help from my family. Then I managed to sleep. I did not want to go back to my town. How could I go back after defying everyone to become a nun? And I was back now. Nobody should ever be in the condition I was in. I just sat there, like a demented person. But I never regretted having come back. I have come back, but what next? That was a big question mark. Then I told Mark everything. When I was there, my past appeared in full in my mind.

C S Lakshmi: You were thinking of your past.

Bama: How I had been living, how hard I had studied, the places I visited, the money that I had earned, my dreams—how happy I had been working in my town. Everything had come to naught. I had put faith in this Order only to return empty-handed. I would recount all this to Mark, whenever he was free. He knew my family very well. I kept weeping when I spoke of my experiences in that Order. He was a very busy man... He had no time to listen to my woes. He gave me a notebook and told me, "Write whatever appears in your mind. By unburdening yourself, you will feel better." But I could not just sit and write, even though I had no job. So the director of that centre gave me the job of a translator—he had created one for me. Thousand rupees was the salary. In '92, I accepted that salary and went to stay in a hostel. Because I could not stay there, because those Fathers in the Social Service Centre lived there. 'You cannot stay here. You can work here,' [they told me]. In the hostel, the room rent was three hundred and fifty rupees. With the balance, I had to travel by bus everyday to my work place. And [also have] three square meals per day. The money was not enough. I had to buy some saris and other things for myself. I had nothing with me. So what I would do is, I would not eat. I would skip a meal on some days and eat something light. I went through a lot of hardship. And what was even more difficult was I could not mingle freely with others. I had been living a cloistered life for so long….

… The director gave me that translation job. Then, in the free time, since I had nothing to do, I began writing. They had given me that freedom. I wrote and I wrote for six months. I would not say it was in the form of a novel. It was not a book. I just wrote. And as I began writing, memories of my town, my people, how we lived, my brother, all these thoughts made me feel happy. I slowly regained my old self—the old Faustina and my laughter. I would write myself and correct it also. I was doing that. I would write about the present. Suddenly, it would be the past. Like a monkey, jumping from tree to tree, I wrote, traversing the past and the present. Then after writing for six months, I gave the book to Mark—that notebook. He himself asked me one day, "Have you finished?" I had been writing just like that. He read it and he liked it a lot. "It is a novel kind of [book], a literary work," he told me. I thought he was just teasing me. I said, "Oh god! No, no! Don't even think of it." Then the director read it. He too liked it very much. Then they suggested a few changes. Whenever I wrote about my town, I used the language in which we all spoke and when I wrote about the convent, it was in a more refined sort of Tamil. They advised me to use the language I was familiar with because that sounded better. 'So using this refined language is not going to improve the story-content. So use your language.' But I asked them not to get it published as a book. But they insisted saying, "You do not know anything about all this; you will be happy once you see the consequences." They convinced me a lot. So I agreed and changed the language…

C S Lakshmi: Who gave the title to that book?

Bama: I did. Actually the book was not separated into chapters or anything like that.

C S Lakshmi: Only numbers, one, two, three…

Bama: I separated [the chapters] numerically. Then at their own expense, that Social Work Centre, they got it published. I never knew that the release of the book will have such consequences nor that it would affect me so much. So I just kept quiet. They gave me some money as royalty. That is all. That was the only profitable result of that book….

C S Lakshmi: So you published *Karukku* (Serrated Palmyra Leaf)…

. . . . . Yes, *Karukku* came out and it surprised me. I selected the name *Karukku* after much deliberation. And I never expected that there would be such a responsive reaction to it. Both in the literary world and among the Dalits in my place, it caused quite a stir. I was very surprised. That a book could do so much… In religious circles, it was met with hostility. They felt I had misrepresented them. But I could not care less. If you take in the literary world, some were for and some were against it. And to which genre did it belong? Was it a novel? What form was it? What is so great about her writing? Before publishing Mark had shown the manuscript to a professor. He was a Tamil professor. He showed it to him. His reaction was "How vulgar it is! Throw it in the garbage bin." He (the professor) is still there. He said so. That was before it was printed. And after it was published, there was a lot of criticism—"Does it look like it has been written by an educated girl?" They said so many things. But that criticism did not affect me; nor did the praise. Because I had no expectation or aspiration to become a well-known writer and that my books should get published. But what hurt me deeply was people from my town misunderstood it. That was very….

C S Lakshmi: Was it because you wrote about your village?

Bama: I was not worried about that. I have written about myself. I had made a mistake. I had used the real names of people [in my village]. Then I remembered he (Mark) had told me, 'You should have changed the names. You should not have kept the same names. You should have changed them.' What happened was — at that time my parents were both sick. They (the villagers) went to beat them. They went to my house. They shouted at them using abusive language and damaged the furniture. My father was very angry with me. He shouted, "Why can't she remain quiet after coming back from the nunnery? Why should she write a book like this? We are the ones being troubled. Why can't she let us live in peace in our old age?" They had actually planned to beat me up. "So please do not come here," [they told me]. They were old and these people have gone to our house to pick up a quarrel with them. They did not lay a hand on my father. But they had vowed that if I ever stepped into my village, they would have me beaten up. So my father warned me to stay away. He said, "Let their anger subside. You come after that. I will tell you when to come." I never went to my place for seven months. I was staying here. Their anger was due to the fact that many of them were illiterate. And those who could read a bit misinterpreted it to those who could not read. 'She has written like this about you,' they would say. They would call each and everyone and say, "She has said this about you, and she has said that." Exaggerating everything. So they thought I had shown them in very poor light, and so many people would read this. She has become rich by writing like this. Then one person just one wrote a letter to me. "Your book is very good. It is a big thing that a history about Dalits should find a place in the literary world." He was a young man, and he had written. And he had also given his address. So I replied. I wrote, "I heard that they had come to beat my parents. I am sad to hear about it. That was not my intention. If I tried to show them in a bad light, I would be degrading my own self. Why did they think so?" So a few educated men decided to rectify matters. They would come home from work and make these people sit in a circle under the streetlight and read out my story, explaining the context. They would ask them, "What is wrong in that? Tell us." And after it was explained, they understood everything. Then he wrote to me, "Please come to our town now. We are proud of whatever you have written about us." So I went back….

I stayed for just one day and returned. I did not stay long. I spoke to these boys and came away. By then, many people from my own town had begun reading the book. In May, that year, they unveiled a statue of Ambedkar in the bus stand. They gave it the nickname of Karukku. They invited me to the stage and asked me to speak….

But initially, even my sisters were not appreciative of my writing. "Why do you have to write about all this? Why exhibit to the world everything about us?" Some of them felt so. But it was a liberating force for me. It was like owning my identity. I am like this—that feeling. That was one thing. I have an inherent feeling of defiance and obduracy, latent in me. It had got withered and shrunk in these seven years. Now it was slowly sprouting. I wanted to live. Until then, the feeling of despair had filled my heart. It vanished and…

Bama has since been working as a senior teacher in a school in Tamil Nadu and she has written many books since and won many awards. Dealing with caste is an experience that continues to be a part of her life but that she can teach young children in a small town and give them hope and strength is what keeps her going. Recently Karukku *got reprinted as a classical edition and she asked me to write an introduction and I mentioned that a novel like* Karukku *needs to be reprinted every decade for we are people who forget history very easily. It has been particularly easy to forget the*

history of Dalit life and the struggles that Dalit women have waged in their life. It has been convenient to make it easy. In order to spoil the sleep of those who pretend that things that pierce one's mind don't exist, to butt against them time and again to trouble them, to cut open their thickened skin, the serrated palmyra leaf is necessary both as a metaphor and a book.

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A widow with a grim face sits in the front yard of her house, under a small tree, weaving bamboo baskets for a living. Her little daughter who often plays truant from school wishes her mother would smile and dress up like other mothers. She also wishes her mother would not beat her up so much and not bathe her as if she was inflicting a capital punishment. The young girl has also to run errands for her mother—deliver baskets woven on order and occasionally run to the Brahmin household opposite to buy pickles for two paise for her mother. The young girl pushes herself to school to fulfill her father's dying wish and finally takes up a job. One day she decides to write about her experiences and that of those around her. She gets to be known as Urmila Pawar, the Marathi writer whose writings reflect Dalit experiences of living, working and existing. In Urmila's narration of her life one can see many stories and in her stories, one can see her life.

***Urmila Pawar**, is a much appreciated writer. Many of her stories are derived from the pain, agony and difficulties of living as a woman and as a Dalit. The frank and direct manner of her story-telling and the earthy language she uses in her stories have made her a controversial writer in Marathi. But there is more to Urmila Pawar than just the controversies raised by her stories. Urmila is a self-made woman. She was born in Pansawle village in Ratnagiri district and later her family shifted to Ratnagiri. Urmila was the youngest among seven children. Her father who was a school teacher, died when Urmila was in the Third Standard. Her mother, who was uneducated, brought up her children by weaving baskets and selling them. After passing her Matric in 1964, Urmila joined the Public Works Department. She did her graduate and post-graduate studies later after her marriage and the birth of her children. She got married in 1966 and came to Mumbai in 1976.*

Urmila is also a close friend of mine and she has done me the honour of requesting me to translate her autobiography into Tamil, a language I write in. I say honour because Urmila does not grant such favours easily! She can be very dismissive. I admire her for her forthright manner and for her contribution to modern Marathi literature which has been recognised with many awards. Her autobiography has been made into a play and recently in a writers' meet organised by SPARROW in March 2015, which Urmila was also a participant, we had invited a theatre group whose director was Sushama Deshpande, to present a shortened version of the play. At the end of the play everyone was in tears. I looked around and Urmila's eyes were also full of tears. Looking back at her life through the play, she must have been moved.

Seeing her in tears took me back to 1998 when we had organised an oral history workshop to have a dialogue with her where she spoke about her life and work. Urmila had been writing from 1975 but a story she wrote suddenly became much talked about sometime before 1998. The story was about the life of a woman who sells mangoes. It was a very sensitive story about how people pass comments on the woman's body in a language which has double meaning. When they say, "Your mangoes look beautiful," they really mean the breasts. The child of this woman doesn't know this. He is sitting with his mother. Once he goes to school and similar comments are passed on the teacher by the male teachers. And the teacher really gives it back. So then he feels, "Why didn't my mother do the same? Why didn't she react? Is it because she is stupid that she didn't understand it?" But the mother understood it very well. But just then she is not in a position to react. The child doesn't realise it. He says, "If you don't stop selling mangoes I won't go to school." He feels ashamed that somebody passes such comments on her. The mother says, "But you know that selling mangoes is our profession, how can I not go?" And that day in the market, two drunkards come and when they pass similar comments on her body, and they ask her if her mangoes are from Choli (the name of her village which also means a blouse) and ask if they can squeeze them.So this woman immediately says, "Yes, these mangoes are from Choli, but your mother's choli. Go ahead and have a good look and feel your mother's mangoes well. Go on." So immediately the boy realises that his mother understands, and that she is capable of giving it back when it is necessary.

It is a beautiful story but some of our politicians thought that this story was against our culture because of the language that is used. They did not realise that this is the language that was used in everyday life. This story was talked about a lot and I had heard about this story and I had also heard Urmila talk elsewhere, when she had come for the session on autobiographies organised by Vacha, *a women's organisation. I was very eager that she should come and share her life with us and students in the oral history workshop. In that oral history workshop Lata P M and myself held*

the dialogue with Urmila. Lata was a health activist and was also an activist in the Narmada Bachao Andolan Movement, a movement led by Medha Patkar, against building the dam on the river Narmada as it meant wiping away several villages and the lives of people of those villages. What Urmila spoke in that workshop has since been brought out as a booklet by SPARROW. In the workshop Urmila emerged as an emotional person but with a great sense of humour. She could ridicule others but she could also laugh at herself and the situations she was put in. Her writing and the role of her mother in her life came out the strongest in her narration that day. Another story of hers which has been translated and is part of the booklet is autobiographical. And the story, which we had read before the workshop, provided a good background to her life.

Urmila constantly played truant from school when she was a small girl for the school master always asked her to clean the verandah, especially the dung on the verandah saying it was done by the cow in their house. Once when Urmila questioned him, he slapped her and Urmila came home running and crying. Her mother consoled her but what she did later made Urmila realise who her mother really was. She says this in her story "A Childhood Tale" in a matter of fact way but when the story was read out in the workshop Urmila began to cry. The mother waits for the Guruji (teacher) to come by that road and when he comes she stands up to give him a piece of her mind:

…she threw down the half woven basket, straightened her sari and stood, like a female cobra, with its hood outspread ready to strike. Just as Guruji appeared she drew her sari on her head and said, "Wait a minute, Guruji…" Guruji rolled his eyes quickly and looked at her. Arrogantly he asked, "What is it?"

"My daughter studies in your school, right? What did she do today? I mean you beat her so much, see, look at the child's cheek," she said and called me to her and held my face in front of him. I did not have the courage to look at Guruji.

"That…that…your white cow…drops dung in the school…" he stammered.

"Our cow drops dung, eh? You saw her dropping dung? Guruji, you are so well educated, yet you talk like a small child? Look here, I am not a respectable woman. I live under this tree, by the roadside, with my children, like an exile. Why? So that they can study… become important people. And you harass the girl like this?"

Aayee was speaking incorrectly, ungrammatically. In a loud voice she was threatening Guruji, "Look here, after this, if your finger so much as touches my daughter, I will see to it that you can never walk on this road…."

"All right, all right, I too will see…" Guruji replied as he moved backwards. Then in a flash, he disappeared. By this time many people had gathered around us, staring at my mother's gesticulation and my swollen Hanuman-like face.

After that day, many things became easier… Collecting dung and Guruji's beating were no longer a part of my fate and destiny. I started going to school on time. But the main thing was that I began to look upon my mother as a tremendous support. And my life got some direction.

What Urmila spoke in the workshop was not only about her life but woven into it was the life, pain and active work of so many Dalit women:

Urmila Pawar: I come from the Dalit community [in Konkan]. My mother did not study; she was illiterate. My father had studied up to the Sixth Standard. Everybody in the village would think he had studied a lot. In those days it was possible to get a job after the Sixth Standard. So he was a teacher. Apart from that he would also solemnise marriages in our community. Brahmins would not come to solemnise weddings in our community. Therefore any educated person from our community would come and conduct the ceremony. My father's forefathers had been solemnising marriages. The people in our community would therefore get married in our house and we would get some money and rice. We would, therefore, carry on with our lives.

I was in the Third Standard when my father passed away. But since he was a teacher, he knew that a person needs education to progress. We used to stay in a village. He had built a small house, like a hut, in Ratnagiri town and he brought us there [from the village Phansawale]. That is how we started to go to school. Then he passed away. He had told my mother, 'Do whatever you can, but don't stop the children from going to school. Let them study.' So the one thing my mother understood was that we had to study. If we did not study she would beat us. She knew how to beat very well. When my father died, she had us six brothers and sisters to take care of. One of our brothers had already passed away, so there were [actually] five of us. We studied in the High School.

used to go to school but we did not have enough to eat. My mother would therefore weave baskets; that was her work–to sit and weave.

My brother passed his SSC [Secondary School Certificate] exams and then he caught typhoid and died. The pain of his death and the death of my father made her cry often. She only remembered how to cry and weave. She was concerned only about our studies. We would eat really low-quality food and wear poor clothes. I would not even bathe for four or five days. I would play in the dust and I would have plenty of lice in my hair. Water would be boiled hot and then a little washing soda would be mixed with it and rubbed into our hair, and then[she] washed [our hair] with this boiling water. Mother would then comb hard to pick out lice. When she poured hot water and combed through my hair, I could see stars before my eyes like flashing lightning. My mother also beat me. This is how we managed to live.

There were those belonging to Maratha, Brahmin and other castes living around us. These people would ask mother to weave baskets [for them] and since I was the youngest, she would always ask me to go to such and such a person's house to deliver the baskets. I would go, but they would make me stand outside their house. They would sprinkle water over the basket. They would drop the money from above into my hands. I would feel really hurt. So I would tell my mother that I would not go.

As I have written [in my story] I would bunk school. Because I did not go to school, the teacher would beat me. The teacher would also practise caste discrimination. He would make me sit in the last row.

I had an older sister. When she was married, my father was alive. The situation in her house was like this: they were so poor that when they ate food, they would eat in one plate and they would measure their food. They were three or four brothers, and they would sit and [argue]. 'How many mouthfuls did you have?' '[How many] morsels did you take?' 'You took it stealthily.' And if someone ate a little more, there would be a huge fight about it. So they were called 'those who measure their mouthfuls and eat.' Therefore girls were not to be married into their house. But my brother-in-law belonged to the same house. He had passed the Seventh Standard. My father thought he could become a teacher and that he should give his daughter to him in marriage. He was very dark—[a real] 'blackie.' My sister was married off. She would tell us a lot [about them]. "These people, they steal and hide the roti on the loft, then they steal each other's rotis to eat," [she would tell us]. They would fight to this extent, even to eat. And we also have this saying among us: if we heard anyone fighting and asked who was fighting, [the reply would be], "Nobody, those Mahars are eating food." This saying has come because there would be a great fight over food....

One good thing was that our father had brought us to a town. We had benefitted from that. We could see and learn the rituals, traditions and customs, ways of behaviour, ways of eating, how we should keep our clothes clean [and all that] from the Brahmin and Maratha children in our class. And we began to behave like them. We did not have [that kind] of food at home. We did not have the recipes [for that food]. We ate roti and machli (fish) because we were from Konkan and the machli that we ate was also of low quality. We did not know of big fish like halwa and pomfret. We went to their house and learnt how to make ladoos and other things for Diwali. If I tried to make these at home, my mother would scold me because it would need a lot of oil, a lot of flour. So she would not let me do it. And because she was unhappy, she would cry….

C S Lakshmi: Could you tell us more about the women around you in your childhood and how they thought and lived?

Urmila Pawar: As I said, my father brought us to a town. And we would feel embarrassed by women from the villages because if some woman came from the village, they would wear their sari above the knees. When I would see them, I would feel, 'I will not tell anyone that they are my relatives.' I would feel this way when I was young. When someone would ask, "Who is this?" even if it was my aunt, I would just say, "She is from our village." During those days people were very backward. They would not get good food to eat, so the life expectancy of women was also very low. A woman would get very old by the time she was fifty. Thirty-five- or forty-year-old women would be called old. 'That old hag', they would call her. Now, even if we turn seventy, eighty, we do not feel like calling someone 'old woman'. We call them Aunty or Mausi and in foreign [countries] they don't even call them Aunty. We don't even think about being old women. But it was like this earlier ... Even when they got pregnant, they would be in a bad state. Nobody would attend to them. Nothing [would be done].

When women deliver today, we talk about stitches, how many stitches are needed and so on. What they would do those days was, if someone's body would tear during delivery, they would take a cloth, put a lot of salt water and a little bit of oil over it, fold the cloth over and give it to her and she had to bear it. They would give the salt-fold because salt has some protective qualities. They would give a hot fomentation. They would put burning coals in a *sigri* (charcoal stove) and let her breathe the smoke. She should sleep above it. Otherwise they would say, 'The body will ring out,' meaning she would pass wind and it would make a noise [and she is not supposed to make any kind of noise]. They would pour the hottest water possible on [the women's] hips.

This means that the task of giving birth to a child was [very difficult] for a woman. Some women would have the child's leg coming out, some would have the hand, there would be no doctor and the woman would die. The condition of women was very backward.

When I grew older, from among my relatives, all the women had shorter life expectancy. My maternal aunt was dead. Mostly they would catch TB, or [have] asthma. Other diseases like cholera or chicken pox would spread and a lot of women would fall victim to these. The women would die and then there was the [inevitable] second marriage. There are a lot of my relatives who have married twice or thrice. These women were not even aware of hygiene. They would wipe their nose and give roti with the same hand. My sister's mother-in-law would scratch her foot and then serve the roti with the same hand. When I would say, 'No, there could be germs,' she would say, 'What germs? Where can you see germs?' I had ringworms in my stomach. They are also called *jant* (germs). She felt only those were germs. She would not understand about germs and other things.

Women worked very hard and often died early because poverty made it impossible to ward off diseases and deaths; however, it was not as if there were no tender moments in this life of poverty and oppression. Urmila spoke about an aunt who used to visit them, and how her mother expressed love for her:

I remember, there was this Chachi (aunt) of my mother's, she loved my mother a lot. When she would come over, even my mother would [show her affection]. She lived alone. When she would come, bathing was a ritual. She would be bathed and given good clothes; good as in my mother's sense of the term. They were just clothes [washed] with a little soap. We would give her good clothes. And how was she bathed? There would be love in it, a lot of love. She would be made to sit, water would be heated, and *khopra* (coconut) – no soap, only coconut [was used] – Mummy would cut a piece of it, chew it and spit it on her hands and she would rub it on Chachi's arms and her body. We were young, we would not understand it – about the coconut. The Chachi, she would go to her village and say, 'I had gone to my niece. She bathed me with chewed coconut.'

We did not use sugar in tea. We used jaggery. We did not know the use of milk at all. Our tea was without milk. We stayed in the city, so we would get a little sugar. She was given tea with sugar. She would be overwhelmed….

Often Urmila is criticised for writing about Dalit men who do injustice to their women. Dalit male writers sometimes ask her why she does not write the way they do and speak in general about the life of Dalits and the oppression they face without being gender-specific. Why does she write about her community the way she does? Urmila was also told that writing about the Dalit community maybe used as a weapon by the upper castes against them, especially against Dalit men. The critics saw it as a kind of betrayal.

Urmila has dismissed the criticism, saying that it need not be seen as a weapon, and that such criticism cannot be used as a weapon against women either. In her own life, Urmila would like to straddle Dalit and feminist identities. She does not think that they are mutually exclusive.

The women from our village would come to the town to sell grass that they had cut, or wood. Our house was next to the road. My father had dug a well in our house. No one would give these women water to drink in the bazaar. They would suffer a lot. They would start from their homes at four in the morning. They would walk eight or ten miles barefoot. Their feet would be chapped, they would gather dust, their hair would be knotted and they would not have good clothes. They had no water.

My father had given my mother good advice that this well should be kept open for women. The rope and the bucket that was needed to pull out the water would also be there for those women. But my mother was very poor and miserly. She would not feel like leaving the rope there because [constant use] would easily break it. She would have to buy it again. So she would remove it and keep it aside. My father would get angry with her.

The women who would come to drink water would sit and eat their roti and chatni. I would steal onions from home and give it to them. Mummy would get very angry with me for that. When they would come, they would tell my mother all the village gossip. As she would weave, she would listen.

There was one thing about my mother–if she heard anything from someone she would not tell another person. It's like a newspaper press. Everything comes to the press but it does not get published! This is how she carried on. They all would come there – 'My husband did this,' 'My mother-in-law does this,' they would gesticulate, eat paan, spit it around and tell stories. My mother would sit in our courtyard under a small tree and weave. Sometimes I feel, if I had those baskets woven by my mother, we could place the needle on it [like in a gramophone] and spin it and they would tell us stories of all those people. We could have heard them.

She would record all the news, collect them. The mother-in-law would come and talk about the daughter-in-law: 'She is a burden, she is useless, she has done this, she has done that.' And she would go. Then the daughter-in-law would come and she would ask, 'Did my mother-in-law come here?' My mother would say, 'No. Why, what happened?' 'Last night she did this,' [she would say and add,] 'My husband beat me. Because of her such and such a thing happened.' My mummy wouldn't say anything to her. They would tell my mother whatever was going on in their minds. They would all come and tell my mother, [they would] cry, all this would go on.

I would be very interested [to listen]. But my mother would take a stick and tell me, 'Go to school.' She would be after me. But I would also bunk school and come and sit down to listen to them.

There was this funny family. The husband would beat his wife, but he would never tell her why he was beating her. He would come into the house, look around, pick up a stick and beat her. If the woman would ask him, 'Why are you beating me?' he would not tell her why. He would not speak. So what she would do is, when he would get angry, when she would feel that he was going to beat her, she would run to our house. She would come and tell my mother, 'This has happened. He has lost his temper,' and so on. So what my mother would do was this. We had a loft. She would get a ladder and make the woman sit in the loft. She would then remove the ladder and tell us, 'Go on children, go to the backyard, go behind the tree.' We would hide there. Then he would come [and ask], 'Has my wife come here?' [My mother would ask,]'No, why, what happened?' Then he would say why he was angry. She would say, 'Why did you get angry? You fight almost every day.' He would say, 'She did this. I had gone to take a bath; the water was very cold. I wanted warm water.' [My mother would say,] 'So, you should have told her. What is this you do?' The woman would be listening from above.

He would come, look around in the house in the corners. But he would not think that she would be sitting above. So he would leave. He would leave after my mother had calmed him a little, saying, 'You should tell your wife what you want and what do you do instead? You should not be doing this.' He would leave when he had cooled down. Then the woman would leave after him.

This drama would go on at our place. This kind of a mess would go on in women's lives, but they would not feel that they were being oppressed by their caste.

Urmila also spoke about her writing and how she began to write.

Urmila Pawar: … With time, when the children grew up I felt the urge to write. I had a friend who could not have children of her own. She used to always cry. Whenever we met, she had only one thing to say—that she did not have children. Her pain used to hurt me. Then my brother's wife, my sister-in-law, had five daughters. She used to be pained by the fact that she had only daughters and she used to cry. I saw the familial pain of these women. I was hurt a little and I wrote. I don't think I wrote very well or that I have handled every issue about women. I do not think like that, but what hurt me, what I felt, I wrote in my story.

Lata P M: What hurt you?

Urmila Pawar: It's like this. The Dalits are a backward community in [Indian] society, they are deprived of the facilities and benefits that the upper castes have access to. They don't even get food to eat. We have fought even for food. Similarly, society has not attended to women's [issues]. Women are also deprived. So they also have pain and hurt. I am also a woman. So even I used to feel that I have been denied, that I should get this. 'Stay in the house, come back before 7 p.m. Do not talk to boys. Don't talk to this person'—all these restrictions [exist]. Women are bound by restrictions. The Dalit community is also bound by restrictions. Their pain hurts me, it comes through in my writing. Some people think, 'You have only that one thought in your mind.' But, every human being lives in a society, is surrounded by society, and the same is reflected, mirrored in their writing.

C S Lakshmi: But until recently we were not very familiar within, say, Marathi or other literature, about the pain of women being the same everywhere. So is the sorrow, the pain of the Dalit women the same as say, the Brahmin or Maratha women? Or is the sorrow of the Dalit women somewhat different?

Urmila Pawar: Yes, it is different. Because Indian society is moulded around the *chaturvarna vyavastha* or the four *varna* system. So within this [society], the upper castes (*varg*) have different questions or problems. The mother-in-law daughter-in-law question or the husband and wife question—these questions at the psychological level, remain at the level of the family. But as I said before, there is also the question of having food to eat. The upper castes did not have these problems. But among the backward communities, the Dalits do not get everything. There is always a lack—this or that is not available. The Dalit woman is also a victim of the male-dominated society; her condition is even worse. So as the Dalit male has to live in misery, the Dalit woman has to face even more. She is on the lowermost level. So the Dalit women have to face a lot of misery, too much of pain,

[when compared to] the women of the upper caste. Actually the Dalits show traces of the primitive societies and cultures. They follow those norms. For example, not allowing widow remarriage, [the custom of] child marriage, or not marrying the second time—these restrictions were practised by the upper strata of society, they were not imposed upon women of the Dalit community. They could remarry if they were widowed. She could marry another man if her husband deserted her. It was not compulsory that a girl child should be married off. She could be married once she grew up. So she did not face the same restrictions as girls from the upper strata of society. But this does not mean that she was happy. She still had to face the problems of not having food. So her problems or questions were different. You still hear from the newspapers that the Dalit community was attacked, Dalit woman was stripped and paraded; that she was raped. Why does this happen only to girls from the Dalit community? There are two reasons for this. One is that those Dalits who want to come up [in life] are suppressed. They are told that they should remain within the space that the society has given them. So the upper strata of society cannot stand their progress. They get jealous and also because, whenever there is a fight, it is easy to spot a Dalit woman. She ventures outside the home. There is nobody to look after her. So, 'Come on' [they say]. They find her easily. 'There's also nobody who will question us, so let's trouble her, rape her, or do anything. She should be suppressed and kept under our control' [they say]. This is another reason why Dalit women face this [violence].

Lata P M: But rape and violence exists in every caste. Those who work with women would know this. Apart from this, Dalit women have to face violence, maybe because they are backward or [men think] they are easily available. Rapes are committed because of the existence of such mentality and attitude in men. But given the way patriarchy looks at Dalit women, is it that Dalit men do not rape Dalit women? How different are the women who emerge from your writing, in relation to the portrayal of women in the literature of Dalit men such as the women in Daya Pawar's writing, or in Arjun Dangle's poems, or in Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpeetha*. What is different about the women in your literature?

Urmila Pawar:... I've written a story called *Baichi Jat* (literally women's caste but used to mean women's community) about this. A woman's husband gets married for the second time and brings his second wife and tells her (the first wife), 'She is like your sister, keep her [in the house].' She refuses and says that was her own house and throws them out. He also refuses to go away and she takes him to court. When she goes to the court, all her maternal relatives, ask her if she has lost her senses. Does one ever take a 'mister' (husband) to court? Is that done? They tease and harass her. Even then she does not back track, she continues with the case. It is not just her husband but her own father who had also married twice. So this has been going on for generations. And so, her stepmother helps her. The court needs evidence that her husband has married again and her stepmother helps her to secure that; so a woman helps another woman. And this should happen. This is the thought that comes through [in the story]....

Urmila Pawar: My second story is called *Nyay*. There was a widow in our village who got pregnant. Everyone wondered, how can a widow get pregnant? So they decided to call a meeting and ask her about it. The meeting was called. She was already four or five months pregnant. Everyone asked her how she got pregnant. But she could not say anything. Who would she name? Actually, she knew the name [of the man who was responsible] but he was also among those who were questioning her. So, she could not say anything and she was punished. She had to bend and all the women would go behind her and kick her. Two women caught hold of her, made her bend and kicked her till she bled. Her foetus was aborted. I heard of this cruelty. Actually, I was not there at that time. I was in the Eleventh Standard then. So the women came and told my mother about what had happened. "That woman was a widow and yet she did this..." The women were telling my mother as if they had performed some act of bravery. I was listening to this conversation. And that is when I felt, how can these people do this? They took justice into their own hands and beat this woman till she bled. So, then sometime later, this incident which had remained with me, came out as a story; as *N*yay….

…Lata asked me how my stories are different. Whether I am different or not, I don't know, but I have thought about Dalit men who do injustice to their women. So Dalit writers sometimes ask me why I don't write like the way they do. Why do I write about my community? "You should not write like this. You are giving them (the upper caste) a weapon to use against us," is the complaint made by several critics. I said: "Why call it a weapon? When you use it against us, is that justified? You can no longer use it against us women." Sometimes they organise a programme and call me to deliver a speech. When they ask me my story, I in turn ask them: "Where is your wife? Bring her along. Then I will also come." Even my husband asks — "Why have you come to call my wife, where is your wife? You have to bring along your wife." These people want their wives to stay at home, cook their food, look after the children and manage everything. They will wander around the town, work, come home and eat, relax and invite other women [saying], "Please come on stage and talk, you don't come often for our programmes." This is how things go on.

Urmila and her friend Meenakshi Moon wrote a book on the contributions of Dalit women to the Dalit movement entitled Amhihi Ithihaas Gadawala *(We Also Made History). It has remained a path-breaking work: the Dalit women's contribution to the Dalit movement had remained unspoken and unwritten. Urmila spoke about how the book came about:*

Lata P M:... How did Dalit women respond to you when you started doing this work? How did Dalit men respond? Was there any difference in their responses?

Urmila Pawar: Let me respond to the first question you raised. Let me give you an example of Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (Unpaid Servant). All of us know about *Baluta*. There was a girl called Salma living next door. He had an ongoing affair with her. But he was married at that time to a woman called Sai. She was interested in a Muslim boy and he (Daya Pawar) did not like this. So he deserted her. She was carrying at that time. She had a little daughter and he threw them both out of the house. Then he was with another woman called Salma. He has written about it. So, the question here is, you could not tolerate what your wife was doing; but you did precisely the same thing. You, therefore, preach one thing and practise another. How can this be? What you do is just and what another does is unjust? We pointed this out to Daya Pawar and there was a lot of argument about it. In the book— *Amhihi Itihaas Ghadawala* (We Also Made History)— I have mentioned that Babasaheb Ambedkar started the Dalit Movement, and just as men participated in the Movement, so did women. The struggle in Mahad for water is an example. Even water was divided in this society— this is Brahmin water, this is for the Marathas, this for the backward castes. And some did not even get water. They had to walk for ten miles with their pots to get water. Just as water was divided, so were the gods — 'This temple belongs to the Brahmins, only Brahmins can worship there, Dalits cannot go there' — this is the kind of justice society followed. Dr Ambedkar led the protest movement against all this. Women also participated in these protest movements. After I passed my MA I thought I should do a PhD and I wanted to write about those women who participated in the Ambedkar Movement...

Then I got together with my friend Meenakshi Moon. When we started our research, people ridiculed us. They said, 'There were no women in the Ambedkar Movement. What are you looking for?' I replied, 'How can that be? There is Shantabai Dani, then Dadasaheb Gaikwad's wife, Geetabai Gaikwad.' They responded by pointing out that there were no more than four-five women. Nevertheless I felt that we should continue our search. We then thought of going to Nagpur. Babasaheb Ambedkar was actually born in Konkan. But he saw that Konkan was a backward area. The Dalits there had no education, no money — they were very poor, and a Movement needs money to progress. He, therefore, made Nagpur his working place and he furthered the Movement there. As a result, the women from Nagpur had, in fact, participated in the Movement to a greater extent. So I went to Nagpur with Meenakshi who was herself from Nagpur. When we went about searching, someone would tell us, "There is a woman who has worked a lot, why don't you talk to her?" However, when we approached the woman, she would remark, "Who? Which Ambedkar? What are you talking about?" Others led us to another woman. They said, "You would also find documents etc. in her house." I am sure you have also experienced this, you also do research projects. So we asked questions to the women we met. Now women have become bold, they can speak the truth and don't have to tell lies. But earlier women had to lie to survive. Husbands often talked appreciatively about women whenever they wanted to. But when they used to beat the women and even if the marks showed, the women would deny the beating; they would bear it. That was the way it was at that time. The same women would boast about their husbands —

"Yes, he asked me to join the Movement. He wanted me to go for meetings," these women would say.

"But who cooked the meals when you went out?"

"I used to cook the meal."

"Who would look after the children?"

"I looked after the children."

"Then who looked after your land and farming?"

"I did that too."

"Then when did you get time to work for the Movement?"

They ultimately said, "Yes, we could not go for the meetings.... My husband would say, 'Let me go for the meeting. I'll tell you about it'."

And this is how we would realise the level of participation. Some women, however, did talk to us and were very articulate. One of them said, "My husband used to beat me up. When the workers from the Movement would come to call me, he would tell me that my husbands had come. 'Go and have fun with them,' he would say." Even some of the workers from the Movement would beat them. In some of his articles and in a few speeches, Dr. Ambedkar urged men to bring their wives, mothers and sisters along so that the ideas of the Movement would reach them as well. Whenever Ambedkar conducted one of his programmes, the women would cook and he would say, "Don't waste too much of your time in cooking food." If they made sweets for him, he would say, "I will eat with everyone. I don't want any different food." He would ask the workers to bring their wives along but they would not listen to him.

Some of the women from Nagpur were body-builders. You can see [such women] on TV now sometimes, you can see these women whom you call *sando*. We met two or three women body-builders. Their fathers were acrobats who went around with the *malkham* (pole for acrobats) and these girls were trained in *akhadas* (gymnasiums). There was one called Chandrika Ramteke and another Shantabai Bhalerao. [They were so strong that] when they held our hands [they held them so tight] that we could not free ourselves! When there was a Hindu-Muslim riot during the Movement in Nagpur, they told us that they supported the Hindus and the Muslims. This was something positive about the women in the Movement and they themselves felt that they became more a part of society because they had joined the Movement. Compared to the women who stayed at home, the women who had joined the Movement were more aware of their situation….

Urmila looks upon her own autobiography as a social document, for every person's life, she feels, is a social document. She adds that she is now ready to face life stoically, as that is what her life has taught her.

It would be difficult to end this without a poem by Jyoti Lanjewar who passed away on November 8, 2013 and with whom I was fortunate to associate and interact. Jyoti was one of the foremost Marathi women writers, widely acclaimed and much anthologised and also a pioneering Dalit woman poet. A noted critic, poet, columnist, activist, short story writer, biographer, linguist, feminist scholar and academic. She has authored more than 15 books and remains one of the leading voices in modern Indian poetry today. Talking of her poetry she once said, "My poetry is about humanity and its seemingly endless struggles for survival, for change, for justice and sometimes humanity happens to be the oppressed marginalised… it's a wonderful process of all these voices coming out of me."

Her poem on her mother is an oft quoted one and it is also a favourite of mine. It would be able to, in a way, knit together the experiences of Bama, Urmila and many other Dalit women like nothing else can.

I Have Never Seen You

I have never seen you
In a brocaded new
Nine-yard *Ilkali* sari
With a gold necklace around your neck
Or gold bangles worn on your hands
Not even rubber sandals on your feet

Burning your soles in the scorching heat
Bundling the tender one of your womb and
Hanging the bundle on the acacia tree
Working with the road construction workers
Carrying barrels of tar
I have seen you.

Your feet bound in rags
Planting a sweaty kiss on the naked child
Coming tottering towards you
Bearing the hunger knotting your entrails
And lips parched for water
Working to build a dam on the lake

On daily wages
Slaving hard
I have seen you

Deluge of tears in your eyes
Eternal summer heat in your life
When the burning sun got off your head
Picking cotton
Keeping it in your sari fold
Pushing behind the plough
Building the future of your children
I have seen you
In crowded streets balancing
The basket load on your head
Wrapping your tattered sari around your body
To guard your honour
Raising your sandal at anyone leering at you
I have seen you.

For a dream of four mud plastered walls
Your feet heavy with pregnancy
Carefully stepping on the scaffolding
Of skyscrapers
Carrying on your head
Scuttles of wet cement
I have seen you

In the late evenings
Untying the end of your sari for coins
To buy oil and salt for cooking
Placing a five paise coin
On your little one's hand
And saying…
"Eat whatever goodies you want
But go to school"
Lifting the little bundle from the cradle
Tenderly holding it to your breast
And saying…
"At least, you study, become like Ambedkar,
And relieve me of this basket load."
I have seen you

Dragging your feet to your house
Skeletal body… the heat of life
Debts to the moneylender… a ploughshare
Half fed from sunset to dawn
Still refusing to accept charity
Retaining your self-respect
I have seen you.

Marching ahead in the Long March
Shouting "Change the name"
Braving the police batons
Going to jail with head held high
Seeing your only son
Falling martyr to police bullets
Consoling him…
"You died for Bhim, your life now has its meaning."

Telling the police officer defiantly…
"If I had two, three or four more sons, how good it would have been,
They would have fought as well."
I have seen you.

On your death bed in the hospital
Donating the money you earned rag-picking
To the Diksha Bhoomi
Gathering the precious last moments of life
And reiterating…
"All of you live in unity
Build a memorial
Fight in the name of Baba."
And with your dying breath saying
"Jai Bhim"
I have seen you.

I have never seen you
In a brocaded new
Nine-yard *Ilkali* sari

Translated from the original Marathi "Tu Kadhich Disli Nahis" in Ajoon Wadal Uthale Nahi and based on the English translation of the same poem by her daughter Dr Aparna Lanjewar Bose in Red Slogans on the Green Grass, *Scion Publications Private Ltd., Pune, 2008, 30-35.*

End-Notes:

Ilkali : It is a special brocaded sari worn in Northern Karnataka and Maharashtra.

The Long March: It was a campaign which was part of the Namantar Andolan (Name Change Movement), a Dalit movement to change the name of Marathwada University in Aurangabad to Dr B R Ambedkar University. It was a sixteen-year long Dalit campaign that began in 1978 and ended in 1994. In 1994 a compromise was arrived at and the university was named Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. The movement carries with it indelible memories of violence against Dalits. Lakhs of people participated in The Long March, especially women.

Diksha Bhoomi: It is a sacred monument of Buddhism. This where Dr Babsaheb Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism on 14 October 1956, along with about 600,000 of his followers.

Jai Bhim: It is a greeting used by Dalit Buddhists. It means 'Victory to Bhim', i.e., to Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. It was coined by Babu L N Hardas who was a staunch follower of Dr Ambedkar.

*****This is the full version of an abbreviated paper that was included in Ed., Catriona Mitchell, *Walking Towards Ourselves: Indian Women Tell Their Stories*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2016.

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25 years…
A Journey, A Struggle, A Joy

A Note on SPARROW and Its Achievements

Ours is a Women's Archives that collects oral history and visual material connected with women's lives and experience as important material for future research on women. Our intention is to make such material more visible and accessible to people interested in women's lives and history. Kindly visit our website, *www.sparrowonline.org* which will give you an idea about the work we are doing.

The scope of SPARROW's work includes the entire South Asian continent and it already has both visual and print material from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where the Indian sub-continent is concerned **SPARROW is conceived of as a national archives** collecting oral history and visual material from all over India. SPARROW's ongoing projects include oral history recordings and video recordings of several freedom fighters, educationists, feminists, and activists in various movements. The life and work of activists involved in the environment movement, human rights activities and social work activities involving women and children are also being documented in SPARROW. Apart from this SPARROW is also keen to archive cultural traditions in terms of performance and has video documented theatre artistes and folk artistes who are trying to keep alive various traditions of performance. Complementary collection of photographs, books and other print material is also undertaken as part of the regular work of SPARROW.

Throughout its existence in the last twenty-five years SPARROW has functioned as an archiving body which in addition to collecting material on women's history and lives, has also generated its own archival material through oral history recordings, publications, digital video recordings and exhibitions and workshops to reach out to the general public as well as schools, colleges, women's groups and media and communication groups. Utilising unique methods of spreading knowledge about the lives of women, SPARROW has functioned as an archiving organisation that has brought women's history to the public sphere even while keeping up its archiving activities. While SPARROW strongly believes that recording, reviewing, recollecting and reflecting on women's history and life and communicating this knowledge in various ways is an important cultural and educational activity in development, it also believes that constant efforts must be made to recreate and bring this knowledge to the public sphere in a variety of ways for ***positive change is possible only when we understand women's lives, history and struggles for self-respect and human dignity.*** While SPARROW as an archive will always be open for consultation by scholars and others it will also take its archives out as part of its commitment to bringing about change in the society.

In the last twenty-five years' time we have brought out 86 publications, including SNL, our newsletter, several reports, held more than 30 workshops for students (two of them summer workshops for American students), organized exhibition, conducted one film festival called **Women's Lives, Women's Words** with the support of Global Fund for Women and one Cultural Festival with films, paintings and handicrafts from the North East regions of India called **One River Many Streams**, held a Women Writers' Camp with the support of Prince Claus Fund, a Dalit Women Writers' Meet supported by Sahitya Akademi and made 25 oral history documentaries ten of them under the title Global Feminisms covering women's activism and scholarship with the University of Michigan**. In recognition of our work for the last 25 years, SPARROW received the Prince Claus Fund Award in 2014.** We are currently working on the fifth and final volume of women's writings with **87 writers from 23 languages of India.** Along with all these activities we have also been cataloguing and digitising existing material in the Archives while continuing to augment our collection. We have also struggled hard to collect funds for a building for us and we now have a permanent building. In a city like Mumbai we can say, this is not an easy achievement.

SPARROW has ambitious plans for the future and what it currently needs is generous donations to its corpus fund which will help it to function and carry out its long term plans.

We thank all our trustess and advisors who reposed immense faith in our efforts which has made it possible for us to spread our wings. They continue to stand by us. We also thank our funders, donors, supporters, well-wishers, friends and many more who have supported us in many ways.

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