

CHAPTER- 7

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Concluding this work entails bringing together diverse strands as the chapters cover a wide range of organizations looking into different aspects of the Dalit women's struggle in Kolhapur. Taking the Dalit women's agency as its central focus, each chapter has grasped the manner in which these downtrodden women are not only desiring a change in their lives, but also trying to bring it about.

Through my research I have analysed the specific needs of Dalit women, which I have shown is variously different from the upper-caste women. The voices of the women matter; I have tried to listen to them and bring out their life-stories. I have studied them from the perspective of their own experiences, in their own natural settings. Most importantly, as far as possible, I have tried to eradicate the gap between the familiar 'we' and the exotic 'they'; I had decided to go simply dressed to the field. I wore the simplest cotton clothes, no makeup and no jewellery. In my own way, this was as near to going "native" as was done by the Western anthropologists when they lived with the so-called tribes. My position was anomalous (in the beginning) and sometimes suspicious; especially in the case of the eunuch devadasis. However, the bonds of empathy soon developed and whatever they may have thought of me in private, I became quite an easy part of their lives. I remember being invited to an after-wedding feast where I tasted bhakri with kolhapuri mutton curry for the first time. Women often spoke to me about their doubts, their sufferings and their internal domestic conflicts.

Through various organisations, focussed upon specific areas, that is, through the lens of the particular, I have focussed on broader issues – that deal with questions of power and authority, rights and human dignity. The particular along with the local and the little histories or narratives of life worlds was given special attention by me. In narrating the lives of Dalit

women, I have emphasised on micro-narratives (includes popular stories, myths, legends and tales) that bestow legitimacy upon social institutions. Not only that, dalit women's stories that form the foundation of this research are a means through which the individual's relationship to the community, the community's relationship to itself and its environment is woven together. One of my biggest challenge was understanding the various rural Marathi dialects of the Dalit women. Even my translators were getting confused at times and I had to verify them from other sources. However, my work was facilitated to a great deal as I identified some 'insiders' early on ,they helped me identify some of the challenges that I would face as an 'outsider' and this again helped me to make informed decisions in the early stages , where chances of misjudging situations are all the more easy.

I started out with three major questions:-

- How significant are Dalit women's issues in the Dalit movement in contemporary times?
- How far and in what manner have the organisations in the region succeeded in ensuring dignity for these women?
- How far are the women of the kalavanteen castes, the devdasis and eunuchs, the women of the Mahar, Mang, Dhangar, Chambhar castes been successful in creating a sense of agency in their lives?

In an effort to find out these answers, I took up three main communities of women:-

- Kalavanteen,
- Devadasi,
- Mahar and Mang women

Most of these women have challenged their Dalitness; contested their being downtrodden; and have derived a sense of agency from their being Dalit, their being downtrodden. They have developed this powerful insight that they alone have the power to change and liberate themselves from the wretchedness of their lives. These women who have shared their lives with me are neither victims nor heroines; they are like most ordinary people, complex, flawed and contradictory. Throughout my work, I have shown how women as active agents are speaking for themselves and trying to perceive the world around them.

After the Introductory Chapter, I began by tracing the evolution of Dalit Sahitya in **Chapter II**. Dalit women, though largely illiterate are slowly but surely making their voices felt. Through memoirs, short stories, poems and testimonials, they are describing the pain, misery and anguish of their lives. However, what struck me was the fact that theirs is a saga of hope, encouragement and struggle to make life worth living. I took up five case studies, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Vimal More, Bama and Viramma. My findings pointed to the same direction; that Dalit women are the ones subjected to the maximum subordination, exclusion and marginalization; at the very bottom of the society, they are isolated, mostly living under impoverished situations; yet, what is most remarkable about them is their capacity to live their lives through their struggles. Coupled with this is their immense potential of sensitivity to one another's need and continual striving towards self-dignity.

Chapter III took up the case of the performing women the *kalavanteen* women. These are folk- artistes, engaged in the culture of entertainment – through *tamashas*, *kalapathaks* and *lavanis*. They continue suffering on account of several factors. Firstly, their careers are very short-lived. Secondly, they have no possibility of getting any kind of aid from the Government. Most importantly, the organizations that I studied, notably the Kalapathak Kalakaar Sangathan and the *Tamasha Loknatya Mandal* remain headed and managed by men – these are in-charge of organizing the programmes, deciding the time and place, bargaining for the payments, everything that is essential for their performances. The men engage in all forms of decision-making on behalf of the women. There simply is no effort to try and evolve alternative career prospects after retirement; there is no way of approaching the medical health organizations in a bid to fight the growing terror of HIV AIDS; what is very sad is that these artistes weren't united among themselves – this is one of

the main reasons for their inability to approach the State Government.

Chapter IV analysed the devadasi women – eternally degraded, subjected to the worst forms of physical, mental and moral deprivation, these women are no doubt trying to come out of years of servitude. Devadasis are women who are married to a God; eunuchs can also be and are devadasis. They are not supposed to be employed in any other profession, being ‘divine prostitutes’. I studied two main organizations that have taken up their cause. But here too, one of the organizations that is working for them, namely the Nehru Yuva Devadasi Vikas Mandal, was managed by a man – Ashok Bhandare. He is trying to fight for the devadasi by organizing *hartals*, *morchas*, and all forms of devadasi meets. But the real need is an alternative future – an alternative means of livelihood. On this regard, he has no such programmes streamlined, even in the remote future. As far as the second organization was concerned, the Samvedana Project, Sadhna Zadbuke is working in a very positive way in counseling the devadasis, urging them to remove the mass of matted hair on their heads and trying to unite them. However, what is needed is a holistic approach to bettering their health and all-round development; supplying them medicines to looking after them in pregnancy and childbirth, fighting against HIV AIDS and so on.

Chapter V looked at two major communities of women, the Mahar and Mang converts to Christianity. Here too, it continues to present a bleak picture, a very sorry state of affairs. The Mahar and Mang are the lowest of the untouchable communities in Maharashtra today. The Christian Church had showed them high hopes of a better life before getting them converted, but as days passed they realized that the Church was spending huge amounts of money in building new Churches and training of Pastors, but they remained jobless, penniless and homeless. Women after women wept at my feet, narrated the immense struggle for water and food that they continue to endure, and told me that they have huge fears about their next generation. The Kolhapur Diocese is taking up their cause; organizing *mahila aghadis*, encouraging them to come up to the forefront through its main forum – the Dalit Samaj Vikas Parishad. However, some major issues that surfaced were like this; even though these Dalits had got land, it was not in the name of the women, but the men of the house. In case where they were widows, they didn't know what to do, as they lacked a proper marriage registry certificate. Some of them who eventually managed to get hold of lands complained

that they were barren (unsuitable for cultivation) and too far away to work.

Chapter VI took up the Dalit women's movement vis-à-vis the all India women's movement. It is even more depressing to think that the FAOW – the Forum Against Oppression of Women , the forerunner of the all-India Women's movement had started out with a rape of a Dalit girl – over time, they too have started neglecting the cause of the Dalits. I personally visited two of the organizations that are under the FAOW: MAJLIS and AKSHARA. They are working for women in diverse areas, no doubt but they do not have any specific programmes oriented towards Dalit women. The same picture is true at the platforms of the IAWS – INDIAN ASSOCIATION for WOMEN'S STUDIES, organized at Wardha, Maharashtra. I attended the Annual Conference held in the year 2010, though Dalit women's issues were largely discussed, Dalit women's literature were sold on a huge scale, the presence of Dalit women themselves were missing, apart from a few and far between.

My research is based on inductive reasoning, where theory flows from data and the approach has been ethnographic; it has involved living, sometimes for long periods, in the environment-or the 'field'. Over time, this non-interventionist approach to research has helped me in the study of local events and people. I began with as open a mind and as few preconceptions as possible, allowing theory to emerge from the data – though this made my work quite fluid and flexible, it did have a research design – through a process of theory building, testing and rebuilding, I eventually arrived at **theorizing at two levels :-**

a) Dalit women are agents in a field which is a structure of social relations; they possess cultural capital. Here I draw the concepts of field, agency and cultural capital from Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu used the concepts of field (location), capital (social/cultural), and habitus to reveal the dynamics of power relations in social life. It is observed that the three key concepts in Bourdieu's writings, namely, belief, field and habitus, represent his 'generalized' sociology of religion - the religious field itself is the complete system of positions between agents, their objective competitive positions or transactions. A field can be any structure of social relations. It is a site of struggle for positions within that field and is constituted by the conflict created when individuals or groups endeavour to establish what comprises valuable and legitimate capital within that space. 'A field is not simply a dead structure, a set of

“empty places”... but a space of play which exists as such only to the extent that players enter into it who believe in and actively pursue the prizes it offers’. Socially instituted, a field ‘is a relatively autonomous domain or space’. It has its history known to the agents. The critical role of the agent is evident in as much as a field is ‘an arena of constant struggle for “stakes”³¹⁴.

Again, for Bourdieu, each individual occupies a position in a multidimensional social space; he or she is not defined only by social class membership, but by every single kind of capital he or she can articulate through social relations. That capital includes the value of social networks, which, Bourdieu showed, could be used to produce or reproduce inequality. Cultural capital is not transmissible instantaneously like a gift or bequest; rather, it is acquired over time as it impresses itself upon one's habitus, which in turn becomes more attentive to or primed to receive similar influences. Over time, the devotees of Yellamma and Renuka, the female performers and the Christian Mahar and Mang converts have acquired this cultural capital that gives them an upper edge in their community. The story of the lives of all the Dalit women whom I have met respectively, bears this out.

Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is the set of socially learnt dispositions, skills and ways of acting, that are often taken for granted, and which are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life. Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time—dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these. In this sense habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously... it is the ‘strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations.

Thus, these Dalit women are social outcasts, or considered to be among the lowest of low castes. Had it not been for their association with their respective fields, their lives would have been different. The everyday worship of Renuka Yellamma reveals a Bourdieusian

³¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press

field³¹⁵. Their fundamental and abiding belief in themselves, the doxa has not only informed their actions within a particular field, but it has also endowed them with cultural capital and influenced their habitus. This fundamental, deep seated, unconscious belief and value is doxa.

Doxa informs an agent's actions and thoughts within a particular field. Doxa tends to favour the particular social arrangement of the field, thus privileging the dominant and taking their position of dominance as self-evident and universally favourable. Each of these women's actions are unconsciously influenced by their deeply ingrained belief in their abilities. However, the particular social arrangement of their field can be traced to the lowest of the low strata of society. Being beggars, kalavanteens, Mahars and Mang by profession, they are looked down upon by the society at large; it is only because they and their significant others believe in themselves they acquire such a social standing. This is their practical sense, what Bourdieu calls 'sense of the game'. It evidently fetches what they need for their everyday living.

Thus, Bourdieu's key concept, "habitus", refers to an area between practice and structure; between willed intention and objective structures. Apart from this, he also shows how even the most ritualistic actions leave scope for actors' strategies, which, for Bourdieu are aimed at maximizing either economic or symbolic capital. In our study, we see the particular examples of Dalit women's perseverance and determination in their fight against the limits of their culture, their defiance of the imposed code of conduct.

b) Secondly, the performances of the Dalit women are what matters in the ultimate analysis. Here, I will bring in Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body³¹⁶; in our case, the body of Dalit women. Butler claims that gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of

³¹⁵ Alan Warde, (2004) '*Practice and Field: Revisiting Bourdieusian concepts*' CRIC Discussion Paper No. 65, Manchester:University of Manchester

³¹⁶ Judith Butler (2011) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Routledge p. xv

gender identity after all. Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure. Thus the conclusion is that gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.

For the kalavanteen, kalapathak women, the devdasis and the Mahar and Mang women, the roles that they play, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, is what defines their agency as women. Their identity that is the result of a tenuous performance over time is an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. For them, the fact of being Dalit is not passively scripted on their body; neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. The fact of being Dalit endows them with an agency that they derive from this specialized identity that they constitute.

As far as the Dalit women's body is concerned, their body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, adds Butler, but in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. In other words, the body is a historical situation and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation. This is especially true for the devdasi and tamasha women; theirs is not simply a body to be exploited – on the other hand, theirs is a body that represents a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. As far as the Mahar and Mang women are concerned, they are engaged in an everyday drive to 'do' their bodies – and yet, though their work is a sort of a drudgery, in doing their bodies they have to do it differently from their contemporaries, predecessors and successors. Thus performing, doing and dramatizing their bodies over time is what gives the Dalit women a sense of agency – a weapon of survival and this is what sets them apart as sexualized agents.

Political agency, continues Butler, cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power; and most importantly, the iterability of performativity is a theory of agency. The Dalit women are

political agents in as much as they are turning themselves and their own bodies (manifested through its performances) into locuses of power. The iterability of their performativity; in other words, the repetition of their daily chores, through their bodies (that matter) which is but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities is what gives them agency.

SOME CONCLUDING WORDS

Thus, from my data I have arrived at theorizing – nevertheless, my sharing of their lives has been virtual; not real. I have neither starved, nor eaten zunka-bhakr days on end; nor stood for hours in the burning sun to wash clothes or plant crops. I have not lived in congested, overheated houses with children crawling all over. Therefore, sometimes, I feel that I am not qualified or privileged enough to speak on behalf of Dalit women. I have used this ethnographic method of participant observation – my theoretical standpoint is emerging from that experience. I found an opportunity to explore the area of grounded theory – which feminism would definitely sponsor. In other words, my theoretical assumption is emerging from their experience – each day was a fresh experience. On this take, I am moving away from Western feminism – mainly because their approach to the subaltern is so different. This is ‘feminism re-defined’ –I would conclude by saying that I stand at the margins of this existence (Dalit women’s) having taken a peep yet not really crossing the threshold.