

New Dalit women autobiographies are opening up private, intimate spaces, rewriting history

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Illustration by ThePrint

Life writing by Dalit women has been an important entry point to understand how the individual subject is placed within a collective identity. The 're-memorisation' of caste experience by Dalit and low-caste women is significant because it rewrites a history that has conveniently decentered their narratives.

The recent rise, however nominal, of autobiographies and memoirs shows there is a ray of hope. The recognition and Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar award for Yashica Dutt's memoir, *Coming out as Dalit*, is something worth celebrating. Similarly, disabled Dalit writer Sumitra S. Mehrol's autobiography, *Tute Pankho Se Parwaj Tak*, is also noteworthy as it tries to unfold the complexities of caste, gender, as well as disability. These narratives are significant because of the self-reflexivity involved in understanding one's standpoint by critically interrogating one's private and intimate space.



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Autobiographies, testimonies, and memoirs have a unique position in narrativising women's experiences in particular. They unravel a lifeworld that is based on an individual's experience and everyday lived realities by socio-politically situating one's self.

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The first-person narrative

Autobiographies have a unique positionality in terms of unfolding Dalit-Bahujan women's experiences. They not only recenter women's thoughts and experience, but the very act of telling and writing involves a critical self-reflectivity. Autobiographical writing brings out a Dalit's conscious self that generates a sense of affect on its readers in unique ways.

The autobiographical accounts of Dalit-Bahujans, however, face challenges at multiple levels. First, when one looks into the personal narrative in the forms of autobiographies, testimonies, among others, there is still an absence of such writings, particularly from India's Hindi belt. Starting from the work of Kaushalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishap* to Sushila Takhbore's *Shikanje ka Dard*, there are very few available Dalit women autobiographies. Works such as Kaveri's *Tukda Tukda Jivan* and Rajni Tilak's *Apni Zameen, Apna Asman* are some of the few that are worth mentioning. However, given the humongous volume of writing that Dalit literature is now producing, the lack of Dalit-Bahujan women's autobiographies reflects a gap in contemporary literary practices.



Second, the absence of Dalit women writing from the Hindi belt is also a consequence of the absence of Dalit women reaching a stage where they can critically reflect upon their own private space. The absence of engaging with such writings in pedagogic processes is one of the major bottlenecks. This absence has discouraged Dalit-Bahujan women from writing their life stories.

Third, and most importantly, there also exists a complete absence of OBC and tribal women writings from the Hindi belt. The absence of such writings is an example of how the pain and agony of these women are routinely passed off as being insignificant. The absence of their autobiographical works impedes the understanding of the problems that they face in their everyday lives, since there is no written account of it.

It is important to record how different Dalit-Bahujan caste women have faced exclusion at different levels in public and domestic spaces. An autobiographical self-reflection is a way to unfold the layered and historical caste experiences of Dalit, Shudra, and tribal women.

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Intersecting caste and disability through autobiography

Sumitra Mehrol's autobiography is a multi-layered literary work, given that she is the first disabled Dalit woman to write an autobiography in Hindi. In the 171-page book published by The Marginalised Publication, Mehrol explores how she has faced exclusion as a disabled Dalit-woman, and how difficult it was for her to gain societal acceptance. Her autobiographical engagement has enabled her to unpack some of the nuanced aspects of the multiple levels of discrimination that she faces in her everyday life.

During my interaction with her, she explained to me that being Dalit and disabled made upper-caste women ignore her. She realised she would never become part of their peer group. "I was always made to feel that I have a sense of lack, and I sensed it very clearly from the behaviour of upper-caste women too. My morale was already shaken because of

my physical disability, but being a Dalit woman, these chasms were further deepened,” she said. She also stressed the importance of writing such an autobiography, and how it has helped her understand not only her own lifeworld, but the lifeworld of many others like hers.

In her writing, Mehrol recalls an incident in which her upper-caste neighbour excluded her from the social programme organised in her colony, despite their acquaintance. After the programme, she was sent leftovers as a token of sympathy towards her. Mehrol argues that while her physical disability was definitely a hindrance in her socialisation, being a disabled Dalit woman made the very possibility of her acceptance in mainstream society impossible.

Furthermore, Mehrol’s experience tells us how Dalits are still ill-treated even within an urbanised educated space. Sending *joothan* (leftover food) and maintaining social distance is an act of reproducing the caste structure as stated in the *Manusmriti*. She writes in her autobiography that even in the public university where she works, her socialisation and social acceptance is limited to a mere formality. She considers her social disability as a bigger impediment than her physical disability because while the physical inaccessibility limits her access to space, social disability bruises her emotionally and psychologically as well.

For Mehrol, narrativising her experience has been an enabling journey. It allowed her to reclaim public memory and empathy through her writings. She wrote her first memoir in the journal *Kathadesh*, which gained wide appreciation from readers. Writing and unpacking her experiences was also a way for her to move past her humiliation.

Interestingly, in her autobiography, Mehrol details how upper-caste peers in her college would react to her writing with blatant silence and ignorance. This kind of reaction explains the dynamics of caste relationships that Mehrol faced despite being a Ph.D. holder. The reduction of her identity, even within a so-called modern/progressive educational space, shows how caste manifests itself in multiple subtle and intangible forms.

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Challenges ahead

The autobiographical writings by Dalit-Bahujan women face many challenges, including the lack of discursive engagement with the little autobiographical writings available. When one looks into autobiographical writings from the Hindi belt, not many women have come out to narrativise their own personal experiences. A patriarchal mindset can be seen as the biggest impediment to this because critical self-reflexivity also involves challenging the patriarchy that prevails even within the domestic space. A fear of opening up one’s private space to public gaze becomes a hindrance in such writings.

The absence of translations of autobiographical writings by Dalit women is yet another limitation. Despite the massive discourse around Dalit-Bahujan issues, there has been no extensive project for translating the writings of this community. Translations are important as they expand the reach of writings beyond geographical boundaries, thus allowing for a free flow of thought. Translations can also help build up solidarities among multiple identities by breaking language barriers.

The lack of tribal and OBC women's autobiographical accounts is yet another challenge. OBC women face caste marginalisation in terms of exclusion from institutional spaces and also in terms of socialisation with upper-caste women. The layers of exclusion brought on by caste identities might be even deeper for them, but one might not be aware of such typologies because they are never written about. The absence of tribal and OBC women's autobiographical accounts is also reflected in the gap in testimonial writings.

It is also important to note the limitation of mainstream publication houses in reaching Dalit-Bahujan women authors. While Sushila Takhbhore's work came from the mainstream Hindi publishing house Vani, she discussed the long waiting period she had to endure to get her work published. Things were very different for Sumitra Mehrol, who got her work published from The Marginalised Publication. She recalls them being very supportive and cooperative, and specifically notes the supportive role played by Sanjiv Chandan, the editor of the publishing house. It is worth mentioning that this publishing house has taken special effort to raise Dalit-Bahujan women's issue, specifically through their journal *Streekal*. Mainstream publishing houses engaging with Dalit-Bahujan women in similar ways could remove existing roadblocks and allow for wider production of autobiographies.

Overall, amidst the ubiquitous celebration of a month-long anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule, the role and position of Dalit-Bahujan women is something that needs recentering. This is precisely because celebrating Ambedkar's anniversary is not merely a ritual, but also about bringing the efficacy to his idea of *Prabuddha Bharat*, in which social justice for women is most important.

Social justice for women can only be achieved if they engage in self-reflexivity and account for their everyday caste experiences. Some Dalit women have indeed done this. For Yashica Dutt, for instance, it was an experience of 'coming out', for Sushila Takhbhore it was the realisation of the pain of caste bondages, while for Sumitra Mehrol it was the very realisation of physical and social disability due to her caste location.

Thus, I strongly feel that the celebration of Dalit History Month, apart from the glorification of socio-cultural icons, must also be an inward journey of accounting for one's own experience of being a Dalit-Bahujan woman. These experiences might not just be about exclusion, but also how one has resisted injustice in everyday lived reality.

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This article is part of the Dalit History Month 2021 series. [Read all the articles here.](#)

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