

Defying Two-Fold Discrimination: The Journey of Kumud Pawde – A Pioneering Dalit Woman Scholar

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ABSTRACT

Caste has been a robust instrument to keep the lower-caste majority populace of the sub-continent away from education and power. Through various revolutions and by enactment of Indian constitution, which guarantees equality, the access to learning resources and free right to participate in civil service examinations, paved the way for the downtrodden to accelerate into academic spheres gaining knowledge and become public servants of all capacities. The paper studies the hardship of one such oppressed women, Kumud Pawde, who was the first dalit Sanskrit women teacher, an ice-breaker for the future dalits to trod in the path she had carved, which was forbidden for millenniums. As a pioneer, the discrimination and resistance she faced was intense and discouraging. Though, she managed them all and achieved no one has ever done before, securing her place in the annals of dalit literature.

Keywords: Casteism, patriarchy, Sanskrit, dalit.

INTRODUCTION

Kumud Pawde was born in 1938 into a Mahar dalit family in a small village in Maharashtra. Her parents were financially strong and followed Ambedkar's message of education as the key to liberation. Her father, especially, supported all her ventures and didn't obstruct her academic journey. Pawde, who was an excellent learner, quickly rose in academics and went on to qualify M.A. in Sanskrit. By that time, she was the first dalit women to have a masters in Sanskrit. Her educational journey is an inspiration for many dalits who are curtailed by the social restrictions imposed by the upper-caste. She also played pivotal role in establishing National Federation of Dalit Women.

The Caste-system:

The Indian society is infested with caste system since millenniums, making it segregated and weak. It divided the society into four *varnas* which forms the structure of caste system. The fifth varna comprised of lowest of the low strata of the society, who were bound to do scavenging works and other menial jobs. The system didn't allow movement among the *varnas* which forced the lowest strata, also called as *panchamas* to freeze there even though they had the potential to rise above their *varna*. This caused stagnation in the society and the lack of mobility made the unfit upper-caste to remain in power and influence by the virtue of their caste, and on the contrary the *shudras* and *atishudras* (fourth and fifth *varnas*) were stuck there even though they had the calibre befitting the upper-caste norms. It took many centuries till it was shattered by the giant among revolutionaries, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who came as a *messiah* for the marginalised and through his Constitution, the *shudras* and *atishudras* were liberated politically.

But socially they were not, the process of transition was too slow and the upper-caste were not welcoming to throw their superior status at once. This created hatred and strife between the castes, which is seen even today. In education spheres, the pioneers who saw day-light by excelling in academics endured unspeakable humiliation. They had to undergo harsh comments and casteist slurs hurled at them as they pass not only by their mates, but also their teachers. Kumud Pawde faced similar hardship as the pioneer dalit Sanskrit scholar and her woes, being a dalit and a women, acted as a double edged sword that inflicted maximum damage to her aspirations.

Toddling toward Sanskrit:

While many girls in the locality of Kumud Pawde were not attending school, it was her father who ensured that his daughter got the best of what upper-caste children had access to. The reason for being so supportive for his daughter's education, at the time when patriarchy was the social order, was because he was much influenced by the thoughts of Ambedkar. He also responded to the call of Ambedkar's mass conversion to Buddhism by converting his family to Buddhist at the event in Nagpur. This is the reason why Kumud got ample support for her educational endeavours. Ambedkar's idea of measuring a society on the basis of progress of women in that society had created such effect in the minds of his followers that they started the change from their home itself, and Pawde achievement is the result of implementing the idea of women empowerment professed by Ambedkar. His father enrolled her to a reputed school

and always made sure that everything will be done to the best of her interest. When she entered secondary school, she was to choose an elective subject. Many choose other arts subjects but Pawde had something different in mind. She was always fascinated by Sanskrit as the 'language of God'. Her motive was unflinching and when she expressed it to her father, he too consented. But the school management was casteist. They persuaded her in all means to avoid her choosing Sanskrit. They tried to instill fear that it was a tough subject and there was no one in her home to mentor her, as they were born of a caste who were even forbidden to listen to chantings in Sanskrit. But Pawde took a bold step and opted Sanskrit despite of all persuasion, that is seen as her toddling towards Sanskrit.

Gokhale Guruji: The ideal figure:

In school, sometimes, if we get to like the teaching experience and mannerism of teacher, we tend to like the subject as well, even though it might be different. Similarly Pawde too had a good Sanskrit teacher who encouraged her dream of pursuing higher studies in Sanskrit. The teaching prowess and the way he presents himself in front of students, in an orthodox manner, inspired Pawde who was eager to learn. Once Gokhale called her to his home, she was fascinated by the mansion-like house of her favourite teacher. She was welcomed by his children and was shown kind hospitality. She amusement continued, the home, the sweet gesture of his children, the divine appearance of his wife who was draped in silk saree and her movements which oozed grace, everything was etched in her subconscious mind that emerged in her adulthood as she too unknowingly mimicked her master's calmness and his wife's grace. This was the first time Pawde created an ideal figure in mind. The one whom she wanted to become in future, that is, Gokhale Guruji. But her caste inferiority didn't stop creeping her mind while she was at Guruji's home. She was reluctant to receive the *poha* served to her and thought they might humiliate and throw her from their house if they get to know of her Mahar caste. She says:

...the older boy came out bearing plates full of cooked *poha*. I became nervous, fear crept over my mind. Suppose this lady were to find out my caste? Along with sips of water, I swallowed the lump in my throat as well as mouthful of *poha*. I couldn't concentrate on what anyone was saying. My only worry was when and how I could escape from there. Suppose someone from the Buldy area were to come here? (Pawde 78)

This incident shows how dalits inherently and unknowingly carry inferiority in their minds thinking the society may look-down upon them if their caste is revealed. It also shed light on how, few orthodox Brahmin have progressive mind-set and were ready to embrace the idea of the equality. It is hard to think Gokhale might be unaware about her caste and invited her to his home. She was the talk of the school when she opted for Sanskrit and the management itself made it a point to thwart her step towards Sanskrit class, but Pawde's determination won over their evil efforts. So, Gokhale Guruji knew he was tutoring a dalit girl on Sanskrit and he willingly invited her to home. This shows how some Brahmin teachers played pivotal role in emancipating downtrodden. Even in the life of Ambedkar and many other dalit reformers, we see upper-caste liberal minded people play their part in helping them pass hardship phases as stepping stones and then vanishing, only to be mentioned when they recall their ordeals.

Higher education and higher insults:

When Kumud Pawde matriculated in Sanskrit with good marks, she was mocked by her mates and neighbours when she expressed her will to pursue M.A. in Sanskrit. But it was her father who reprimanded the commenters and stood firmly beside his daughter and made sure nothing comes between her and Sanskrit. She joined Morris College, where she was abused by the students for receiving scholarship. Even from officers to clerks of the college, everyone were unbearable to see a dalit receive financial assistance from the government. Pawde bared regular criticism on how the taxpayers money was drained to facilitate dalits. She poses a question, that others too received scholarship through other means, but why don't they get criticised? The answer to this is known to all of us. The hatred in the belly of upper-caste is displayed through these blaming. Even if dalits doesn't receive scholarship they will still be abused for their caste. Scholarship and reservation is just a pretext to regurgitate their hatred towards dalits because, they couldn't stand the growth of the community who were once slaves and bonded labourers of the upper-caste.

While she was pursuing M.A. the head of the department (HoD) didn't like Pawde, a dalit women, studying Sanskrit. But he couldn't oppose it openly, so he resorted to subtle and sugar-coated mockery and humiliation whenever he gets a chance and quenched his thirst of tormenting dalits. This mirrors how the academic spheres did not provide a conducive and welcoming atmosphere for dalits. It can be seen even in recent times with the suicide of Rohit Vemula. The vice-chancellors of universities across India show how dalits are under-represented, even in faculty strength too, dalits are deliberately kept at the minimum threshold of reservation, and the major chunk of general merit is still enjoyed by the upper-caste, even though dalits possess far more expertise, they are limited to the reservation slab. It is in this kind of unfriendly environment Pawde completes her postgraduate in Sanskrit and thinks it's now sunshine and rainbows ahead, but it was not that easy for a dalit.

Thinking that she will be appointed as lecturer, Pawde applied for numerous institutions but, to her disappointment, none recruit her. Wherever she went, she was praised for her academic excellence and behind her back they spoke mockingly, that how a dalit women aspires to become a Sanskrit teacher, and how unfortunate it is, to learn from her, "That a women from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it- is a

dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind”(72). Even after two years of relentless efforts she couldn’t manage to get a job. It reflects how, for dalits, the path is always filled with hurdles and hardships, which the upper-caste never get a chance a experience. In despair she writes a letter to the central cabinet minister Babu Jagjivan Ram about her hopelessness. He places it in front of the then Prime Minister (P.M.)Nehru, who forwards it to Maharashtra Chief Minister (C.M.) Yashvanthrao Chauhan. The C.M.calls her and only gives a blatant assurance, like they give in election rallies. If it was any upper-caste in her place, the he would have plunged into swift action and made sure their problem is resolved but since it was a matter of one highly learned dalit women, who wants to fit into the established casteist structure, he brushed-off the case.

It is interesting to note that even the C.M. of the state, who has the power to deliver justice to the unjust, doesn’t take up the matter seriously and invites her reluctantly,as it was forwarded by the P.M.The state and it’s machinery were not yet ready to accept and accommodate the new norms of equality and justice as they were still under the eagle’s grip of caste hegemony. Now the situation is better due to educated dalits and also the society, which is opening up to equality. After her failed attempts to a get job, she pursued M.A. in literature, as she couldn’t sit idle at home, she fell into love with an upper-caste man,whom she marries. Pawde sees daylight all of a sudden. In just two months of her marriage she gets a job as assistant lectureship and her career kick-starts from thereafter. Her surname changed after her marriage from Kumud Somkuwar to Kumud Pawde, which marks her change of caste from wedlock and that is the reason for her sudden upliftment, which was stagnant from three long years, in spite of drawing attention of the union cabinet minister, the Prime Minister and the Chief Minister. This mirrors how the state structure, from its apex i.e., the P.M. couldn’t provide a job for a well deserved dalit but a change of surname guarantees her job and affluent status inall of a sudden. This shows how the Indian society is dictated by the caste hegemony, rather than the principles of equality and social justice.

CONCLUSION

Kumud Pawde’s ‘The story of my Sanskrit’ sheds light on the struggles and woes faced by a bright dalit women, who, despite of her herculean efforts to study and secure a post-graduation, couldn’t find a job that befits her qualification. She acts as an ice-breaker who, for the first time breaks the societal norms, instils hope on those who wish to peruse higher education streams that were obscure to dalits. The torment she endured echoes in the hearts of those who read her story, and gives encouragement for those who dare venture into the unknown. She challenges the caste hegemony as well as patriarchal hegemony at once,for being a dalit and a women is the most deprived and oppressed state any human can be in the Indian society and Pawde, being both, successful swam through the dangers, enduring whatever thrown at her and finally becoming a tale of inspiration.

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