

My life as an Ambedkarite poet

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Inanna Craig-Morse Aug 14, 2015

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One hot Sunday afternoon in April, 2015, I meet with a poet named Chhaya Koregaonkar at her home in Badlapur. I have been working on a project that involves compiling interviews with Dalit women writers, and after hearing of Chhaya several months prior to this afternoon, I am excited to finally meet her.

Located 60 kilometers North-East of Mumbai, Badlapur has its charm, an example of this is that it lacks any corporate presence, save for a few state banks. To meet the needs of the already dense city's growing population, a plethora of low-cost high-rise apartment buildings are constantly being erected, but the streets remain the same, wide and flat as if constructed by accident. The brightest landmark near the station is a cinema (which today displays worn posters of bronze-toned women in bathing suits and police hats), and I meet Chhaya there. She is dressed in a deep green saree and her hair is clasped in a light yellow clip. Adjacent to the theatre sits a small restaurant serving breakfast, and we squeeze into a table partially inhabited by a different group and order lassis.

Over the din of the room Chhaya tells me about working at the Bank of Baroda. Despite being fairly well known among the Dalit community in Maharashtra for her writing, she still has to work full time at the bank to earn a living. After being diagnosed with cancer two years ago, she resettled in Badlapur to be closer to where she receives her cancer treatments. As we walk the two kilometres to her apartment in the summer heat, she pauses to dab her forehead with a cloth and to catch her breath. A defining characteristic of her personality and writing is how little she dwells on hardship; nevertheless, today her physical weakness seems evident.

Being Ambedkarite

Like many of her contemporaries, Chhaya prefers to be called an Ambedkarite rather than a Dalit writer. Dalit literature now forms a distinct subset of Indian literature. In conjunction with the founding of an anti-caste organization called the [Dalit Panthers in 1972, a group of neo-Buddhists](#) in Mumbai, including Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and Barburao Bagul began writing autobiographies and poetry exposing the hardships they faced living as Dalits. Their writing sparked a literary movement that spread to other regions and languages. The majority of these original Dalit writers were male, however, in recent years women have been actively contributing to Dalit literature. Urmila Pawar and Pradnya Daya Pawar are names that are well known among Marathi readers, but there are over a dozen lesser-known female Marathi writers who currently publish as well. This list includes Chhaya Koregaonkar, Kavita Morevaonkar, Shilpa Kamle, and Sharda Navle, among others.

Many of the writers I've spoken to, who have published after 1990, claim that the reason they call themselves Ambedkarite and not Dalit is because Dalit writing has tended to focus on the ill-treatment of Dalits, whereas Ambedkarite writing emphasizes a way forward. According to Shilpa Kamle, "Dalit

means abuse and ill treatment. Ambedkarite writing is different. It means you are searching for an answer to this reality and will find solutions." Chhaya tells me, "Dalit means suppressed, but now I am earning. I have a good position." She writes in order to procure the future that was Dr. Ambedkar's vision, not to lay bare the unfairness she has encountered along the way.

Satara Story

Chhaya was born in 1958 in Satara, Maharashtra and began writing poems at age 13. She remembers times when she would write all night, consumed by the power of the words. Her first poem was published in a Marathi newspaper when she was 15. "I would come home and show my published poems, but my father was not interested in them. My mother supported me a lot. She was very fascinated by the fact that her daughter could write poems and other literature."

Chhaya recollects one of the many incidents that inspired her writing: "It was in sixth standard. We were doing a play with 5-6 girls and would rehearse every day. It was an old Marathi play that we were going to perform in the cultural Ganapati festival program. I was the director. The day before we were to perform, the girls refused to participate. I told them that I had registered the name and that they [the organizers] were going to announce it, but nobody turned up for the dress rehearsal. They had prejudices about me being dark in color and because I was a Dalit. My mother suggested that since I was the director and I knew each and every dialogue, why couldn't I perform it solo? So I performed a one-man show and won the first prize." She expresses her gratitude for her parents' support often, especially for her mother who was a singer.

When Chhaya was 18, she fell in love with and married a man who was from a different caste. She soon found out that he was "extremely abusive," so, with her infant son, she moved back to her parent's house and began to pursue a college degree in Marathi literature. "Since I am a divorcee, living alone, I have suffered every single problem that a single woman faces." She feels her son suffered as a result of her being a single parent. "He was a troublesome child, but I wish he knew how much I sacrificed for him." During these years Chhaya continued to write, feeling that her poems were her closest companions.

After graduating from college, Chhaya began to work as a computer operator at Bank of Baroda, where she has worked full time for the past 33 years. When she was 40 years old she met a bank manager who introduced her to the philosophy of Ambedkar. Having grown up in a family who had converted to

Buddhism in the 1950s, this man continued to be a strong follower of Ambedkar. He showed her Ambedkar's writing, including the piece "[Who Were the Shudras?](#)"—a book which Chhaya credits with revealing to her that caste is made by man, not by God, and that "all human beings are equal." Though they are not legally married, Chhaya and this man have lived together as a couple for 20 years. He now works as a farmer, and though he is out of town more than two-thirds of the year, he has been an immense help to her during her struggle with cancer. One particular quality of his that she likes is his love for her poetry.

Themes in Chhaya's writings

As we sit in enclosed in her bedroom to maximize the effect of the air conditioning, she looks fondly at the numerous trophies on her desk, awarded to her for her writing. She tells me that that there are even more in her closet. Before reading Ambedkar's work, Chhaya's writing did not have a political edge; she remembers writing about nature and about falling in love. "Ambedkar was the first man who united women, who saw the united force in women, and who showed women their own strength. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is my hero." Only after discovering Ambedkar did she begin to write poems that "had social awareness, [and discussed] justice in society, injustice towards women, and how women suffer."

These themes continue to be the common thread in her writing. "The pain is the same for any woman, be she from a schedule caste or a higher caste. I don't only write about the pain of women from my caste. It is about all women who go through pain and who suffer." Chhaya tells me about the poem she wrote after the infamous gang rape that occurred in Delhi in 2012. "I was very disturbed and could not sleep for two nights after that." She shares with me in Marathi several lines of it. A rough translation reads:

Candles were burnt after your death

Was it possible that they were burnt earlier—candles of humanity?

Then perhaps you would not have been raped

And when I remember you, I feel like I have had a miscarriage

I am scared that if I had a daughter, would she have to go through the same?

Halfway through the interview Chhaya pauses to offer me some tea, and I accept. We stand at a window in her kitchen overlooking a small patch of overgrown grass. Open space like this is rarely known to Mumbai. The grass is shadowed by the surrounding buildings, each stretching endlessly upward in exponential replication of itself. Standing beside Chhaya at her window I feel as though we are clinging to the view of the grass as a sign of our stake in the city.

When the interview ends I stop the recording and Chhaya asks me if I can replay some of it for her. As she hears her voice on the recorder, Chhaya contorts her face with a look of embarrassment—her voice sounds more feeble through the small speakers. But her expression soon eases, and she rests her head on her pillow, shutting her eyes. Her eyelids, blackened from her cancer treatments, rest peacefully, and her recline is delicate. Her thinned hair lays creased having been fastened throughout the day. For the first time since I had met her earlier in the afternoon, she looks as though the burden of life is not weighing so heavily down on her, and I don't wake her. We listen to the rhythm of her voice through the speakers as she describes vignettes from her childhood and reads poems. Finally she shakes herself awake. Pulling herself up she quickly pins up her hair and asks, "Are you hungry?"

For the purposes of completion of this article, I asked Chhaya if I could meet her again, now four months later. I join her at her son's house outside of Thane, a house that she bought for him in 1989. Her son lives here with his wife and their 12-year-old son. The walls are painted a rosy pink, their car and several two wheelers are parked in the apartment lot beside. On the wall are two photographs, one of Chhaya's son age four and the other of her grandson at about the same age.

When I see Chhaya now she seems much healthier, and she explains that her cancer is in remission. She no longer has to take medicine. I ask her if she will ever write about her experience with cancer and she replies that there is no reason to: many others have written about it and people are clearly against it—there is nothing new for her to say. Instead, she will continue writing about what she finds important. "In the new age, Dalit women writers who have a strong and sharp writing and are forward thinkers are criticized often. They are not accepted easily. They have to push their own compositions even when they might not get support." Chhaya continues to push with her writing, to write what has not been written; for this her readers are grateful.

As we prepare to leave for the train station she tells me that her grandson does not know what caste is because it is never talked about. Her grandson interjects, "Yes I do! I learned about it in history class."

Chhaya responds, "See? That's the difference."

After she retires in 2018, Chhaya plans to devote her time to social work. A compilation of 55 of her poems is currently being translated into English by Maya Pandit, who (in addition to other works) has translated Urmila Pawar's autobiography. Chhaya's book of poems will be published in December of this year.