



# Dalit Childhood Trauma: Exploring The Interplay Of Humiliation, Violence, And Resilience In The Autobiography Of Phoolan Devi

<sup>1</sup>Sonam Thakuri

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>1</sup> Department English,  
<sup>1</sup>Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

*Abstract:* This research article explores an area of study that is often overlooked, Dalit childhood trauma. This research explores and explains the multidimensions of trauma experienced by the children belonging to the Dalit community in India. Dalits, being a marginalised group of people, have been victims of discrimination from childhood and have faced what is said to be the most sensitive issue in their entire lives, including their growing-up phase. The objective of this research is to dig deep into the complicated situation of interplay between discrimination, identity formation, and resilience in the background of trauma Dalit children face. This research is based on an examination of current available research related to Dalit experiences, childhood trauma, and identity formation. Besides, the study includes primary data from the story of Phoolan Devi's traumatic childhood. The research uses a multidisciplinary strategy, drawing imbricated understanding from psychology, sociology, and anthropology to achieve a holistic grasp of the subject matter. The results of this research show that the Dalit children are vulnerable to different forms of discrimination, such as social exclusion, economic deprivation, and caste-based violence, which have a serious psychological impact on their psychological well-being. These traumatic experiences become their identity, which in many cases leads to a sense of inferiority, self-doubt, and disempowerment. This study provides critical importance towards dismantling caste-based discrimination and promoting social learning societies for all children to grow and thrive in life without being bound with shackles of trauma and discrimination.

*Index Terms* - Dalit childhood, trauma, resilience, social learning, holistic grasp.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The caste hierarchy is one of the oldest systems of social stratification still found today, sanctioned by sacred writings (Sekhon 45) that use the doctrines of karma and dharma in the chaturvarna system, as outlined in the varnashrama dharma or chaturvarna. Within this framework, a category denigrated as the “atishudras” is envisaged, and these people are marginalized and excluded from the structure of castes, often being classified as “outcastes” (Roy 8).

Narendra Jadhav ferociously criticizes the caste hierarchical system that is contained within Manusmriti and Gautama Dharma Shastra which prevented Shudras and “Atishudras” from acquiring wealth and proposed they were allowed to keep only “dogs and donkeys.” The codes deliberately barred them from receiving education (7). Why were they denied access to education, which has always been considered sacrosanct and a weapon of division and dominance?

Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, is conception and is conceived as dwelling in those whose body is free from contamination, both internal and external. As a result, Shudras and Atishudras were taken to be ritually impure and unfit for learning; they were removed from the purview of education, fearing such impure people would contaminate the sanctity that came along with Saraswati.

Historically, knowledge has had a great deal of power and granted freedom from the chains and shackles of caste domination. Accordingly, the Brahmins tried to keep Shudras and Atishudras away from the teaching of education, being aware that imparting education can lead to insurrection when these sections become conscious of their rights. In the process of monopolizing the Vedic corpus, the Brahmins successfully divided the Chaturvarnas and rendered their rule over them as envisaged.

The Brahmins created a formal society where they played an important role in perpetuating the hierarchical order. Violent measures were used to protect this system. Hence, if ever Shudra demands education or dares to listen to the recitation of the Vedas, the sanction is that “his ears shall be filled with lead; if he [dares] to recite them, his tongue shall be [chopped off]. If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain” (Jadav 7).

It is clear that the Sudras were wrongly seen to be incompetent and reduced to serving the three upper castes (Velassery 8). As a result, they were assigned to menial tasks such as cleaning, handling carcasses, and forced labour. The purpose of the establishment of Varna Ashrama is to organise society for the “optimal performance of the fivefold yajnas in order to efficiently attain the fourfold goals” (Artha, Kama, Dharma, and Moksha). To achieve these goals, the Dharma Sastra “ensured the distribution of resources, power, and responsibilities via two complimentary systems working in tandem: the varna system (principles applicable to specific occupations) and the ashrama system (principles applicable in specific states in life)” (Malhotra 6).

The paper focuses on three essential features that lie at the heart of the process of degradation associated with caste: the fatherly passing down of the message of upper-caste superiority, the divine sanction received for the caste system, and the dependence on upper castes for their very survival. Arundhati Roy aptly puts it, “The top of the caste pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties” (7).

The deprivation of economic resources and basic human rights in their time took a significant role in their decline, following the strict laws of the caste system of the Hindu culture. Kautilya, the famous ancient economist of ancient India, explains in terms of a theoretical approach to the four castes, where each caste is required to perform its dharma according to the shastric prescriptions, while the king's role is to look after and ensure orderly conduct:

Hence the king shall never allow people to swerve from their duties; for whoever upholds his own duty, ever adhering to the customs of the Aryas, and following the rules of caste and divisions of religious life, will surely, be happy both here and hereafter. For the world, when maintained in accordance with injunctions of the triple Vedas, will surely progress but never perish. (Kautilya 7)

This kind of endorsement highlights the validity of the caste hierarchies and makes the most marginalized Sudras the obedient servants to the elite. The caste system thus gets integrated into daily religious rituals. In her autobiographical account, Phoolan Devi describes how her father, willing to live with it, constantly

forced upon his family the unfair rules that are dictated by the shastras. He used to say, “It was our duty to serve them...if we did what they asked without complaining and bowed our heads and touched their feet to show them respect, they would give us food” because “God made it that way” (11).

The negative impact of this institution is manifested in the psychological well-being, social status, and economic development of the lower castes. According to Ambedkar, the caste system is also a product of the Brahminical aspirations to preserve their supremacy, as he says, “Not only has the Hindus made no effort for the humanitarian cause of civilising the savages but the higher-caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes” (271). By systematically denying them access to education and the right to own property, Dalits have been reduced to a state of intellectual Schubert. Thus, they became dependent on the upper castes for their subsistence. Condemning the structure of the caste system, Roy argues that “there cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than the caste system,” said Ambedkar. “It is the system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity” (9). Omvedt, in *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*, amplifies Ambedkar’s imperative for the complete eradication of caste through rejecting the authoritarian supremacy of the holy scriptures that code rule and regulation for the four varnas;

Caste, according to Ambedkar, is the bane of Indian society: it erects barriers between human beings, weakens solidarity and any ability to resist oppression; it is anti-national. Destroying caste must be done, first of all, by attacking its foundations—and these, Ambedkar believed, were found in Brahminic Hinduism. (xvii).

Thus, the analysis elucidates how the caste system contributes to institutionalised degradation of Dalits, primarily confining them to menial labours such as carcass disposal while privileging upper castes with knowledge and wealth acquisition. Roy and Ambedkar criticise the pyramid of purity and pollution binary and its degrading psychosocial-economic impact on Dalits. Omvedt amplifies Ambedkar’s imperative for a complete eradication of so-called holy scriptures, which are the foundation for fostering inequality and promoting discrimination.

## II. Phoolan’s Traumatic Childhood

This study examines the life of Phoolan Devi, a Dalit, a dacoit, a socialist, and an anti-caste activist—these are reconstructed through the traumatic childhood experiences and attendant transition to adulthood by the close textual analysis of Phoolan Devi’s autobiography. Her narrative is presented as a primary source used to demonstrate the traumatic events that she experienced and how these are portrayed in her words.

Born into a socio-economically disadvantaged family in Uttar Pradesh (the most populous state in India, with a population of more than 200 million), Phoolan Devi endured relentless violence, societal ostracism, and brutal subjugation that forged her path from victim to revolutionary icon. At the age of eleven, she was an early bride to a much older man and later suffered spousal sexual abuse. She recalls the traumatic nights of her marriage at her husband’s home: “My father-in-law had shut me in the dark. The only light in the cowshed was a thin shaft coming from under the door... I sat on my heels with my face in my hands. I was hot. My cheeks were stinging me” (Devi 1). Her husband sexually assaulted her, leaving her bleeding and in pain. She refused to allow her husband to manipulate her body. She resisted, she fought back, and she cried for help. “I cried so much, my head hurt and my skirt was damp from tears” (2). The more she resisted, the more he tortured her. “He shook me hard by the shoulders and angrily twisted me around, and then he pushed me down with my face against the earth” (100). Resistance to this abuse led to even more mistreatment, such as being confined to a cowshed, being starved, and being kept in solitude (1-3). Nevertheless, she defied the pervasive patriarchal and

gender discrimination, which was a foundational feature of her environment, and grew a steely determination to defy and oppose her oppressors.

Although child marriage is forbidden by the Indian constitution, it is still entrenched in the culture. In the 1970s, child marriage was common among the villages of India. Phoolan's sister, Rukhmani, was married to a man at the age of thirteen, and Phoolan's marriage was forcibly arranged when she was only eleven by his uncle, Mayadin, who wanted to evade property claims from his brother Dividin, Phoolan's father. Phoolan showed evidence of curiosity at an early age about the injustices that were committed to her parents because of their lower status in society, questioning the natural inequity in which the rich were in charge with the lower castes being the victims.

### III. Identity Formation and Resilience

These events correspond with Lev Vygotsky's other sociocultural theory of self-formation, which states that identity is formed through mediation processes in the interaction between cultural tools and supportive scaffolding (Vygotsky 57). In the case of Dalit children like Phoolan, the denying nature of the basic needs, where they can neither reach the wells, temples, nor schools, disrupts this growth experience to give rise to dissociated selves who are compelled to either resort to survival tactics or experience shame.

Early traumas that Phoolan experienced intersected caste discrimination with gendered violence. Mallah girls, devalued as disposable, endured patriarchal "honour" codes that normalized abuse. "We were almost as wretched as untouchables, who were less than animals. And being a girl meant being even lower" (Devi 36-37). This statement discusses how society treats women from lower castes, restricting their freedom to act and move as they wish. Furthermore, she states, "A girl didn't exist without her father, her brother, her uncle, or her husband or any man at all belonging to her family or her caste. She couldn't even walk without fear between the village and the river" (37).

Therefore, "Lower caste women are most prone to violence as they face oppression at three levels: (1) caste, as subject to caste oppression at the hands of "upper" castes; (2) class, as labourers subject to class-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of "higher" castes who form the bulk of landowners; and (3) gender, as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste" (Arya and Rathore 8).

Her movement in the world steadily deteriorated as she was faced with societal harshness, which is a significant factor that influenced her mindset. Childhood memories are usually idyllic, but Dalit children experience little sentiment. Imagining life as beautiful, playful, and joyful, she had a vision of marriage as a sweet transition, Brahmins as "gentle" priests, and the rich as kind people (Devi 37). Gradually, these idealized constructs crumbled when it was realised that suffering pain and humiliation was an inalienable aspect of Dalit identity.

Religious texts bind Dalits, attributing their fall from grace to past-life transgressions (Smith 10). Her uncles, Mayadin and Bihari, beat and humiliated her many times. Even the village Pradhan showed cruelty by slapping her as she asked for a mango (Devi 10). Upper-caste children got a dominant, boastful, and cruel attitude from their parents (Devi 168). Her husband, Putti Lal, proceeded to rape her many times over and threatened to kill her (97-104). From all sides, she was the victim of caste, social status, and gender.

The ubiquitous injustice helped develop in her profound anger and revenge (Devi 175) with an end result of self-imprisonment and existential crisis. Caste was the basic cause of trauma for Dalits which led to the downfall of the lower caste and subjected them to atrocities, humiliation, and discrimination. The

bodies of the lower castes were considered impure; simply their existence was thought to make the upper castes impure, subjecting them to discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation.

On the other hand, the “defiled” bodies of the upper castes were subjected to ritual purification. Lower castes were not allowed such opportunities but instead were encouraged to show themselves to be most sincere in their devotion to their dharma, serving all three castes, for which they would be absolved of sin and allowed to be reborn in the upper castes.

The cultural triangle of violence model by Johan Galtung shows how violence in caste societies is justified by religious beliefs and ideas about karma, making structural barriers seem as unavoidable and acceptable as direct attacks like slaps and rapes (291). Johan Galtung’s idea of “structural violence” provides a useful framework through which to view caste-based societies and highlights the violence to which Dalits are subjected and the traumas they experience from childhood. Structural violence is an institutionalized and pervasive type of violence that resides in economic, social, and political structures and is so often invisible because it has no apparent perpetrator. In such societies, people are divided into those who have economic capital and those who do not; the former are always in dominant positions, while the latter suffer from subjugation, marginalisation and discrimination. Galtung goes further, to state the following: “By ‘cultural violence’ we mean those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)—that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” (291). Thus, it renders such violence “visible, or at least passive” (291).

To hold the theoretical roots of the caste system, it is necessary to analyse the structuralist aspects of the Hindu society. Cultural values provide an important framework and decentralized way of decoding human psychology, life perception, and greater ways of life. The cultural atmosphere that she grew up in was steeply imbued with Hindu culture, in which the injustices, violence, and humiliation that discriminated against lower castes by the superior ones was not merely accepted but rather justified and continued without any opposition from the oppressed.

Wherever she faced humiliation and assault, she protested, rebelled, and fought. She did not surrender to the system that always tried to silence her voice. She strongly held the advice her mother gave to her when she was fighting for justice: “I had found a strength in me that I hadn’t suspected, a force I drew from my mother. ‘Stand up straight,’ she always told me. ‘Be proud of yourself. If somebody slaps you, slap them back’” (Devi 155). Due to her strong resilience against the system and patriarchal practices, eventually her uncle and all those caste people who were fed up with her disobedience to the system had Phoolan Devi kidnapped by Babu Gujar, the notorious gang leader of dacoits. The gang leader repeatedly sexually assaulted Phoolan Devi, targeting her due to her status as the only lower-caste woman. This dynamic led to a schism within the group, dividing it into an upper-caste and a lower-caste faction. Later, she entered into matrimony with a leader of the Mala caste, but he was cheated and murdered by a rival gang led by Thakurs. Phoolan suffered further humiliation and was publicly exposed in the Thakur village and later sexually assaulted. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon claim that the sexual violence against Dalit women is public instead of a domestic phenomenon: the occupations are labour-intensive, thus vulnerability is very high due to labour and thus sexual violence is a “permanently existing threat.” It acts as a “means to punish Dalit” women and men that proclaim rights against caste hierarchies. Predominant forms are murder, gang rape, and naked parades that torment Dalit women. This structure of violence makes them “easy prey” for the lust and wrath of upper-caste men (8-9).

Taking shelter in the Chambal ravines, Phoolan assembled her criminal confederacy called the Bagis. During this time, she sought retributive justice in killing twenty-two Thakurs, thus retaliating for the wrongs done to her. Subsequently, she turned herself in to law enforcement and held her prison term for fifteen years.

Throughout her troubled life, Phoolan Devi commanded adulation from a substantial body of Dalits and was elected as a Member of Parliament as a representative of the Mirzapur area. She acquired fame and prestige for her altruistic nature and generosity, especially among the marginalized Dalits. With this, she became a symbol of the saviour of Dalit women, who had miserable lives, and acquired a messianic status in the Dalit community. She was shot dead in the month of July 2001 by Sher Singh Rana in front of her residence on the grounds of revenge for her killing of the twenty-two Thakurs (Devi vii).

#### IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research pertaining to the caste system, and how the system has affected people even up to Phoolan Devi's childhood brings to light various social injustices that are ingrained in the cultural fabric of the Hindu society. The caste hierarchy, which was legitimised by ancient scriptures, has been perpetuating discrimination, violence, and exploitation against the lower castes, especially the Dalits.

The systematic denial of education to the lower castes, as brought out by Dr. Ambedkar was a very strategic tool to maintain the status quo and control potential upheavals amongst the marginalized communities. Interwoven with patriarchy came the caste system that subjected Dalit women to several layers of oppression, making them vulnerable to caste-based as well as gender-based violence. Phoolan Devi's experiences during her very traumatic childhood, from being forced into marriage at such a young age to her brutalization as a Dalit woman, show how the caste and the gender systems interact as valuable elements in reproducing the cycle of pain.

Phoolan's life journey, characterized by resilience and defiance, told us further about the structural violence that has been ingrained in the caste system. Cultural values and traditions that perpetuate this system are a contributing factor to the normalization of injustice and discrimination, as they often shape societal attitudes and behaviors that accept and reinforce caste-based inequalities. The paper emphasizes the need to challenge and dismantle these structures of oppression, which are rooted in ritual and brooding, and this aligns with Ambedkar's argument that sacramental scriptures reinforcing caste hierarchies must be repudiated.

Moreover, analysing Phoolan's narratives leads to the conclusion that the caste system, embedded in various social norms, influences individual worldviews from an early age. Structural violence, as it features in economic, social, and political systems, provides the foundation of dominance for Dalits while reinforcing a hierarchy in which upper castes benefit.

In examining the transformative journey of Phoolan from the victim of caste-based violence to opposing the dominant social structures and putting her name in the symbolic books of changemakers, this paper highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and societal factors that create the identity of an individual. Phoolan Devi's story is a powerful indicator of the hardships of those dealing with the complex intersections of caste, gender, and social status. The text, through scrutinising the cultural values that sustain the caste system, places obvious calls to question fixed knowledge and fight against social injustice as "casteism fractures the ability to engage with others at the basic level as it replaces a common body with a casteized body" (Kumar, p. 117S). The interconnectedness of caste, patriarchy, and structural violence lays all the emphasis on why breaking down these systems is more critical if we want to create a fairer and more inclusive society. Phoolan Devi's legacy—in spite of the issues that have since surrounded her actions—thus stands as a poignant reminder of the power that systemic oppression has in skewed lives and the need for the transformation of our society.

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