

## DISPLAY OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE IN DR. KISHOR KALE'S AGAINST ALL ODDS

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### ABSTRACT

*Emergence of Dalit writing is a result of assertion of Dalits in all spheres of their life. In post-independence time, due to constitutional safeguards, access to education, Dalit anti-caste movements and social activism, Dalits developed their Dalit consciousness and started asserting and finding their rightful place in the mainstream of society. After attaining education, writing about their struggle in the form of personal writing has proved to be an empowering act for them, and, hence, it is a part of their social activism against the oppressive caste system. The personal account of their struggle against all odds displays their never-say-die spirit which keeps them going in their difficult times. The paper aims at mapping Dr. Kishor Shantabai Kale's struggle for making ends meet and pursuing his higher education in Medicine. The textual analysis of Dr. Kishor Shantabai Kale's Autobiography, Against All Odds reveals his inspiring life-journey from being an illegitimate son of a tamasha dancer to becoming a proud Doctor. It indicates how hope and resilience, coupled with hard work could give a strong sense of selfhood and purpose for living a meaningful life no matter how unpleasant situations are around.*

**Keywords:** Dalit Writing, Dalit Assertion, Hope, Resilience, Caste System And Self-Transcendence

### Introduction :

Literature presents pleasant and unpleasant human experiences which include writers' unavoidable trauma and suffering. Sometimes their suffering is caused by their own fellow humans in society in the name of religion, class, gender, nationalism and all sorts of unfair discriminatory practices. In India, the social structure is constituted based on the hideous caste system which allows one section of society to enjoy the social status and all special privileges, whereas some unfortunates are left to suffer eternally due to their birth in the low caste community. Dr. Ambedkar calls caste as the root cause of all problems in Indian society. He calls it: "There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than Chaturvarnya. It is the system which deadens, paralyzes and cripples the people from helpful activity. This is no exaggeration. History bears ample evidence" (Dr.BAWS, Vol. - 3, 70). Those who come from the backward communities are known as "Dalits" in today's time. The nature of their trauma and suffering was excruciatingly painful in the olden days. But,

after attaining independence from the Britishers, this social picture is gradually changing in India. As a result of collective efforts, taken by the great nationalist leaders and social reformers like Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and few others, Dalits are coming together and fighting for their rights. This social progression was reinforced by the constitutional safeguards, access to education, anti-caste movements and social activism. This changing social scenario opened the doors of opportunities to the marginalized people, who were previously kept away from the mainstream of society. Dr. Pai rightly mentioned :

Democratization can be understood as a gradual, long term, multifaceted faces operating since Independent that has helped marginalized sections of society, and polity participate in the process and equality with other citizens of the country. (“Introduction”, xvii)

The Dalits, who were totally thrown outside of mainstream society, gradually started taking education and asserting themselves in all walks of social life which ruffled the features of few upper caste people. Instead of being accommodative in their approach, the upper caste Hindus treated them as an unwanted burden or outsiders. Dr. Kishore Shantabai Kale is one of such Dalits who suffered a lot due to his birth in the low caste- “*Kolhati*” community. This study attempts to find out how Dr. Kale took all his adversities in his stride when it was impossible for a normal person to survive, but he fought back against all odds as hard as he could. His personal narrative, *Against All Odds* was originally written in Marathi, with a title- *Kolhatyache Por*, and, later it was translated into English by Sandhya Pandey in 2000. It gives a close peek of his life-journey. This paper unravels how hope and resilience helped Dr. Kale to cope up with all difficult situations and people, and rise above the hostile surrounding. Dr. Kale, instead of getting crushed by this unbearable social burden, he worked hard to overcome his difficulties and went on to become the first doctor in his community.

### **Emergence of Dalit Writing and its purpose:**

The caste system has caused an unrepairable damage and divide amongst people in the Indian Society. We witness various circles of marginalization in India; Dalits are considered untouchables by the upper caste Hindus, women are treated like inferior objects and they are exploited by men, and a weaker section of minority is dominated by hooligans of the majoritarian groups. As a society, we have failed to take care of all subalterns. In such a situation, an illegitimate son of a tamasha dancer aspires to be a doctor which shows his indomitable spirit and resilience. This also proves that even if everything goes against you, still you are free to choose your invincible attitude and rise above all adversities. The problems of Dalits are not related to only poverty and lack of food, but it is with their strong urge to be treated like ‘human beings’. Dr. Sharan Kumar Limbale, a famous Dalit activist writer mentions the same during his conversation with Alok Mukherjee:

But Economic issues are not of import to us in isolation. Along with those, we have issues of our self-respect, our fundamental rights, our status. ‘We are human beings’: This language, this idea, is of even greater importance to us than economic issues. We will talk about money and food later. Before everything else, we are human beings - we will first talk about this. This is because we have not yet been recognized as human beings, our voice is deemed untouchable, our

shadow is treated as untouchable, our touch is considered untouchable. Our colonies have been kept apart. (“Dalit Literature Today”, 140)

To assert their need of human values such as liberty, honour, security, and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society, Dalit writers started producing ‘purposive’ and ‘reformative’ kind of literature, specially, in the form of autobiographies which portrays their ‘hopes’ and ‘aspirations’ focusing on their fights, daily humiliating experiences and their indignation. Sarah Beth Hunt rightly opines about the representation of Dalit reality by Dalit writers:

Dalit autobiographers reinforce their individuality, emotional, interiority and intellectual life, thereby asserting their status as equal human beings yet without threatening their simultaneous claims to a communal cultural identity. (“Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation”, 194).

Dalit writing is an emerging genre of Indian literature in today’s time. It has its own poetics or aesthetics. The writers of this form of literature normally come from the Dalit community. Their writing is a purposeful act as it aims at presenting their inspiring stories of struggle and triumphs of Dalits. They intend to reconstitute our society based on egalitarian values-equality, justice and brotherhood.

### Display of Dr. Kale’s Struggle, Hope and Resilience:

Dr. Kishor Kale comes from the Kolhati community in which Kolhati men and women used to perform acrobats and jugglers. But gradually they pushed their women into dancing and singing in the Tamasha parties- a traditional folk dance. The dance form that evolved from their shows is Tamasha or Jalsa, and the type of music and song to which it is performed is called - Lavani. The Kolhati men force their women to sing and dance to attract the male attention and allow the upper caste men to establish physical relations with their women in exchange of money, property or maintenance. The Kolhati community legally approve prostitution of their women by performing infamous custom called - ‘chira utarna’:

Young, teenage virgins are given to men in a ceremony called ‘chira utarna’ with all the trappings of a wedding, but none of its sanctity. The man pays a prefixed price for her virginity. (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 4-5)

The life story of Dr. Kale in his autobiography, *Against all Odds* (2000) covers various phases of his life including the traumatized experiences of Kolhati women, the commodification of their bodies, his helplessness and poverty, caste-discrimination based on his mother’s Kolhati caste, his search for identity, his fragmented psyche and depression, his growing caste consciousness and educational achievements in the caste-biased society. The entire narrative revolves around Dr. Kale’s constant struggle to meet his ends and get his mother, Shantabai in his life. Dr. Kale presents the predicament of a Kolhati woman who is doubly exploited in the inner circle of Kolhati family and, outside, she has been used as a saleable commodity to be sold in the market. Her life is controlled by the hegemonic customs and rituals of the caste system. Like a shrewd businessman, Kondiba Kolhati, Dr. Kale’s maternal grandfather, sells his own daughter, Shanta to the MLA from Karmala

district, Namdeorao Jagtap by performing the ceremony of –‘chira utarna’, the Kolhati ritual for selling a virgin girl to the master. In this custom, the first man in a Kolhati girl’s life has to pay her family a certain amount of money in the form of cash, gold or land. In Shanta’s life as per Kolhati tradition, Jagtap takes the position of her husband, and becomes her ‘kaja’ or ‘yajman’, her master. Dr. Kale exposes the barbarian exploitative traditions of Kolhati community:

Kondiba was now a happy man. He had kept up the family tradition. His father had sold Jiji’s young body-Jiji, who had found as a little girl in a corner of bus stop, and Kondiba has sold his own daughter’s youthful body. His heart mellowed towards his young daughter, who had brought a shower of money to his house. Thanks to her, he could eat meat every day and drink to his heart’s content. He was proud that an MLA was a regular visitor to his house. (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 5-16)

Being born as an illegitimate child from his Kolhati mother’s first relationship with an upper caste MLA, Namdevrao Jagtap, Dr. Kale was constantly humiliated as a bastard Kolhati child. After being disowned by his father and his mother, Dr. Kale was brought up by his great grand aunt, Jiji or Tarabai at Nerla. Dr. Kale mentions his sense of loss and shares his pain of being rejected by his own mother on several occasions in his personal writing. He is left behind at Nerla, unattended by his mother and all his family members during his formative age. Through his life story, Dr. Kale tries to bring the problem of Dalit children of tamasha dancers to the notice of world. These children live extremely miserable lives in vulnerable conditions. As a result, Kolhati children are subjected to the different level of caste-discrimination, exploitation and violence. These Kolhati children are especially discriminated based on their fatherless status and low caste. They receive step-motherly treatment or extreme torture within the family circle. Dr. Kale shares his heart-wrenching story of his traumatized childhood. At the time of going to school, instead of sending his grandson to school, his grandfather, Kondiba suggests Kishore (Dr. Kale) to learn how to play dholak (a folk instrument or drum):

Nobody in my family offered to enrol me in school. In fact, Kondiba ajoba used to say, You must learn to play the tabla. I’ll send you to a jalsa party to learn. What do you want to go to school for?! (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 46).

Looking at other Kolhati children going to school, Dr. Kale desperately thinks of enrolling his name in the school. With his eyes filled with tears, he goes to Gawali Guruji, who was a classmate of his mother, Shanta and requests him to enroll his name in the school. He describes how his name was enrolled in the school:

He took me to school and registered my name-Kishore Shantabai Kale. I was given my mother’s name because my father was unknown. This is common among the Kolhaties and causes the children much embarrassment (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 46).

Gawali Guruji takes initiative and enrolls Kishore's name in the school. Dr. Kale suffers for his identity of being a fatherless child since his childhood. After being announced the writer's name as Kishore Shantabai Kale during the roll call, all children laugh at him and tease him for his fatherless status. Here, in such a vulnerable situation, Dr. Kale as a child takes help from Gawli guruji to get his name admitted into his first school as Kishore Shantabai Kale and completed his early schooling at Nerla and then joined the senior school at Sonepeth. This shows that he didn't allow his disadvantaged background to control his life. On the other hand, he used available guidance and resources to find the best path to coping and consequently ensuring that he gets the best start in his early academic life. At the age of six, Dr. Kale was forced to do all odd jobs and daily chores at house, such as buying groceries, taking the wheat to the flour mill for grinding, sweeping floor and pasting with cow dung, sprinkling water in the front yard, tending to the cattle and the hens in the farm, helping to prepare food and serving food to the guests. It was difficult for him to strike the balance between doing his daily chores and attending his school activities. No one at home was concerned about his study and school. To avoid regular quarrels and the beatings, Dr. Kale went to Barshi to stay with Baby Maushi, his maternal aunt, where she used to dance in the Citra-Gulzar party. At the Citra-Gulzar party, he was required to perform tasks such as fetching buckets of bathwater for women dancers, scrubbing their backs, pressing their arms and legs, taking care of their babies when they were on the dance floor and taking the errands of their customers or clients. Staying in such uncongenial family environment, the writer struggled to continue his schooling. Still he successfully handled his suffering, depression, and annoyance which was a part of his daily life and came out with a sense of high self-esteem, hope, and resilience.

Dr. Kale, as a school student, received positive support from his teacher, Gawali Guruji and Ramesh Patil, a *Yajman* or *master* of Susheela Maushi, his maternal aunt. Patil helped him by giving some money to buy books or pay his exam fees, in exchange for his respect and service that he offered to Patil by pressing his legs. After being beaten up by his grandfather, Kondiba, Dr. Kale would listen to Susheela Maushi cursing his mother, Shantabai who had abandoned Dr. Kale for her lover, Nana:

What a sin have you committed, Kishya, that you were born into this family? That whore who gave you birth is sitting pretty with her gigolo and has left you to suffer here. Why have you abandoned this child, you'll suffer in your old age for this sin, she cursed Bai (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 76).

As a child, he saw closely that the father or a brother of a Kolhati woman plays a role of pimp in the name of following caste-customs and use a young girl's virginity to get money from their clients for their survival.

Dr. Kale depicts his traumatized childhood and the plight of Dalit women who used to dance in the tamasha parties and fall prey to the sex predators of upper caste rich Hindus. As a child, the writer had to struggle hard to take his school education at Nerla up to seventh standard. During this time, Dr. Kale's mother, Shanta stayed with Nana at Sonepeth. She left Kishore back heartlessly. Frustrated with Shantabai's decision of leaving Kishore back, Jiji threatened her that she would break her head if she touched him: "Go with that man. You want a lover not a child. It would have been better if you were barren. I don't know why God gave you this son" (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 85).

Dr. Kale developed a strong feeling of alienation in the absence of his mother when he was at Nerla. He completed his schooling upto seventh standard at Nerla. Kishore's childhood time at Nerla was the most difficult time of his life. In spite of being a child, he did all types odd jobs at the house and field, and got physically tortured by his grandfather, Kondiba and his mamas (maternal uncles). On numerous occasions, he had to face the acute financial crisis. His grandfather, Kodiba would refuse to extend any financial help to Kishore's education. In such a situation, he was left with no option, but to get money from his other relatives. He did the work of cutting grass in the field of his relatives just to get fifteen rupees for buying his school books. Kishore, who was hardly in his fourth standard, felt helpless and left home for the farm mulling over to run away and find the way out of the hell. He described his helpless situation in his own words:

But where could I go? I could not go to Bai. I now understood her problems. I wondered what was to become of me? Would I have to spend my life like this? When would I grow up? And get a job and be free of this life? I knew that there were specially reserved seats in educational institutions and jobs for backwaed communities like the Kolhatis (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 92).

This is his initial stage of awareness of his Dalit identity and his Dalit consciousness at the time when he is in his fourth standard. Like Dr. Ambedkar, he considered education as a tool to free himself from the humiliations and the caste tyranny. In his pathetic situation, he had an option of becoming a typical Kolhati who would exploit his women and terrorize others, but he chose to get educated and become a useful person for the society. Without getting cowed down by the adversities, he studied hard for his fourth standard board exam. On the exam day at Salsa, a nearby place from Nerla, while the examiner started calling out every student's name to check the seating arrangement, he called Kishore's full name as Kale Kishore Shantabai. The students sitting behind him started teasing him and saying, "Why Shantabai? It appeared strange"( Kale, *Against All Odds*, 98). The missing name of his father in his name is a sign of his fractured identity and a blot of his illegitimate birth. In the process of finding his self-dignity, Kishore interrogates all agencies of our social system, which are responsible for constructing his identity and inflicting pain in his life: "What kind of life is this? Why did my mother give birth to me? My life is that of a stray dog-any passerby can kick me or shoo me away, and I have to run" (Kale, *Against All Odds*,99).

He kept studying hard and passed the sixth standard living at the same uncongenial place. The school at Nerla had its classes up to seventh class. It means that Kishore had to leave Nerla for his further education. His grandfather decided to stop his education : "You have studied up to the seventh and that is enough. More, in fact , than any Kolhati boy. There is no need to study any further. It is not as if you are going to get a job or something" (Kale, *Against All Odds*,120). Kishore felt the vacuum in his life as there was no one who could think about how he should study and find a respectable place in the society. Kishore describes his helplessness and his poor situation in his own words: "Once or twice a year, Bai would send a money order for me. That too, would be taken away by Ajoba. I had no chappals, I went barefoot to school; my shirts usually torn at the seat; my mind and heart were brushed and my body tired with the endless chores I had to do everyday" ( Kale, 121). The extreme poverty and helplessness forced him to meet his mother and then decide whether he should continue his education further. The writer describes the typical situation of a Kolhati boy who

is in a precarious situation because of poverty. After his seventh standard, he came to stay with his mother at Sonepeth.

The first thing that Kishore's mother told him to do was to tell people that he belonged to Sali caste if someone asked him about his caste. However, the truth was that he was a Kolhati as it was clearly mentioned in his documents that he was from Kolhati caste. Due to his caste, initially Kishore was neglected in the classroom by his teachers as well as his classmates:

Some said that I had no father at all. I was aware of all the speculation about me and, in the beginning, I dreaded going to school. But I soon got used to it.[...] Nobody at school made friends with me. For days I kept to myself, quietly attending classes and then going to home (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 125-126).

In spite of constitutional support, it is indicative of the fact that even today Dalits are being discriminated against on the basis of their caste. Still, untouchability is being practiced in smaller villages all over India. When Kishore was studying at Nerla, no upper caste student came close to him in his friend circle. Most of his friends were from his Kolhati caste. Here, at Sonepeth, his situation was not much different.

Kishore had to take charge of a flour mill that required him to keep the record of account and do all the required chores of Nana's household at Sonepeth. Kishore is heavily burdened with his studies and forced to work in the flour mill. He tried to strike a balance between his study and other chores at home. But, Nana started quarreling when Kishore would buy fruits for his younger brother, Deepak, which was an unnecessary expense for Nana. One day he asked for the account of expenses which Kishore had not written. Calling all thieves, he accused all of looting him: "You will be true to your caste, what can you be but thieves. Nothing and nobody can turn you into anything else"( Kale, *Against All Odds* 139). He started beating Kishore for not complying with his instructions. As a child, Kishore felt that his continuous work at stretch in the flour mill was never considered by Nana. On the contrary, he was forced to suffer for the mistakes he had not committed. In a fit of anger, Nana beats Kishore mercilessly. Fed with Nana's volatile behaviour, Kishore ran away to Nerla.

From Nerla, he accompanied Rambha Maushi to join the jalsa party (tamasha dance group) at Barshi. Here, he got acquainted with Babya, a pimp who lived near Rasik theatre. He trained Kishore in a way of making money by enticing clients and taking them to the prostitutes. Besides his job of being the odd-job-lad-cum-errand-boy, he was also introduced to this new part-time profession of pimping in a whorehouse. While doing this job, he, as a teenager, got infatuated with a young prostitute, Hamida and decided to run away with her. The owner of that whorehouse came to know about their plan. Hamida was severely beaten up and kept as a captive till she accepted her slavery. Kishore was also beaten and threatened to leave the place immediately. He came back to Nerla again. Somehow he returned to Sonepeth and completed his tenth.

For his eleventh and twelfth, he came to Ambejogai. With great efforts, he completed his eleventh and twelfth in Science from Yogeshwari College, at Ambejogai aspiring to become a doctor. During his stay at Ambejogai, he had to live in disguise by concealing his Kolhati caste. In spite of living the poverty-stricken life and facing all sorts of caste humiliations, he

worked hard and stood second in his twelfth board exam from the group of backward students. Dr. Kale's description of his life in Ambejogai displays the caste-biasness of people around him:

Life at Ambejogai was very hard for me. I had to keep changing my room because every few weeks, I felt convinced that everybody around had discovered what my caste was and the kind of family I came from (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 146).

While searching for a decent room on rent, Kishore was always enquired about his caste whether he belonged to Maratha or Brahmin caste. He would tell a lie to get a room and live in the disguise of Maratha caste.

He realizes that it is only education which can redeem him from the caste slavery and poverty. He feels more determined to pursue his medical education. However, Dr. Kale mentions about how he was given secondary treatment in the same society:

I was the first student to go to medical college from Sonpeth, but nobody there ever got in touch with me. The reason was simple- I was the son of a mistress; besides, at Sonpeth, the Brahmins were in control. Ambejogai also had its staunch supporters of the caste system, but there were people like Professor Choudhary who stressed that caste had nothing to do with effort and hard work (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 160).

Dr. Kale highlights the economic deprivation of Dalits through his case. The economically deprived Dalit families are constantly engaged in the struggle to meet the basic necessities for their survival and earn enough to take care of their life activities. He describes the economic crisis in his life:

My first year MBBS exams were only a few months away, and I eagerly awaited my scholarship money. At home, Bai lived on one torn sari, and managed to cook without oil on some days, or without any flour for bhakris on another. I worried about her. I thought that I could bear her death, but she had to go back to the stage and dance because Nana abandoned her, it would be unbearable. Because I had no money I worried about how I would ever finish my MBBS (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 160).

The financial deprivation and his mother's pathetic situation at Sonpeth made him worried. He would barely get adequate food for himself in the hostel. He struggled to adjust in the medical college and its hostel as most of the students would tease him and cracked jokes on his situation. The miscreants tried to trouble him on a daily basis in the college and in its hostel.

Sometimes students would knock on the door loudly in the middle of the night and disappear after opening the door. Kishore felt frustrated by the regular bullies and thought of leaving the hostel. After being persuaded, he confronted all those boys. He lived under constant threat and fear for his inability to pay the bills of hostel and mess. Depressed with the growing



financial worries, he tried to commit suicide twice; first by popping sleeping pills in the hostel room and second time by consuming pesticide at Sonepeth. To get some financial help for his education, he worked with a doctor for the whole night. But soon his health started deteriorating. So, he had to leave this job. He also sold the shirts and fabrics in Ambejogai and Parali with the help of Deepak's friend, Ashok. Despite trying hard to get some help for his medical education, no one came forward to his rescue from Nerla and Sonepeth. With financial support of Rs. 1500/- from Nagin Maushi, one of his mother's friends, Kishore's major problem was solved. He worked hard to clear his medical exam. Finally, on 18 June 1994, Kishore's result was declared. Disproving his grandfather, Kondiba who stopped his daughter's education and didn't allow her to realize her dream of becoming a teacher, Kishore completed his education and became the first doctor in his community. In the past, the same person advised Kishore to learn the dholak instead of going to school. For obtaining a dignified life and getting freedom from the oppressive caste system, Dr. Kale chose education as a tool to transform his miserable life into a big success. He concludes his personal story with a dramatic end:

I faced severe hardship and humiliation, but I also received unexpected help. I had been tried and tested every step of the way, but at last my dream had come true: Kisrya had become Dr. Kishore Shantabai Kale! (Kale, *Against All Odds*, 197).

The journey of a Dalit boy from the Kolhati community encompassed the vision of Dr. Ambedkar who advised Dalits- Educate, Unite, and Agitate. The magical transformation from Kisrya to Dr. Kishore Shantabai Kale is indicative of the fact that you are free to choose your destiny no matter what difficulties you encounter in your life. Dr. Kale lived his Dalit life through all painful moments, which sensitized him socially to work for the Dalit children of Kolhati and spread awareness among the Kolhati women and sex workers about their exploitation. He encouraged many Kolhati women advising them to break the inhuman tradition of :”Chira utarnal” and gave their daughters good education instead of pushing them into dancing in tamasha parties.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the paper encapsulates how Dr. Kishore Kale displays his resilient approach towards his life and uses hope to combat all his difficulties. It is evident that the writer developed his positive self-esteem, identified his strengths, used his available support system to come out of the worst conditions that he was subjected to. Dr. Kale's self-transcendence is a result of his ability to face all sorts of adversities in his personal and social life, which fostered his strong resilient attitude to grow from stressful and traumatic experiences through self-healing emotions and hope.

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