



# We Also Made History

*Women in the Ambedkarite  
Movement*

URMILA PAWAR AND MEENAKSHI MOON

ZUBAAN ACADEMIC

# **We Also Made History**

## **Women in the Ambedkarite Movement**

**Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon**

*Translated and with an introduction by Wandana Sonalkar*





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The Late K. K. K. and M. K. K. K.

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01

**01** Beginning of the Kaala Ram Mandir satyagraha in 1930, with woman in the foreground and women at windows



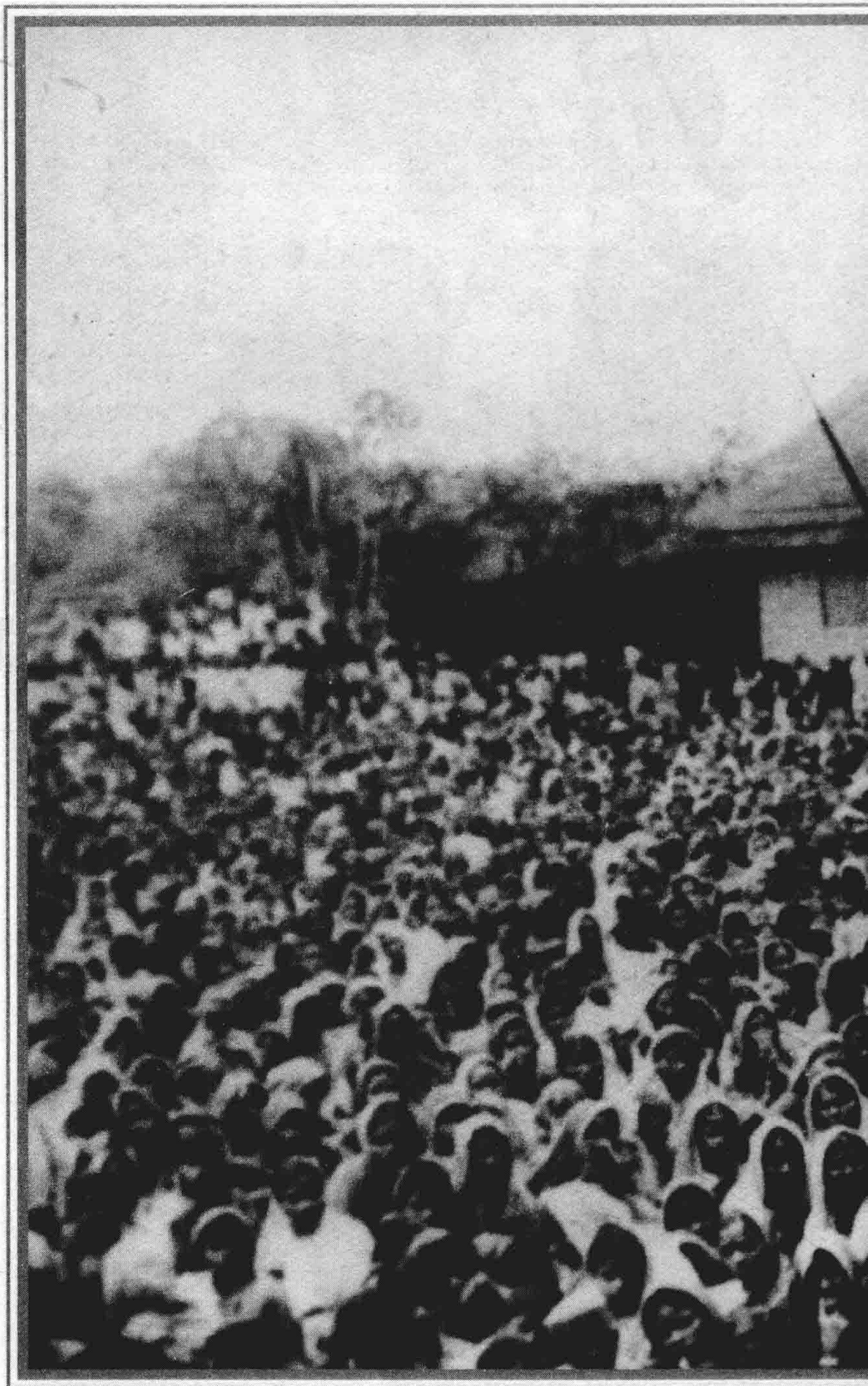
**02** Women felicitating Dr. Ambedkar on his becoming Law Minister, 1942

**03** Dr. Ambedkar with his second wife, Maisaheb (standing)

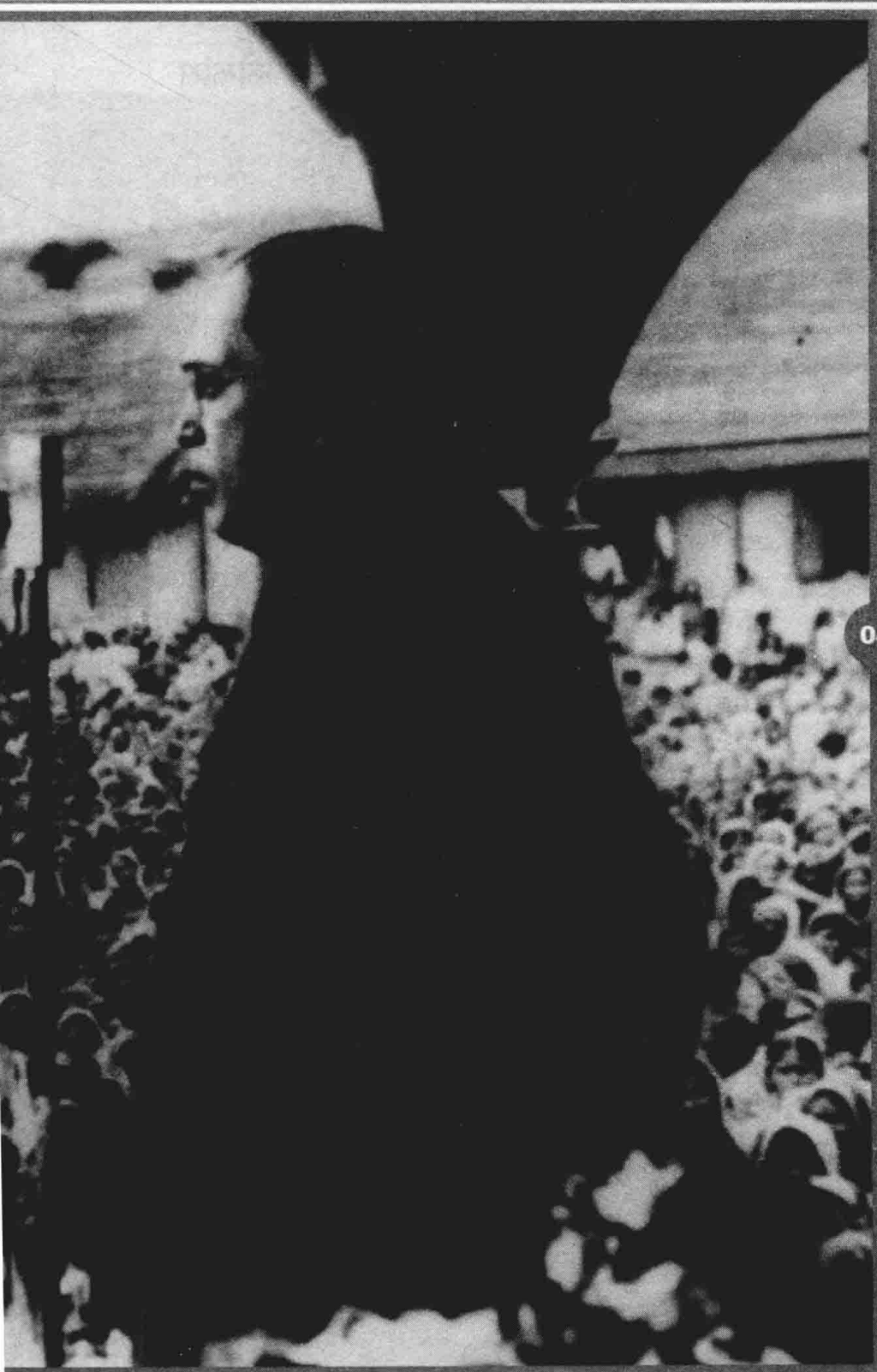
**04** Dr. Ambedkar addressing women's meeting (undated)











## महाड सत्याग्रहास जाणाऱ्या लोकांस जाहीर खबर.

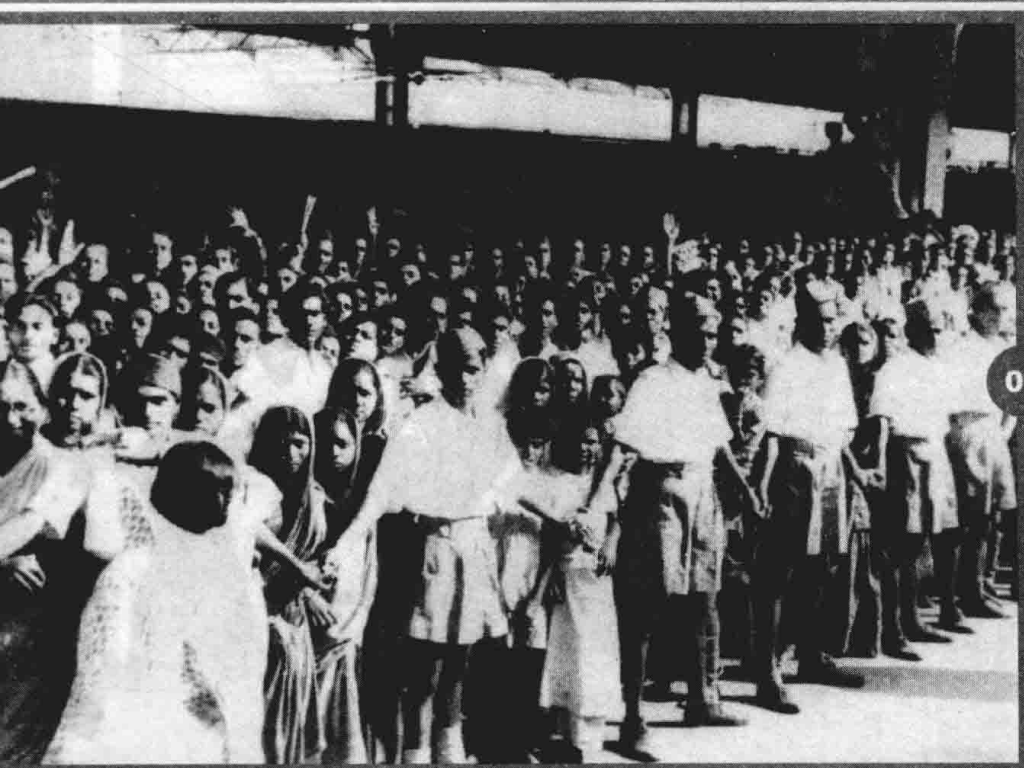
ता. २५-१२-२७ पासून महाड येथें सुरू होणाऱ्या सत्याग्रहास जाणाऱ्या मंडळीस विनंतिपूर्वक कळविण्यांत येतें कीं, त्यांनीं आपल्या-बरोबर ताट, तांब्या, कांबळी व तीन दिवस पुरेल इतकी भोजनाची सामुग्री जरूर आणावी. आम्ही तेथें भोजनाची व्यवस्था करणार आहोंत तरीपण प्रत्येकानें आपापली तयारी ठेवावी. डॉ. आंबेडकर व इतर सत्याग्रह कमिटीचे लोक मुंबईहून ता. २४-१२-२७ रोजी आग-बोटीने निघणार आहेत. तर ज्यांना त्यांच्याबरोबर येणें असेल त्यांनी ता. १५-१२-२७ पूर्वी आपल्या जाण्यायेण्याच्या खर्चाकरितां ५ रुपये बहिष्कृत हितकारिणी सभेच्या ऑफिसांत आणून दिल्यास त्यांच्या-करितां स्वतंत्र बोटीची व्यवस्था करण्यांत येणार आहे. तरी ही सोय ज्यांना पसंत असेल त्यांनीं ताबतोष आपली नांवे बहिष्कृत हितकारिणी सभेच्या ऑफिसांत नोंदवावी व सेक्रेटरीकडे ५ रुपये देऊन पावती घ्यावी. व ज्यांना कमिटीच्या मंडळीबरोबर यावयाचें नसेल त्यांनी दासगांवला उतरण्याची खबरदारी घ्यावी.

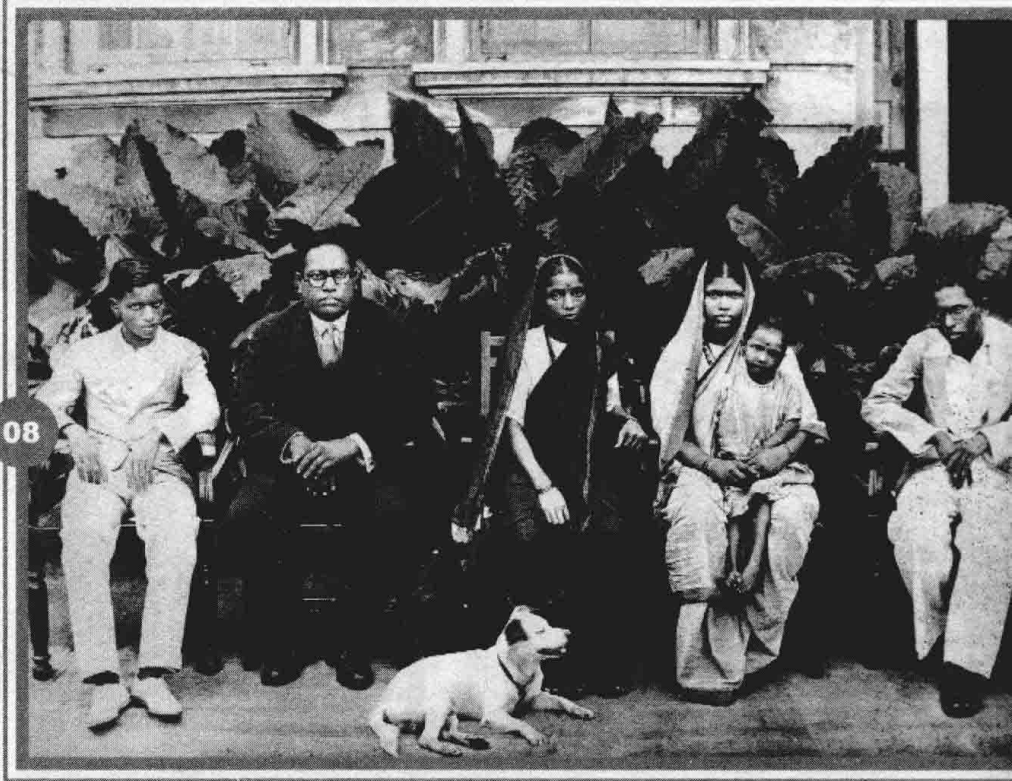
महाड येथें सत्याग्रहाच्यावेळीं अलोट गर्दी होणार आहे. म्हणून त्यावेळीं गर्दीमध्ये आपला मनुष्य अचुक ओळखता यावा या करितां सत्याग्रहांत भाग घेणाऱ्या स्वयंसेवकानें बहिष्कृत हितकारिणी सभेच्या नांवाचें पदक छातीवर लाविलें पाहिजे. ज्यांच्या छातीवर सभेच्या नांवाचें पदक नसेल त्यांच्या संरक्षणाची किंवा इतर कसल्याही प्रकारची जबाबदारी सत्याग्रह कमिटी आपल्यावर घेणार नाही. सद-ग्रह पदकाची किंमत फक्त दोन आणे ठेवण्यांत आली आहे. व ते बहिष्कृत हितकारिणी सभेच्या ऑफिसांत विकत मिळेल.

आपला,

सिताराम नामदेव दिवतकर.

सेक्रेटरी सत्याग्रह कमिटी.





08

**05** Notice of Mahaad satyagraha, 1927

**06** Women at a meeting being guarded  
Samata Sainik Dal (undated)

**07** Women's meeting at Bombay centre  
(undated)

**08** Family photograph of Ambedkar with  
his first wife Ramabai, son Yashwant and  
other family members

All photographs reprinted from the book  
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar published by  
Lokvangmaya griha, Mumbai (2007), and  
from other archival photographs made available  
by the same publishers.

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## Translator's Introduction



**“T**here were different stones down at the river for kunbi women to wash clothes, and different ones for the Mahaars.<sup>1</sup> I purposely washed my clothes on the kunbis’ stone. Four of them came running in a trice and said, ‘O Mhaarni, have your eyes burst or what? Can’t you see it’s the kunbis’ stone?’

‘Who are you calling a Mhaarni? So what if I washed my clothes there? Pour water on it and make it pure.’ ‘What a useless woman this is’ they retorted. When they said this I ran and clutched the hair of one of them. I hated to be called a Mahaarin, it made me angry. There was a fight. There were four of them but I, alone, was a match for them. Then my father-in-law intervened and ended the fight.”

*My first verse I’ll sing for Bheem*

*I’ll be in the satyagraha and I’ll see him*

*My second verse for him*

*Who gave us the right to draw water*

*For him, bai, we’re happy in this van.*

*My third verse is for Ramaai’s lord,*

*He made all the people like a happy bride.<sup>2</sup>*

The reality of caste practice in village life in today’s India is such that the incident narrated in the first paragraph, taken from one of the interviews with dalit women that form the second part of

this book, could still occur today—that is, if a Mahaar woman were to commit such a provocative act. Untouchability has not been banished from India, even though it is ‘banned’ by law. Separate settlements of dalits are still located on the boundary of a village, on a downward slope, so that water used by them for washing flows outside. Dalits are still denied access to village wells used by other members of the community; their use of common grazing lands and other public spaces is contested by non-dalits. Underlying these exclusions is a threat of violence. And it is the women who bear the additional burden of work, the additional threat of sexual violence, constantly in their daily lives.

Yet the first quote does record a moment of rebellion, a memory cherished by the woman telling the story to the authors of this book. She is Shantabai Sarode, a remarkable woman from the Nagpur region in eastern Maharashtra, who trained as a wrestler and was often called to settle disputes between untouchables and non-dalits. According to her narrative, she went to prison eighteen times. She is indeed a unique personality, even in a gallery of remarkable women; but in the pages of this book we will find several stories of rebellion, rather than the narratives of violence and victimhood that we have come to expect from dalit women. There are of course accounts of early marriages, of abusive and violent husbands, of ill-treatment at the hands of in-laws, as we might find in the lives of women of any caste. The social violence underlying the caste system is a reality they have to live with, and it is a subtext that runs through this book. What the book privileges, however, are the moments of overcoming violence, humiliation and exploitation, and the unique form of politicization that made it possible.

The second quote is from a song sung by women taking part in one of the satyagrahas<sup>3</sup> of landless agricultural workers carried out in 1964. Although some dalits in some parts of India own land, and not all the landless are dalits, dalits and adivasis — or tribal communities living in or displaced from forest land — make up the majority of landless agricultural workers. Some years after the death of B.R. Ambedkar in 1956, Dadasaheb Gaikwad led this movement of dalit agricultural labourers. Dalit women courted

arrest and spent time in prison, often with babies in their arms. The “Bheem” in the verse is of course an affectionate reference to Ambedkar. “Ramaai” is Ramabai Ambedkar, his first wife, referred to as “Rama-ai”—“aai” means mother in Marathi.

Dalit popular culture is full of references of this kind. The history of the dalit movement during Ambedkar’s lifetime is a living part of dalit consciousness today, even as the generation that remembers Ambedkar’s leadership grows older and gradually dies out. Songs about the struggles, about Bheem, about Ramaai who is venerated as a mother figure, are sung on various occasions when dalits, especially in Maharashtra, gather to celebrate, to commemorate or to protest. And yet, the specific and particular point of view of dalit women themselves rarely becomes a part of this cultural expression.

There are certain historical reasons for this. The Ambedkari *jalsas*<sup>4</sup> that were built up as a cultural medium of the dalit movement towards the end of Ambedkar’s life and which flourished in Maharashtra for some time after his death, used elements of existing folk forms such as the *tamasha*<sup>5</sup> as well as religious forms, but their performances and their troupes did not include women. This was because the appearance of dalit women in tamashas had always been heavily imbued with the culture of their sexual exploitation, of their availability to men of the upper castes. The exclusion of women from the jalsa troupes was thus motivated by the objective of emancipating them from this history of sexual exploitation. Throughout his life Ambedkar endeavoured to bring dalit women into public life in a new role, as speakers and chairpersons in public meetings, as movers and seconders of resolutions, and as teachers. The numerous accounts of women performing this role, which we find in both parts of this book, should be read in this light.

The exclusion of women from the jalsas however, implies that the voice of the dalit woman speaking for herself has been largely absent from dalit popular culture even up to the present time. The few autobiographies by dalit women that have been published in the last two or three decades have been rare exceptions.