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Breaking The Chains: Baby Kamble's Struggle Against Poverty, Untouchability, And Dalit Patriarchy In *The Prisons We Broke*

Amit Kumar[1*]

[1*]Research Scholar, Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, Rewari

Abstract

Dalit Literature has emerged as a prominent genre within the literary landscape of India. The hard reality faced by the marginalised and "voiceless" Dalit population is examined and internalised. The objective of this study is to provide a contextual analysis of the physical and psychological violence experienced by Dalit women, examining its occurrence in both public and private domains. Baby Kamble is recognised as a prominent figure among Dalit writers, and her autobiography titled *The Prison We Broke* gained significant recognition and acceptance within academic circles. This paper additionally addresses the concerns surrounding the marginalisation experienced by Dalit women, as exemplified in the autobiography of Baby Kamble. The work produced by the individual in question is a manifestation of the concept of double consciousness, which explores the manner in which Dalit women have been subjected to mistreatment and the roles they have assumed within their respective social contexts. The focus of Baby Kamble's engagement lies within the historical context of Dalit persecution. The author does not romanticise the existence of the Dalit community; instead, she explicitly expresses her objective to subject the circumstances of her community to meticulous examination. Her aim is to illustrate how the dominance of the Brahmanical system had reduced the Mahars to a state of servitude, compelling them to endure living conditions that were even more deplorable than those of animals. This essay undertakes an analysis of the author's portrayal of the visual documentation depicting the lives of the Mahars throughout the course of the last five decades in Western Maharashtra.

Keywords: Autobiography, Brahminical, Dalit oppression, marginalisation, Mahar.

Introduction

In *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (trans. 1913), Jean Jacques Rousseau presents a well-known remark that commences with the proverbial phrase: "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains" (49).

This concept was specifically aimed at the prevailing social structure, highlighting Rousseau's discontent with the advancement of civilization resulting from human detachment from the natural environment. When considering the initial portion of his remark, it becomes evident that the Dalits of Maharashtra do not possess the status of being inherently liberated. The Indian caste system is characterised by intricate complexities and intricacies, wherein individuals are inherently assigned a caste and associated beliefs from birth.

Contrary to Rousseau's idealisation, it is evident that Dalits are consistently subjected to oppressive conditions, as they are born into a state of bondage and lack the fundamental freedom that Rousseau envisioned. The volume titled 'The Prisons We Broke' consists of twelve chapters and spans 135 pages. It chronicles the origins of the Dalit community, highlighting their humble beginnings rooted in dirt and soil. Despite a lifetime of relentless labour and effort, the Dalits find themselves in the same circumstances without any discernible signs of advancement or improvement. In the introduction, Maya Pandit highlights the significant element of *Jina Amucha*, which is the Dalit feminist criticism of patriarchy presented by Baby Kamble. The author vividly depicts the physical and psychological violence experienced by women in both public and private domains. In the context of Brahmin-Mahar dynamics, the Mahar community assumes the role of the 'other' in relation to the Brahmins. Consequently, Mahar women are positioned as the 'other' within the Mahar group itself, particularly in relation to Mahar men. The work of Baby Kamble illustrates the intersectionality of caste and patriarchy, highlighting their role in the perpetuation of exploitative practises targeting women.

It is noteworthy that Baby's decision to pluralize the term 'prison' as 'prisons' and her affirmation of the act of breaching those prisons serve as evidence of her strong commitment to the Dalit consciousness-raising movement. Baby Kamble serves as a guiding figure for marginalised communities, including the educated and privileged Dalits, who are committed to upholding the vision of Ambedkar in empowering the Dalit Bahujan's. She represents an alternative path that does not succumb to the convenience of conventional educational systems or compromise the aspirations of Ambedkar for the upliftment of the Dalit community. The use of the plural term 'we' in the title *The Prisons We Broke* (emphasis Mine) instead of the singular form 'I' serves to validate Baby's development of an authentic Dalit individual consciousness, which is influenced by the collective Dalit consciousness characterised by a three-tier oppression. In the opening statement, translator Maya Pandit discusses Baby Kamble's exploration of the history of Dalit oppression and the author's explicit aim to systematically demonstrate that Brahminical Hinduism is the root cause of societal ills. Kamble argues

that it is the Brahmins who have transformed a diligent and submissive population into perpetual slaves. The Mahars are subject to significant hegemony within the existing social caste hierarchy, resulting in a perception that poverty, untouchability, humiliation, exploitation, and strenuous labour are not sporadic incidents, but rather inherent phenomena akin to natural elements such as the sun, moon, tree, and wind.

First and foremost, the initial focus of any Dalit literature is to provide a description of the 'difference in location'. The Savarna system of social hierarchy is predicated around the dichotomy of physical cleanliness and impurity, whereby Dalits are consistently seen impure and contaminating. This perception serves as a primary impetus for the exclusion and marginalisation of the Dalit population from the broader Chaturvarna society. The geographical isolation experienced by the Dalits results in their exclusion from mainstream social activities, hence perpetuating their disconnection from historical narratives. With the exception of the houses belonging to the sixteenth share Mahars, which exhibited a somewhat satisfactory state, the remaining buildings were characterised by extreme destitution, perpetually afflicted by poverty. The affordability of their residences is significantly limited. A structure composed of stone and mud is constructed, including a roofing made from the palmyra tree. Baby Kamble experiences a sense of self-pity as she recounts her fond memories of her childhood country days. Regarding their household equipment, it is customary for them to possess a large clay vessel with a narrow opening, known as a *keli*, which is typically situated near the entrance of their abode and serves the purpose of containing potable water. The oral cavity would be concealed by a fractured coconut shell, adorned with three perforations at its base. Additionally, it functions as a vessel for consuming the water sourced from the natural stream, commonly referred to as 'mineral' water. The method of consuming the water is somewhat intricate, "One had to pour water in to the coconut shell, and blocking the holes with one's fingers hastily empty the shell into one's mouth."(07)

The dwelling would be equipped with a clay *chulha*, a traditional mud oven, in close proximity to many clay pots, a wooden *pali*, and a nonstick *tawa*. The *tawa* likely experienced cardiac perforation as a result of over utilisation and absence of prospects for cessation of activity. A rolling pin is used to flatten the dough, while a lengthy sheet of tin, distinct from a can, is employed to hold the *bhakri*, a type of rustic bread, during the baking process. In one corner of the room, there is a grinding stone, accompanied by a limited number of dust-emitting rags that serve as a type of cushioning. Adjacent to this arrangement is a small platform known as *Bhawnas*, which holds a modest collection of clay pots. Kamble expresses, "…they matched the overall décor of the house."(08)

The initial four chapters of the book titled 'The Prisons We Broke' provide an account of several societal injustices prevalent within the Dalit community. Superstitions, the practise of impawning, the belief in the ownership of women by deities, instances of intoxication, the harassment of brides by their in-laws, and incidents of domestic violence against wives are among the various examples that can be cited. The individual in question is consistently engaged in efforts to address and eliminate the internal challenges faced within their community as a Dalit. The persistent issue of untouchability and exploitation perpetrated by individuals belonging to higher castes remains prevalent. While the broader society is rapidly adapting to the ongoing advancements and advances, the Dalits continue to be confined inside the confines of their caste, as prescribed by the descendants of *Manu*. Kamble expresses her discontent over the lifestyle of those inside her society by questioning the nature of their existence. "Come to think of it, what kind of life did these people really lead? What was there worth living for? Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished. But it is a basic human need to hope for change. The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls"(11). The deplorable phenomenon of untouchability, despite being legally criminalised in post-independence India, continues to permeate the existence of the Dalit community.

The practises of scavenging discarded items from a distance, consuming water by cupping one's hands, refraining from walking in the presence of individuals belonging to higher castes, avoiding sitting alongside Dalits on public transportation, and the refusal of barbers who groom animals to provide their services to Dalits, all constitute the cultural heritage of the Dalit community in India. In the aforementioned passage, it is observed that the shopkeeper belonging to the upper caste refers to the Dalit lady as a 'Dirty Mahar' in a public setting. Conversely, the Dalit woman, who is subjected to hegemonic oppression, addresses the 'little' boy as 'master…please…get polluted.' The phenomenon of untouchability within prisons can be likened to an intangible blemish, perpetually engendering discomfort and a sense of inferiority within the Dalit community.

The phenomenon of double marginalisation experienced by Dalit women is prominently illustrated in Kamble's literary work titled 'The Prisons We Broke.' Dalit women experience a dual form of marginalisation. Firstly, in the context of my Dalit identity, and secondly, as a woman. Women are on par with males in terms of contributing work, but they continue to be subordinate in regards to societal expectations, authority, and decision-making pertaining to familial affairs. The patriarchal structure of the Dalit community restricts women to the domestic sphere. Several examples included by Kamble in the essay reveal the terrible reality faced by Dalit women. The gender inequality experienced by a married Dalit woman is perpetuated by both her father-in-law and mother-in-law. If a Dalit lady experiencing hunger observes others consuming food and desires to partake before her in-laws commence their meal, it would elicit reproachful remarks from her mother-in-law.

Just in case a *sasu* noticed this, she would contemptuously throw a morsel at her daughter-in-law, saying , „push that down your throat, you shameless hussy! Aren‟t you ashamed to stare so at a child who's eating? At least let the food get down his throat! Your evil eye will make the child choke. Don‟t you know how to behave like a good daughter-in-law? (30)

Furthermore, the prevalence of child marriage is widespread within the Dalit population. Females experience pregnancy and are required to undergo childbirth under unfavourable conditions, resulting in both the newborn and the mother enduring adverse effects such as hunger and diminished vigour. The child mortality rate and maternal mortality rate in Dalit groups are significantly elevated. Another notable piece of information presented in the text is that around one percent of women would undergo the severe act of having their noses amputated. The rationale behind this incidence can be attributed to the *sasu*. The husband, under the influence of his mother-in-law, engages in a process of psychological manipulation, thereby instructing his wife on appropriate societal conduct. Instances can be observed when, whenever an individual belonging to the higher caste traverses a particular path, if, by happenstance, a woman from the Dalit community is present on such path, she is compelled to conceal her entire physique and continuously recite the mantra, "the humble Mahar women fall at your feet master" (52).

Dalit women experience adversity not only within the patriarchal structure of society, but also within the matrilineal stereotype prevalent in their communities. Baby Kamble places significant emphasis on the emancipation of Dalit women through educational means, while also providing guidance to her female counterparts on the initial stages of establishing a small-scale enterprise. Kamble urges Dalit mothers, in accordance with Babasaheb's teachings, to ensure that their children receive an education and strive for economic self-sufficiency. The final two chapters of the book are dedicated to the exploration of the life and contributions of B.R. Ambedkar. According to Kamble, Ambedkar was perceived as a divine intervention. The author provides a detailed account of several public gatherings, initiatives, and undertakings spearheaded by Ambedkar. The individual in question actively participated in the Dalit solidarity movement and held a prominent role as a member, eventually assuming the position of president, inside the Manila Mandala organisation. In a technical sense, Kamble's conclusion of her book, characterised by her profound admiration and reverence for Ambedkar in the context of the Himalayas, serves as a manifestation of her unequivocal support for the contemporary superhero archetype. Ambedkar enhances their resilience and fortitude. The Dalit community, comprising individuals of many genders, regarded Baba as a significant figure and drew inspiration from him in instances of discrimination, perceiving him as a source of inner fortitude. Baba was perceived by them as a figure embodying superhuman qualities, akin to the heroic protagonists found in mythological narratives and cultural literature. The individual expresses a vehement disdain towards the post-Ambedkar segregation among leaders, attributing it to their pursuit of power.

Her pledge serves as evidence of her dedication. Dalit communities perceive themselves as having reached a point where they have no further losses to incur in relation to the Savarna Hindu population. Although Baby Kamble does not explicitly acknowledge any Marxist inspiration in her memoirs, her work might be interpreted as a manifesto that urges her fellow members to challenge the oppressive systems that perpetuate their subjugation and dehumanisation. The individual mobilises the Dalits to actively participate in efforts aimed at dismantling the societal barriers they face. This mobilisation is achieved through educational initiatives, collective action, adherence to the values of the Ambedkar movement, and the pursuit of economic independence.

The Prisons We Broke' illustrates the Mahars illiteracy and poverty. The individuals in question lacked the physical and mental capacity to effectively resist the system that was accountable for their state of low morale and despondency. The Mahars experienced persistent victimisation through various atrocities, despite the existence of explicit regulations aimed at preventing such cruelties. Practises like as enforced segregation, separate access to water sources, and severe punishments for any resistance against the oppressive actions of the upper caste were prevalent among the Mahars.

In her work, Baby Kamble provides a comprehensive portrayal of the profound entrenchment of Indian society inside the caste system, shedding light on the distinct perspectives held by those belonging to the upper caste Indian community and the Dalits. Kamble experienced humiliation, harassment, and discrimination from both her peers and educators. The individual in question appeared to hold the belief that the occurrence itself is not what would induce fear and render individual’s incapable of action. The endeavour of social reform is consistently challenging. Obstacles are inevitable. Instances of insults and humiliations can originate not just from external sources, but also from individuals within one's own community. The user's text lacks academic language and structure. It needs to be rewritten to adhere to the article titled 'The Prisons We Broke' highlights the dire socio-economic conditions and lack of education experienced by the Mahars. They lacked awareness of the existence of humans in general. The individuals in question exhibit a reluctance to defy prevailing societal conventions and question the authority of the caste-based Hindu population. The individuals had a strong inclination towards superstition and adhered to the commands of their captors. In Hinduism, there exists a historical perception of the Mahar community being marginalised and deemed inferior. However, it is important to note that despite this societal prejudice, the Mahar group has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to upholding Hindu values and holding gods in high reverence. Baby Kamble espouses a steadfast belief in comprehensive transformation. The individual desires a fundamental alteration. It is imperative that all individuals possess social equality. The entire societal

structure is founded upon the existence of inequality. There exists variation in the relative heights of certain entities, with some being situated at greater elevations while others are positioned at lesser elevations. This civilization is characterised by the presence of religious sanction, which results in the fragmentation of the community into numerous divisions, each with its distinct identity and allegiance. In this context, it is observed that each caste within this particular society possesses its distinct cultural practises, with religion being closely intertwined with caste affiliation. In contrast, in many other nations, religion is considered a personal matter, while culture is shared with the general populace. The existence of caste has contributed to the manifestation of societal ailments.

Dalits historically occupied a subordinate position within the social hierarchy, serving as labourers and facing systemic oppression at the hands of the savarna caste. However, the inclination towards subjugating others was deeply ingrained in the mindset of the Dalit community as well. Consequently, they were known to subject their daughters-in-law to a state of servitude. Baby Kamble narrates the inclination of Mahars to subject their daughters-in-law to enslavement, so highlighting the dual oppression experienced by Dalit women. This not only underscores the exploitation perpetuated by the caste system, but also sheds light on the additional hardships faced by Dalit women. Mothers-in-law subject their daughters-in-law to torment as a means of seeking retribution for the mistreatment they themselves endured at the hands of their own mothers-in-law. It provides individuals with a sense of gratification and enjoyment derived from exerting control over another person.

In her autobiography, Baby Kamble provides a vivid portrayal of the lives of the Mahar community over the course of the past five decades in western Maharashtra. The individual openly expressed her discontent with the Chaturvarna system in Hinduism, as well as the prevailing patriarchal hierarchy among the Mahars, which marginalised women and assigned them a lesser social standing. The autobiography critically examines the patriarchal system and pervasive superstitions among the Mahars community. The text also serves as a chronicle of the poverty and starvation experienced by the Mahars. The autobiography serves as a critical examination of the Hindu social structure, as well as the patriarchal hierarchy among the Mahars. The autobiography of Baby Kamble stands apart from the autobiographies of both higher caste women and Dalit males due to her introspective and candid analysis. In these other autobiographies, the presence of Dalit women as autonomous individuals is never acknowledged. In her narrative, Baby Kamble sheds light on the challenging circumstances faced by Dalit women.

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