

## **CASTE AND PATRIARCHY DOMINANT THE LIVES OF DALIT WOMEN IN BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISONS WE BROKE**

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### **Abstract**

The Prisons We Broke (2008) is an English translation of Jina Amacha (1985), a Marathi text by Baby Kamble. The text which has been translated by Prof. Maya Pandit, is in fact, a 'narrative of pain' dealing with the lives of Mahar men and women in Veergaon, Kamble's village in the state of Maharashtra. This text provides a realistic picture of the oppressive caste and patriarchal beliefs of the Indian society. She is tried to depict the life of her community and people showing that how brahminical domination had turned the mahar into slaves. One of the most ironical things which emerges about Dalit women is that they don't have security in their own homes. They can be rightly called as the most vulnerable community in Indian contexts because of the social, cultural, and economic crisis in their lives. The two factors of 'caste and patriarchy' are very much dominant in the lives of dalit women all over India. The paper also makes an attempt to reveal the fact that Dalit women here have to face both Brahmanic as well as Dalit patriarchy. However, this narrative shows agency in the lives of Dalit women which helps them in emerging as the agents of transformation in their community. It is not the change but the degree of change that can transform their life in a better way.

**Key Words:** Dalit Women, Community, Caste, Dalit Partriarchy, Mahar

### **Introduction**

Through this paper I wish to present the distressing effects of the caste system on the social and cultural status of dalit women. Through this paper I want to highlights the harsh reality of struggle, suppression and suffering of dalit women as they face every day of their miserable lives. The Dalit Panthers movement which was spearheaded by the male writers like Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale in 1972 in Maharashtra, was least concerned about the rights of the dalit women and this type of development indicates that dalit patriarchy is very much visible like that of 'Brahmanic patriarchy'. It was only in 1980s that dalit women writers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and later on Bama and P.Shivakami plunged into the literary world to give an expression to an age long suppression. The works of these writers echo the common idea that the

dalit women suffer from the triple oppression of caste, class and gender and hence, get a little chance to explore the greener pastures.

I would like to start by citing the often quoted statement made by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* or *Principles of Political Right* (trans. 1913) begins with the proverbial lines "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains" (49). This very idea was directed towards the then social order as well as it showed Rousseau's dissatisfaction to the progress of civilization at the hand of human being away from the lap of nature. If we contextualize the first part of his statement, the Dalits of Maharastra is not even 'born free'. The Indian caste system is devised with so complicacies and diplomacies that whenever one is born is born with its caste and the creeds attached to the caste. The Dalits are not and cannot be an exception. Once a Dalit is born, a voluntary worker of nature is born. The caste-Hindus would cease the moment with no delay to condition the new born to Dalithood and to its social specificities and legacy of oppression. Dr. Ambedkar criticized (chapter 19; "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" *The Essential Writing of B.R. Ambedkar*. 2011) this formation of Hindu social and caste hierarchies based on "by birth" philosophy. The frustration in the collective consciousness of the Dalits with this overall oppressive and depressive Hindu society regarding caste and poverty has come out in a famous poem by a Marathi Dalit poet Baburao Bagul. In his poem "You Have Made the Mistake", Bagul writes-

"... That's why I say-

You have made the mistake of being born in this country..."

(*Poisoned Bread*: 81)

Post colonialism challenges the world of inequalities that once in the past deprived people of enjoying fundamental rights of their lives. In this context, Young States "It refuses to acknowledge the superiority of western culture. Its radical agenda is to demand equality and well-being for all human beings on this earth" (Post colonialism: A very Short Introduction:7). But the reality is that the gap between rich and poor has widened in the recent times with the advent of global and neo-global scenario. As far as the Indian social set-up is concerned, the dalits are still the lesser sons and daughters of God. Dalits, all over India, are the victims of oppression that is both epistemic and hereditary that perpetuates the agony by resorting to both violent and non-violent means. Dalits are suffering from the double burden of being poor and being dalit. For dalit women, the situation is even worse, as they suffer from the triple oppression of being women, poor and low caste. August Babel called the women "the first human being to come into bondage. She was a slave before the male slave existed" (quoted in *Haunted by Fire*: 404). But what about dalit women who can rightly be termed as the slaves of slaves.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (published in 2008) is considered the tactic of Dalit women. As Maya Pandit examines, —Like most Dalit autobiographies, *The Prisons We Broke* is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalit for thousands of years?|| She notes that after Phule and Shahu Maharaj, it was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who provided the intellectual and ideological foundations for a sustained critique of the caste system and that under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, Dalit protest acquired the form and force of a militant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism. Kamble raises certain important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit women to get themselves educated both socially and culturally.

Born to an industrial father, the author's —family background hardly keeps her above the miserable poverty suffered by her community. Her English-speaking aajas or grandfathers were butlers to European sahibs. As she says: all the people of the maharwada were illiterate except for my aaja. Therefore, she has nothing much to suffer as her people suffer but she had experiences of her community her people who suffer a lot.

The text explores how the Brahmanic domination had turned the Mahars as good as animals. The Dalit women shown in this text emerge as sandwiched between the Brahmanic and Dalit patriarchy. Maya Pandit in the introduction to the novel states “If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men” (XV). The Prisons We Broke demonstrates the ‘Democratic Patriarchy’ as propounded by Iliah Kancha in her book *Why I am not a Hindu*. This type of patriarchal set-up gives the authority to wife not to make herself an easy prey to her husband's dictates that are in the form of pervasive and coercive ideology. But here in this text, the dalit patriarchy is not democratic patriarchy of Pandit. In fact, the Dalit patriarchy as represented by Kamble in her self-narrative is the one in which Dalit men have become the beacons of brutality against their own wives and daughters. The text shows the extreme types of exploitation that the dalit women have to face from the dalit patriarchal forces. One of the worst forms of exploitation was to chop off the nose of dalit women who did not abide by the patriarchal norms. The Devdasi system also gets some space in this narrative. Mahar women could never resist the inhuman treatment meted out to them by their own husbands. The mark of kumkum on the forehead of these women becomes more precious than a ‘kohinoor diamond’. This mark of kumkum thus becomes a symbol of servitude.

In this autobiography, Kamble speaks out for the women of her community, presenting an unflinching portrait of its women, subjugated by both caste and patriarchy. Especially newly married younger women suffer the worst fate. Usually married off at the age of eight or nine, immature, even without knowing what a husband meant yet the child has to go her in —laws' house to lead a married life. However, for the girl \_marriage meant nothing but calamity.‘ After arrival of the young bride at her in-laws' house, she would be asked to make two basket full bhakris. The poor child would sit down to make them but she could not able to do that properly , may be bhakris burnt in some places and remain uncooked in some. Then the sasur would call all her friend for the presentation of the tiny-burnt bhakris, \_Attyabai, come and see what happening here is. Didn't you think that I'd brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She cannot even make a few bhakris properly. Oh, well, what can on expect of this daughter of a dunce? (94).|| If the sasur is not satisfied again with her making of bhakris properly, she started abuses on her and her mother, —what's your aai really? Tell me! Is she a good married woman at all? Or does she know only how to run after the pot-maker donkeys? Didn't she teach you anything? I pamper you... my own sasur was spitfire. A burning coal! Holding a burning coal in one's palm was easier than living with her!! (95). so the tradition of oppressed her own daughter in—laws is continued till days.

The novel depicts the Mahar Dalit women in a strange condition in which they have to appease both the high caste Hindus and their own Mahar men. The writer narrates the saga of her ‘maharwada’ women who had to sell firewood to the high caste community to make both the ends meet. They were not allowed tread upon the road that was frequented by the high castes. However, their entry into the high caste community was possible because of the firewood that they carried to that prohibited area for sale. On the way, they had to cover themselves if they happened to see the high castes coming down the road. They also had to bow before them in most humble manner and utter the words “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master”

(52). Even a small child belonging to high caste community was given the same kind of treatment. Sometimes newly-wedded girls in the group of old women would fail to join the other women in this act of humble submission. Their failure to join the chant would make the master furious and hence all the Mahars were summoned to the Mahar chawdi and the new brides cursed for not showing respect to the higher castes. Consequently they had to face the ire of their 'sasra', 'sasu', who threatened them in the most abusive language. Thus it was a complete surrender to Brahmanic patriarchy and its ideology.

These women wear ragged saris. The clothes were worn as per the caste of a woman. The Mahar women could never muster courage to wear saris like high caste women. These ladies of low birth had to tuck the pleats of the sari in such a way that the borders could remain invisible where as the high caste women were recognised by wearing saris with their borders remaining visible.

The ceremony of marriage, which again depicted the suppression of a 'bride's family' was a spectacular site to watch in the Mahar community. The bride and the groom had to pass through strange and cumbersome marriage rituals and the bride's father had to bear all the expenses. They had to reach groom's home a day earlier than the marriage. The marriage was a mega event lasting for eight days. The bathing ritual was nothing short than a comic event. The bride and the groom were made to sit on a wooden board in the courtyard with two huge pots placed in both sides and the bride was rolled around in the muddy water by his brothers till she was fully besmeared with mud. After this event, the bride and groom were not allowed to walk for five days. A Brahmin priest had the prerogative to solemnise the marriage ceremony. It was just an empty ritual for him because he was just there for money and the fear of being polluted haunted his mind and compelled him to maintain a distance.

The theme of untouchability is second midpoint in this autobiography. There are many Comical incidents where the narrator comment on Hindu caste's false ideologies, such as the one where the narrator as a young girl, together with her classmates, enters a temple to pollute the idol of Ram, is almost metaphorical. The girls terrified by the idols of the god's guards. This group of girls thought that Ram must have sent the five-hooded cobra after them because they had polluted Him. Or must have set demons on them. The sound of their screaming makes aware the Brahmin priest and they told him that, —we are Mahar girls and the god has sent demons after us because we have polluted him'. (131) the Brahmin priest who chases them out of the temple became god for them who had come to save them from demons. The other incident where a mahar boy touches the idol of Vitthal and this became great commotion everywhere. After that, the priest in the temple announced that, —the Mahars had polluted the temple. They also declared that god Vitthal's face had become contorted and that tears were flowing from goddess Rukmayi's eyes. Soon the news of the Mahars having polluted the divine couple Vitthal and Rukmayi spread all over Phaltan. In fact, it reached all the eighty-four villages in the state of Phaltan. Priest organized the chanting of scriptures and purificatory rituals to wash away the pollution with milk and gomutra. Finally, after one and a half months of incessant chanting, ceaseless worship, and of course substantial grants from the king, the Brahmin priest managed to cleanse the gods of the pollution, restored the original expression lord Vitthal's face and stemmed the flow of tears from Rukmayi's eyes(127). For marriage occasion, the Brahmin priest would be invited to solemnize the marriage. The fear of polluting the Brahmin priest is stand at a distance. Interesting he would never make any compromising on his Dakshina including money, two kilos of channa dal, one-and-a-half kilos of rice, three kilos of wheat and a huge plateful of jiggery. By taking of this stuff, the Brahmin priest never feel polluted. Even the

upper caste's god is not their god. He does not accept their prayer. He is not even capable of feeling their misery. As Keshav Meshram challenges this god in 'One Day I Curse That...God', in these words:

One day I cursed that mother-fucker God.  
He just laughed shamelessly.  
My neighbor – a born-to-be Brahman – was shocked.  
He looked at me with his castor-oil face and said,  
How can you say such things to the  
Source of the Indescribable,  
Quality less, Formless Juggernaut?  
Shame on you for trying to catch his dharma-hood  
in a noose of words. '....'¶

The text also presents the example of travesty of the institution of marriage in dalit community where girls are married off before attaining the age of puberty. The writer was herself married at the age of thirteen. The text also reveals the plight of the newly wedded Mahar girls who had to go through various types of suppression and violence. Their ordeal started after the very first day of the marriage. The very first job of the newly-wedded daughter-in-law was to prepare bhakris so that she could prove her culinary skills and get acclaimed for that act. She had to do all the household chores without being given the chance of making any complaints and further suffer the exploitation by their mothers-in-law who used to vent out their retaliation in the form of abusive language. Further these women were just depicted as child producing machines. Their prime duty was to look after the domestic chores and produce children "A mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause" (82). It is one of the ironies that some people die by overeating and others by under eating. The Mahar women described in this text have been shown to be the victims of malnourishment after the act of delivery. They had to contend with only the gruel made from jowar. The midwives performed their jobs without any professional skill.

Kamble covers interesting aspects of the Dalit movement including the 'Riddles controversy' and the argument between Gandhi and Ambedkar. During her school education all mahar girls are neglected by upper caste girls because the fear of polluting. Even if upper caste girls pass by them they would cover their nose, mutter chee, chee, and run away from there, as they are great danger. One of the upper caste girls says, "you know, I have bath again after I go home from school. My mother has come to know that mahar girls sit in our class and she doesn't allow me to enter the house unless I have a bath." Very young age, even these upper caste girls do not understand around their surrounding they talks about untouchability. The act of attending school by mahar girls, the higher caste girls got together and comment on them, "that Ambedkar has educated himself, that's why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!" (109)

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar decided to awaken his people who had ruined to the level of subhuman. He began to organize meeting to the people. Ambedkar's Speeches make people against religion, custom, tradition and superstition. As he said about worship of god Khandoda in Jejuri, " the stone steps in front of the god's temple have been worn away by hapless people beating their heads against those steps in utter supplication. But has he ever taken mercy on you? What good has this god ever done to you? Your people have served the village, the upper caste communities, for ages. You clean all their dead filth. And what do they do for you? They feed you with their dead animals. Even then this god does not take pity on you. Do you know

something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return from this god?"

The Effect of Ambedkar's speeches is seen in the last part of Kamble's text, when Rani Sahiba organizes Mahila Mandal in Phaltan, she called Brahmins, Maratha and mahar women for this Mandal. The second round meeting was organizing in dining hall where all the Brahmins and Maratha women occupied the chairs. Unfortunately mahar women stood on one side at the same time when Rani Sahiba and her followers move towards stage; suddenly Thakubai shook shoulder and told her, "Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. I am going to forcefully remove your women from the hairs and sear my women there." The Rani Sahiba was taken a back for a moment. But she immediately arranged chairs in the front for all of us (133)."

Ambedkar tried to challenge the ideology and perspective of Brahmanism. And the text shows the verbal battle between mahars and higher castes in a more aggressive and violent way when they start hurling abuses at the leaders of their respective communities. Mahars could never tolerate any ill-will against their leader Dada Sahib Ambedkar and Gandhi was dear to the higher castes. It is interesting to note that the writer makes use of the word 'Bhimrekha' instead of 'Lakshmanrekha' just to obliterate the Hindu symbols. Here Sharankumar Limbale needs to be evoked "Rama the killer of Shambuka, cannot be our ideal. Gita and Mahabharata, which support the caste system, cannot be honoured by us"( 34 ). Ambedkar's philosophy however again started losing its impact as the Mahars started living Hindu way of life which was once discarded by Ambedkar and his followers and once again the author seems to lament that. In fact, the domination of 'Brahminism' is so strong that a Mahar seems to be incapable of coming out of its shackles.

The Prisons We Broke is important because it draws the progress of the Mahar community from pre-Ambedkar days to its rapid transformation through education and mass conversion. Dalit Literature represents a powerful, emerging movement in the Indian literary tradition. Dalit and African American literature in a course entitled 'Literature of Protest' is introduced in various Indian Universities. Their stories earlier told in Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada and Telugu are now being translated into English, French and Spanish. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into different languages, its reverberations are now being heard all around the globe. To conclude this paper I would like to say that, the situation of dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the biggest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world. There is no doubt about the traditional taboos are same for dalit men and women. But dalit women have to deal with them more often.

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