
WHEN THE 'PRISONS BROKE': A MAHAR WOMAN'S LIBERATION NARRATIVE

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Abstract: Right to Equality is a fundamental right in India, regardless of caste and gender. But here, women are not only subjected to the patriarchal norms of the society, but some are also forced to bears the burden of double oppression. The accident of one's birth ordains their present and future and therefore, this paper will focus on the identity construction of Dalit women through reformative Dalit movements and self assertion. From Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) to Kausalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap* (1999), one could easily decipher that Dalit women were subjected to dual disadvantages: of being women and of being Dalit. This paper will primarily discuss Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* so that we may get a chance to peep into Dalit women's world, their community, through their lens. Autobiography as a literary genre has always been a contested category. It was valued as an interpretation of life in its totality, but not as a literary text. In India, traditionally, home and the family life have been the women's domain. They understood their identity in a referential manner. In a country, where the condition of women in most of the regions is pitiable, we have a handful of names like Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and so on, who made an attempt to raise their voices and established their own identities. When one is talking about the Dalit autobiographies, one must be aware of the dynamics of the Dalit movement in various phases.

Baby Kamble extensively discuss the emergence and importance of Dalit Movement initiated by the Mahar leader, B R Ambedkar, which became a huge social mass movement. Therefore, the paper will attempt to answer the centuries old notion of untouchability, the unquestioned question of religion and its role in the formation of the Hindu hierarchical society. And, lastly, it becomes imperative for the masses to understand that Dalit Literature is not just a compilation of pain, victimhood and rejection, rather it is a collection of several voices which were earlier muted by the baseless social and political forces. Hence, Dalit Literature is a movement to raise the voice against inhumanity.

Keywords: Autobiography, Caste, Dalit, Marginal, Resistance, Women.

Introduction: Dalit literature is not only a literature of protest and rejection, but also a literature of reconstruction of the past. "Dalit consciousness has inspired intellectuals to probe the entire Indian history and culture from below." (Aston 37). Dalit Literature is based on fundamental human values. Agreeing to what R.G.Jadhav notes that Dalit literature believes that man is the measure of all things including arts, literature and culture. Dalit protest literature has been an effective way for Dalit writers to express their Dalit consciousness and show their inner feelings. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and negativism, as it intimately linked with hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as "untouchables" are unfortunate bunches of social, economic and cultural inequality. Many people contributed their valuable experiences and histories to this genre, but Marathi literature proved to be the initiators.

Marathi literature has a significant tradition of autobiographical narration. Interestingly, we observe women erupting powerfully and contributing their stories of sustenance and resistance to the genre. In Marathi the word Dalit is used for 'the spurned': the term was the first expression which now includes Harijans (Mahars), Mangs, Mallas, Chambhars and Pulayas. The Dalits were treated worse than animals till the end of 19th century. Their presence was

usually banned from upper class society. The caste system with a history of more than 3000 years in India is a shameful social segregation which works on the principal of purity and pollution. From the 13th century onwards *Bagavat Dharma*, a religious sect (post Buddhism), accepted women members and gave them the right denied to them by *Manusmriti*. It was a sect which assumed equality before religion.

Baby Kamble wrote *The Prisons We Broke* and was the first fully fledged Dalit woman's autobiography which was published in 1986, though it was written at least twenty years before its actual date of publication. It can essentially be seen as a socio-biography than a mere autobiography of a single individual as it recorded the travails and transformation of the Mahar community on the threshold of an epistemic transformation under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar in 1950s. The personal narrative deals with the two major problems of the society: firstly, the oppression and exploitation of the Dalits by the upper caste and secondly, the discrimination towards women in a patriarchal society. Baby Kamble comments "the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people." (*Prisons* 47). Kamble's autobiography reflects as if the entire community is speaking with pride about its memories of

Maharhood. Further, Kamble tries to portray the conditions of a subhuman existence of an entire community, shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, reduced to a state of beasts of burden, and extremely marginalised.

Besides describing at length, the plight of the women in a lower caste settlement and the extreme poverty that worsens the case, Baby Kamble brilliantly elucidates the role played superbly by the Mahar leader, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. Casteism in India is a permanent problem with no definite solution. While varying from region to region, the prejudice against the castes stigmatized as untouchability has remained so strong that there will be Dalits as long as the caste system and caste hierarchy remain. Dalits of today may not remain Dalit tomorrow but their place will be occupied by new Dalits. If caste had been a problem and unwanted, the people themselves would have destroyed it long ago. But, caste does not create any hindrances for those who rule this system, i.e. the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. These groups do not face any caste related atrocities, they do not undergo any humiliation and above all, they are treated as fellow human beings. The discourse of caste rests upon a base composed of relationships of inferiority and superiority in which a sense of full humanity emerges only from a position higher than those below in the caste hierarchy.

As mentioned earlier, the autobiography features the role of Dalit women in a patriarchal society. Baby Kamble was herself a product of such a civilisation. A Dalit woman becomes a target of the double oppression of the society. Women, in any case, are seen as the weaker mass of the society. Thus a Dalit woman bears the burden for being a woman and secondly, for being a Dalit, untouchable woman. Many a times, literature makes us aware of the endangered life these women live. They become easy prey to the upper caste men to devour and humiliate them. Many critics tend to introduce the disrobing of Draupadi when the context of a Dalit woman is mentioned, to intensify the powerlessness of the subject. Draupadi's plight, while universally applicable to all women, is especially relevant to the women of a powerless group. It is an instance of oppression endured within marriage when the institution fails to safeguard the woman from "upper" caste males who are physically, materially and socially so powerful as to exercise power as a matter of right over what they see as usable goods. Baby Kamble's autobiography is unique because in critiquing Brahminical domination, it also speaks out for the women of her community, presenting an unflinching portrait of its women, subjugated by both caste and patriarchy (later, the same women become the driving force towards education). The younger women suffer the worst fate. Usually married off at

the age of eight or nine, they are often physically chained or have their noses chopped off for incurring the displeasure of their husbands or in-laws. A very sorry state of the women is witnessed when Baby Kamble illustrates the conditions and sufferings of a pregnant Mahar woman. The miserable and the repugnant condition of the illiterate Dalit society get highlighted here. Moreover, the Mahar women were made to believe that what was happening to them was right.

The first half of Kamble's autobiography depicts the down-trodden oppressed state of the Mahar community. How superstitions perpetuated amongst them in the name of various small deities, God and Goddesses. How little festivities took the shape of great events and with what eager urge everyone waited for an animal to die, so as to fulfil their own empty stomachs. Kamble transgressed all her set boundaries when she penned down the minute details of how girls, brides and expecting child brides are mortified and humiliated in the name of norms and traditions, and how education became a flying dream for the untouchables. The autobiography tends to put forward all the atrocities and the hardships the Mahar caste people are subjected to by the upper caste communities, in their day-to-day lives. And later how Dr. B.R.Ambedkar illuminates and apprises these unaware people.

Babasaheb brought about a revolution for the Depressed Classes. Maharvada was elated to see a Mahar man's acceptance into the upper caste society. Baby Kamble and her acquaintances were influenced among the lot, like many other folks of the community. Ambedkar professed with the intent of promoting the spread of education amongst the Depressed Classes by opening hostels, opening libraries and by advancing the economic conditions of such down trodden castes by setting up industrial and agricultural schools. He was against the unquestionable acceptance of the caste system which emphasised on suppressing the suppressed, a practice which is both, morally and legally wrong. Babasaheb's main concern was that the untouchables should cease to be agricultural labourers and escape from their landlessness. They should either get industrial or white collar jobs or they should get land for cultivation. He criticised the Indian village system where the lives of the untouchables were dictated by the dominant touchable community. As a callous critique, Ambedkar stated, "I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?" (*Speeches* 62). In Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, there are innumerable references which show that the action of a single individual or a group of Dalits if differs from and questions the traditionally accepted

notions or morality and social behaviour; the Caste Hindu takes it as a grave violation of its ethics and punishes the alleged offenders severely. It is a fact that the structure of justice rests on the consensus of the entire village, which could also mean the unchallenged rule of upper castes.

The Prisons We Broke portrays a very anti-Gandhian picture of the entire Dalit Movement. We learn that during her school days, Baby and her friends, used to torment and insult other upper caste girls at the slightest possible chance. This was a method to let the other "upper" caste people know that Mahars can no longer be suppressed and grounded. Uncounted instances can be picked which clearly showed the retaliation and the process of annihilation among the Dalits; Kamble and her friends deliberately "polluted" the drinking water of the school, and they intentionally entered the temples of the upper caste people. Baby Kamble describes the insults each caste group threw at each other's leaders (Ambedkar and Gandhi) very effectively through songs. To quote a Mahar's song:

"Our Ambedkar looks like a sahib. You know why your Gandhi is toothless?

Because our Ambedkar kicked him in his teeth! Ha ha...That's why your

Gandhi has no teeth! And you know why Gandhi has no hair? Because our

Ambedkar shaved it off! That's the kind of man our Ambedkar is!" (*Prisons* 63-4)

Baby Kamble in her socio-biography expressed "the 'real me' as against the received archetypes from witch and whore to goddess and doll, gave rise to multiple expressions of innumerable 'real me'". (*Prisons* 110). Female autobiographical writing differs from male writing basically in its approach to the subject in question. While male writing focuses on a well-formed, well-integrated, fully-developed, the woman occupies a number of positions from which she can grasp herself and her relations to others. Thus, *The Prisons We Broke* is a very powerful Dalit autobiography which delineates a woman's social, familial and private self in this society which hunts to oppress her.

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