From Oppression To Expression: A Study Of Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract:

Dalit women autobiographies reflect and discuss various socio-political-cultural issues pertaining to Dalit community. There is no fictional motif in Dalit women autobiographies. Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies and most of them have been written in regional languages and that they have hardly been translated into English. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (original *JinaAmucha* in Marathi, translated by Maya Pundit: 2009) is an autobiography of not a Baby kamble but an entire community. *The Prisons we broke* gives an evidence for the Casteism in India. The fact that caste system not only stigmatizes Dalits as untouchables by reason of their birth and forces them into dirty jobs, but also segregates a large chunk of the population as lower castes and also forces them into various menial jobs by virtue of their birth. Casteism has not just killed millions of Dalit but also destroyed generations of these enslaved people by keeping them away from civilization, development and social honour. Millions of people, for generation to generations together were reduced to a level much lower than dogs, cats and rats. Casteism caused deaths of not only the body but also killed honour, self pride and the living spirit of a whole race for hundreds of years. Casteism does not kill directly, but kills the spirit and consciousness of a person or society.
Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* is a Dalit autobiography written in the first half of the twentieth century. It focuses on the two major problems of the Dalit community. Firstly, the oppression and exploitation of the Dalit by the upper classes secondly, the discrimination towards women in a patriarchal society and their position in their families and communities. The Dalit problems in India are unique in its own ways, not just in terms of its form but also its dynamics. Nowhere and never on this earth an enormous mass of people, sons of their soil, have been treated so badly for a continuous thousand years or more that they were reduced to the level of two footed animals under the social system called the Caste system as its popularly known. Dalit problems are not like the problem of slavery as exited in the west till the last century, but have its own religious cultural dimensions to it. It goes beyond the realm of mere physical exploitation of somebody for economic gains using whips and batons but simultaneously using the weapon of religion to spoil the living spirit of man.

“Only shoe wearer knows where the shoe pinches” proverb is very true in *The Prisons We Broke*. Baby Kamble describes herself as, “I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community”. Baby Kamble speaks about the life in her village, called Veergaon and her own community people Mahars. We can see utter helplessness, frustration and hopelessness here. *The Prisons We Broke* portrays the Mahars ignorance and poverty. They were not physically and mentally fit to struggle against the system which was responsible for their low and depressed condition. They were becoming the victims of atrocities continuously despite there are specific rules to prevent all the cruelties against them. Separate habitation, draw water from separate wells and get the worst chastisement if they dare to oppose the upper caste torture were common in mahars.

The condition of the Mahar women was miserable who live the life of animals. When women make forceful efforts to get identity and respect not only against the upper caste men but also against the men of their own community. *The Prisons We Broke* reveals in detail how Kamble was a victim of her husband’s male narrow mentality. She remembers:
“Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely ….The same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train’ (155)

Baby Kamble gives a detailed depiction of the way in which Indian society is so imbedded in the caste system that everything is organized on the basis of castes. She brings out the attitudes of upper caste Indian and Dalits. Kamble was humiliated, harassed and discriminated against by not only her classmates but by her teachers also. She seems to have believed that it is not the actual happening that would frighten us the most. But it is the belief we develop based on those happenings that would frighten us and immobilize us. The work of social transformation is always a tough task. Hurdles are bound to come. Insults and humiliations are not only from others but from our own people.

The Prisons We Broke relates that the Dalits in Maharashtra had to do only menial works. Caste system is much more gigantic in magnitude, more widely spread in time scale, yet difficult to pin point and comprehend easily. Mahars revolves around tragedy of poverty, hunger, and tales of lesser human beings. Kamble remembers:

“The labour of the entire family was paid for in the form of Bhakris (pieces of bread), which the yesker (a Mahar bonded laborer whose work was to collect food at caste Hindus houses in the evening) had to go and collect from house to house every evening” (74-75)

Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke portrays the real picture of the Dalit Community through the names of Dalits like, “Kondakaku” (30) is the name given to a Mahar woman which means “dust lady”. “Bhikabai” (54) is yet another name given to Mahar women. The meaning of this word is beggar lady. It shows Dalits’ aesthetic in calling her community people by their action and behavior. A name like Dagadu (27) is the name of one Mahar man. Dagadu denotes a piece of stone. Dhondu (27) is also the name of another Mahar man. Here, Dhondu means a small piece of stone. Jungalu (84) is the name of a Mahar man. Junglu means jungali man, an uncivilized man. These names exposes the fact that the Mahars were not have dignified meaningful names.
Baby Kamble’s autobiography has depicted a realistic picture of the Dalit community in which she was raised. She has recorded that the Mahars were so ignorant that they could not know whether a child suffered from a fever was alive or dead. Kamble herself was declared to be dead when she was two and a half years old because she was not feeling well and had fallen unconscious. She was about to be buried. However, one of her elderly relatives there noticed that Kamble was still alive. That was how she was saved. Kamble says that many such alive but unconscious and unfortunate children were buried in those days just because of a lack of awareness among the Mahars.

*The Prisons We Broke* points out that the Mahars were leading their lives in ignorance and abject poverty. They were not aware of the human existence as such. They would not dare to go against the social norms and challenge the caste Hindus. They were greatly superstitious and obeyed their oppressors. Hindu Religion and gods considered Mahars as dirt, Mahar community upheld the Hindu principles and they thought of gods with great sanctity. Baby Kamble believes in total change. She wants basic transformation. All beings must be socially equal. Whole society based on inequality. Some are higher and some are lower. This society has got religious sanction which divides the society into innumerable divisions, each having its own identity and loyalty. Here every caste has its own culture and religion is supported by caste. Whereas in other countries, religion is personal and culture is common. Caste has made society a diseased society.

Kamble not only blames Hinduism for the ill-treatment given to the Dalits, but also condemns it as a religion of animals. Besides, she declares that the pride of the caste Hindus is at the cost of the lives of the ignorant Dalits. She states emphatically:

“What a beastly thing this Hinduism is! Let me tell you, it’s not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy - it is the very life blood of the Mahars!” (56)

Baby Kamble was very much influenced by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Dalit resistance to caste system, all through the history of India, has always been there in one form or other but it used to be generally a scattered affair. Many localized revolts have taken place against the oppression and exploitation in the past years but they were detached from one another owing to the absence of any leadership. With the emergence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a low caste Mahar from Western Indian State of Maharashtra, on the National Politics that the Dalits of India found a role model whom they could trust and follow. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was not just any other politician forced to the centre stage of politics by circumstances but a scholar of international repute, an intellectual
of high caliber who had faced oppression and humiliation at each step in his childhood and youth. This filled his heart with strong hatred for the caste system. His intellectual ferocity and open disdain for Hindu Religion won him the support of Dalit masses all over the India, transgressing all regional, linguistic and social barriers among Dalits. She states:

“Dressed in rags, they would be lying in some dark corner of a hut, crying with hunger. They would have served the high castes day and night, been flogged for small mistakes; they would have to survive on flogging than on food. The monopoly over leftovers from high caste houses would be yours. It was our Bhim who rescued you from such a terrible fate. He showed us this golden day. You must fold your hands to this great man, this self-sacrificing soul, and introduce him to your children. He has made this new life for us. It is to him that we owe our present prosperity”.(123)

In the last part of her autobiography Baby Kamble talked about the responsibility of the present society. No downtrodden man can achieve greatness unless he is prepared for struggle and suffering. Social transformation is an external change and it begins with the personal transformation which is an internal change. If we change our own outlook, we can change the world around us too. Even now discrimination is not completely wiped out from our society. There are a lot of villages which should be brought into the light of mainstream. I, as a reader could hear another reformative idea in Baby Kamble’s voice. A new hopes, aspirations and dreams are born out of her voice. We every one of us, too can achieve the success without exception, if we are willing to own the ideas of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dr.Babasaheb Ambedkar physically not before our eyes, but he will be very much within us. Let us make his ideas as our ideas. And let us see the success he saw with his eyes.
References


