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Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke: Breaking Free: Impacted

By Dr. B.R Ambedkar

Abstract

Out of poverty, superstitions, oppression and caste system in India, enlightened people like Baby Kamble have found a new way for self-assertion. Since the caste system denied education to shudras and panchamas, anti-caste writing was a way in which the oppressed were retaliating against the oppressors. It was a psychological literature. Baby Kamble's work is an autobiography. She portrays vividly the plight of her community, she also expresses her debt of gratitude to Dr. Ambedkar for his efforts in opening the eyes of the people. He makes them realize their oppression and enlightens the Mahar community. He shows them the path of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was the first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of advance of women in India. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how the Mahars were delivered from the strongholds of evil customs through the impact of the great and noble leaders like Ambedkar.

Key Words: Fraternity, Oppression, Superstitions.

Introduction:

In the words of Sharatchandra Muktibodh, "Dalit Literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. (Muktibodh, 270) It gave a voice to the exploited and unraveled the

caste politics in India. It very much differs from Main stream literature and this difference is made consciously by the writers. Mainstream literature is not objective and neutral.

Mainstream literature includes voices of male upper class and upper caste only. Initially the Dalits felt very stifled with the way they were portrayed in upper cast works (While talking about Dalits they had a touch of sensibility e.g.: Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchables). Dalits were against such portrayals, when the upper castes wrote about the Dalits, they failed to talk about the realities of class oppression and used a sentimental tone, with no focus on a rebellion that could arise and this called for the creation of Dalit literature.

Major focus of Dalit literature was on day to day writing as opposed to mainstream writing (who wrote about spiritual reality, love and so on). Their writing focused on close portrayal of their social surrounding. The Dalits didn't write for entertainment or aesthetic values. They argue that mainstream writers were not visibly propagandist. They wanted to talk about the things that concern rather than talking about spiritual or philosophical things. They were against established literary traditions.

Subjectivity is a concept related to consciousness, personhood, reality, and truth. Subjectivity could mean an individual who possesses conscious experiences, viewpoints, feelings, beliefs, hopes. It could mean an entity that has agency. Subjectivity is the opposite of Objectivity and Subjectivity is shaped by culture and is return shaped by it. Just as how we all have two eyes but our view is different, subjectivity differs from people to people.

The 25th of December 1927 is an important day for the Mahars as the speech given by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar was followed by the burning of the Manusmiriti. It is celebrated today as Manavmukti din. This event is a symbolic event for the entire oppressed community. Many times, the oppressed castes are oppressed by the higher castes and they still want to imitate their oppressors. Take for instance the colonial hangover the people of India still reels under.

The oppressed people of the Mahar community found their voice through writing. Writing can be seen as a record of the suffering and the release from the pain. Buddhist literature, radical bhakti literature, writing of Phule awakened their sleeping conscience. Poet Raja Dhale wrote in an article in a Pune socialist magazine, Sadhana that people are fined more for 'dishonouring the national flag' than for raping a dalit woman. The era of literature written from 1960's to the mid 1980's can be called the 'golden age' of modern Marathi Dalit literature. Many works have been translated, incorporated in syllabus and have received recognition and fame.

In the book, *The Prisons We Broke*, the author articulates her sufferings in these words:

"Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts... We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on. And yet no one tried to understand us. Our minds somehow kept hoping against hope-that we too would be able to live like the upper castes. The month of Ashad was kept in full honor and reverence, but they were looking for help to the same forces that oppressed them, they sought liberation and hope from the same forces that tied them down and robbed them of their hope." (Kamble, 18)

Superstitions like offering the eldest son to the deity as a vaghya, child marriages, illiteracy amongst women, eating the flesh of dead animals have been practiced ignorantly and ardently. They lived literally in dirt and filth.

The Impact of Dr. Ambedkar:

Mahatma Gandhi coined the term Harijan which meant children of God. This word is of Marathi origin and means ‘held under check’, ‘suppressed’, or ‘crushed’, or, in a looser sense ‘oppressed’ Maharashtra Dalit Activist and poet Namdeo Dhasal made it a symbol of pride to fight against social injustice.” (Prasad, 8). The Hindus did not regard their own with honour; they felt more affinity towards the Muslims than with the people of the lower class.

“Dalit is the latest and currently most politically correct of many terms used for the caste. Offensive terms used mostly in the past include chura, bhangi, neech, kanjjar and mirasi.” (Prasad,8). The Dalits sought for identity in the Hindu religion and when they developed a crisis when they were not able to get a place where they belonged, they turned to Buddhism. According to French Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser, Ideology is not really a set of political ideas but it offers us coherent subject positions (roles).

Some of the roles of a Hindu is to read Hindu texts, visit temples and pray to the idols but these ‘roles’ were not available to be performed by the Untouchable and hence they were unable to fill this void that they felt gnawing in their hearts.

‘A fourteen-year old girl from one of Jotirao’s schools for untouchables wrote an essay in which she said, The Brahmins say that other castes should not read the Vedas; this leaves us without a scripture. Thus, are we without religion? Oh God, please tell us, what is our religion? [...]” (Joshi, 12)

“...Religion must have bribed you quite well to do this...you kept stealing our fates with your writings” (Kamble, 62)

The significance of the title comes in to play,

“Our lives were governed by various calamities. We were imprisoned in dark cells, our hands and feet bound by the chain of slavery. Our reason was gagged. But it is because of us

that the world stands...Shallow water makes a lot of noise, but still water runs deep! Like the ocean that covers mountains of sin under its huge expanse, we covered the sins of the high castes. That is why we, like the ocean, deserve the admiration of the whole world.”

From 1930 onwards, Buddhism started spreading its wings towards the Mahar community. People were greatly taken up by the works and talk of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar was critical of the Hindu religion. He believed that education was a means of triumph from the life of poverty and ignorance. He wanted the caste system to be uprooted and wanted equality among all castes not sympathy or tolerance towards each other (promoted through practices of inter dining and other such customs). Many people from the lower castes were greatly taken up by him. He opened the eyes of the people to see their oppression and their plight in the hands of the upper caste

Mahatma Jotirao Phule was a social reformer, hailing from Maharashtra, belonging to the 19th century. He worked for the education of women and Dalits and for the downtrodden. He was radical in his thinking and was “one of the foremost exponents of modern humanitarian thought.”(Joshi, 3) Jotirao realized that “though all Hindus followed one religion, Hinduism had not succeeded in creating a spiritual life based on unity.” (Joshi, 9)

Kabir was a bhakti who converted from Islam. He believed in the Nirguna form of worship. In his poem Padas he compares God the creator to a potter who has touched all human beings when he created them with his own hands, writes:

“...we eat by touching, we wash
By touching, from a touch
The world was born.
So, who's untouched? Asks Kabir.
Only she

Who's free from delusion?"(118)

Thus, with the influence of such radical minds the people of the Mahar community started to open their eyes and be aware of their subjugation. Ambedkar wanted to raise the educational standards of the untouchables so that they too can wield political power.

“Ambedkar planned his programmed to bring the Untouchable from a state of ‘dehumanization’ and ‘slavery’ into one of equality through the use of modern methods based on education and the exercise of legal and political rights.” (Prasad, 2)

Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar community, he was educated and came back to lead his people from darkness to light, from bondage to freedom. He rejected Hinduism and embraced Buddhism.

“For Ambedkar, Buddhism represented the historical revolutionary experience in India, while Hinduism represented the counter-revolutionary experience seeking to bring back an orthodoxy founded upon the caste system.” (Prasad, 1)

Ambedkar used concepts of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity from the French Revolution to justify eradication of untouchability.

The author's father was inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He enrolled both his children into schools. In an education institution too, that was supposed to enlighten people and free them from superstition, caste practices were seen. The Mahar children had to sit in a corner from where the board was not visible. The author had a group of seven to eight girls and they felt united for the first time, they would deliberately gang up on the upper caste girls, touch them and beat them up. They no longer accepted their fates and no longer saw the higher

caste groups as “god’s own people”. They would insult Gandhi and the upper caste girls would try to insult Dr. Ambedkar.

Another wave of consciousness, the people decided not to celebrate Padva, the New Year of the Hindus, but to celebrate 14th April, the birthday of Dr. Ambedkar as the New Year keeping all the rituals and customs intact.

The two movies, Sant Tukarama and Satti Savitri greatly impacted their lives. Also, in the lives of the children of the author, they held family discussions on what to choose for their career. They didn’t just accept any lot that befell them, but were given the freedom of choice. While choosing a suitable groom for a girl, his educational qualification would come into play.

Seeking to exert their rights “as the sons of the soil”, the Mahars forcefully entered the Vitthal temple and the author and her friends too decide to do the same. And this incident made the author come to the conclusion that she would never think of those gods again.

Another event, the Mahar women were not given chair and Thakubai charged the Rani saying, “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 chairs and seat my women there [...]” (Kamble, 133) and immediately chairs were arranged for them.

The author has educated all her children, the eldest son has done his M.Sc. in Agriculture, second son is a clerk and his wife is a teacher. Their third son is an officer and has married a teacher. Their daughter is a block development officer and her third daughter is married to a rich farmer. Their fourth daughter is married to a doctor.

The fighter’s spirit is seen in the author as she narrates incidents from her school days and also in her writing. She resolves to follow the path of Ambedkar. She shows the awakening of consciousness to a very large extent. The Hindu Code Bill helped the women break free

from the nets that entrapped them. She says that, “Veergaon has a lion’s share in helping me perceive the truth.” (Kamble, 102) She serves her community and uses her writing as a tool to start her struggle against the oppressive forces and to articulate her sufferings. “...it is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts.” (Kamble, 102)

CONCLUSION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was against caste system and called it a many headed monster. He targeted caste system and said that it was just a different type of class system. According to him, caste is practiced, maintained and reproduced only through marriage. Caste determines who we will marry and that practice is known as endogamy (all the people within your caste you can marry). Exogamy on the other hand refers to all people in your caste you can’t marry due to clan or gotra system. Ambedkar did not believe in inter caste dining as all these practices only reinforced the hierarchy, he believed that endogamy is the root of caste system and one should target it from its roots. Exogamy is sinful as incest is frowned upon by society. Endogamy has been created to promote caste system. There were four practices created to take care of surplus men and surplus women- Sati, forced widowhood, celibacy and child marriage. While Sati and forced widowhood were forced upon women, men could choose to become celibates or marry a young child in case he becomes a widower.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar believed that Brahmins started the self-enclosed system and they did not allow inter caste marriage and one could convert to Brahmins, as Brahmins were created by being born into a Brahmin family only. Other caste groups wanted to imitate the Brahmins- Sanskritization means when you imitate the practices and rituals of the higher caste. Shudras do not practice forced widowhood and Sati because they are farthest from the high order. Kshatriyas practiced sati and forced widowhood was practiced by the Brahmins. Shudras

practiced neither sati nor forced widowhood. Vaishyas practiced forced widowhood, but at a small scale. Lower caste wanted to imitate the practices of higher caste.

Gandhi's understanding of caste was more humanistic. He called for a change of heart. He didn't say it on behalf of the rights of the Dalits, but to understand their religion. Ambedkar believed that it is the right of the Dalit, and that, they should have access to everything. He wanted it as a kind of civil right. He wanted legalistic jurisdiction to claim that caste system should not exist. Gandhi believed that Varna system was intentionally good but had been corrupted by men. Gandhi was not against caste-based occupation. Shudras have a class called Bhangi who deal with dead bodies and cleaned toilets. Gandhi said that there was nothing impure about cleaning toilets, he was asking for tolerance. Ambedkar said it is a very pitiful way of talking, he wanted to completely eradicate caste system and hence he was more practical.

“Both reformers (Gandhi and Ambedkar) had a vision of equality, but for Ambedkar equality meant not only equal status of the Varnas, but equal social, political, and economic opportunity for all.” (Ambedkar and Indian Caste System, Singh, Ravindra Prasad, 2)

Gandhiji called them Harijans, but they rejected this word and wanted to use the word Dalits. For Ambedkar abolishing caste system was his first priority whereas pushing the colonial rule out of India was Gandhi's first priority. Nobody could address caste system in its entirety unlike Ambedkar. For him Hinduism was an immoral religion, and he was very critical of it. He used examples from Hinduism in his speeches to show its pitfalls and this sets him apart. He wanted a structural reorganization of the Hindu society. Ambedkar was more political and did not believe in the spiritual understanding of Hinduism. He did not believe in God given power. He understood it for what it really was- a system that kept people unequal.

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