

From Margins to Centre: The Dalit Feminist Voice in Baby Kamble's

The Prisons We Broke

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As the great ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, so my doctrine has only one flavour, the flavour of emancipation

- Lord Buddha

Dalit Literature has been neglected and marginalised for a long time for many reasons. As such, it has not found acceptance in literary circles until recently. It emerged as a movement in the 1960s in Marathi that provided a lead and mainstreamed English translations of Marathi Dalit writing as an important and distinct part of Indian Literature. Dalit Literature revisits and embraces the ideas of Sri Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and others who articulated the modes of caste oppression that prevailed in India. Hailing from Phaltan - a small town in Satara district of Maharashtra, Shantabai Krushnaji Kamble (1923-) writes about the life of her community. She is considered a veteran of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. Inspired by the leadership and teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, she has been involved with the struggle from a very young age. *Jina Amuscha*, the Marathi original of *The Prisons We Broke*, is a milestone in the history of Dalit writing in Marathi. It is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. It reveals the diverse ways in which the construction of the resistant selfhood of not just a person but an entire marginalised community takes place. The present paper makes an attempt to show how Kamble exhibits the realistic picture of Mahar community of Maharashtra.

The Prisons We Broke (2008) is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste-system has subjected the Dalits for thousands of years. In one sense it is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography as it speaks of the composite apparatus of Brahminical dominance perpetrated through superstitions, illiteracy, ignorance and oppressive practices. Kamble's absolute engagement is with the history of Dalit oppression, but she does not glorify the life of her community rather she keeps it to critical scrutiny to demonstrate how Brahminical hegemony has turned the Mahars into slaves. She tells, "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my

people and therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community” (Kamble 2008: 157). In the memoir, the retrospections of Kamble flow out in sequence where she talks about the life in her village - Veergaon and the Brahminical creed that has sanctioned and perpetuated the oppression of Dalits and how ignorance, poverty and epidemics weaken them. To Kamble Chawdi is not like the traditional caste court (*jati panchayat*) where disputes are discussed and judgements are delivered, but it is as a much open sphere of discussion and debate that offers an opportunity to everyone to participate in the deliberation on issues concerning the community.

The unholy alliance between feudal forces and the bourgeoisie in the political sphere tried to hide the inequalities under the garb of the so-called developmental policies. In reality, these policies have pushed the already oppressed communities further into desolation, depriving them even of basic resources like water and food. The entire Mahar community looks upon the four weeks of Ashadh as a rare occasion of festivity and joy because it provides food for them from the dishes offered to the village goddess. To the Mahars, it is the burgeoning of happiness and a blessing for their starved bodies. When the Ashad ritual begins, a Mahar woman is destined to beg the village shopkeeper for provisions where the shopkeeper throws the things from a distance into her pallo (saree end). Then she is supposed to keep the money on the threshold that of course does not pollute him. Commenting on the age-long oppression of caste system, Mulk Raj Anand writes, “we must destroy caste, we must destroy the inequalities of birth and unalterable vocations” (2001: 145). Though Mahar community upholds the Hindu principles and embraces Hindu rites and rituals, the Hindu religion has discarded them as dirt and thrown them into garbage pits on the outskirts of the village where they live in the filthiest conditions possible. The entire community has sunk deep into the mire of dreadful superstitions such as the traditional event of cutting a buffalo in the buffalo fair, becoming potrajas and the possessed women. For a long time the Mahars rotted and perished by following a superstitious way of life, yet they have kept in believing the truth, “you played with our lives and enjoyed yourselves at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything but never the truth” (Kamble 37). Unfortunately, religion which ought to elevate man to a higher spiritual plane has constantly ended up in debasing him. Speaking against the orthodox Hindu religion and its evil practices, Kanchan Verma opines, “the orthodox religion hindered the growth of man and was devoid of humanistic values like charity, morality, pity, benevolence, virtue and strengthening of bonds of love and harmony between men of different religions, caste and creed” (2015: 117).

Kamble focuses on another important aspect of the Mahar community - Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy. She describes the physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both the public and private spheres. If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men. The Mahar women's destiny is irredeemable as they undergo two forms of sufferings; one from Hindu religion the other from patriarchal society. When the world does not let the Mahar men to dominate, they desirably create an alternative to enslave their own daughters-in-law. The Mahar sasra (father-in-law) urges his son to be a brave hero, "You are a man, you must behave like one! You must be proud and firm. You must walk tall. Twirl your moustache and show us that you are a man" (Kamble 100). Kamble not only narrates the plight of the dalits but also brings out the worst form of exploitation and physical torture that the Dalit male inflicted on Dalit women. "Humiliation" as Gopal Guru points out, "the physical torture not only involved physical injuries but also inflicted deep psychological pain, leaving a scar of humiliation in the minds of dalit women" (2008: 168).

Kamble also describes another evil practice - Devadasi system in which young girls are married either to a god or goddess. This is done for the survival and welfare of a male child. This is prevalent among the Dalit women where the traditional Mahars used to dedicate their girls to God Khandoba. The prevalent patriarchy and the Brahminical outlook treat the Mahar girls like lepers at school. The teachers are worried that the girls may pollute them, so they treat them as despicable creatures and, "they would cover their nose, mutter 'chee, chee', and run as if their lives were in mortal danger" (Kamble 108).

Illiteracy, ignorance, superstition, and poverty have long plagued the Mahar community, yet these hardships have never diminished their deep sense of loyalty to the nation. It was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who offered them the intellectual and ideological foundation to challenge the oppressive caste system. Through his teachings, he instilled in the Dalits a sense of dignity rooted in the principles of *sheel* (character) and *satwa* (truth). Ambedkar emphasized that ignorance and blind faith were the true sources of their suffering, and he urged his people to seek liberation through education, the ultimate remedy capable of dispelling darkness and guiding them toward equality and self-respect.

He encourages them to discard all age-long unmethodical religious customs which strengthen their ignorance and appeals them to step forward for reformation. Since then the

Chawdi (a central place in the village) has become a seat for arguments and counter-arguments countering the progress of their lives.

Kamble makes a firm resolve to lead her life along the path shown by her father and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and that has become the motto of her life. There are other things that influence her, particularly the movie, *Sati Savitri*. Savitri's life leaves a deep impact on her mind and some of the strength and will power lying dormant within her is awakened. With sheer grit and ability to face life's adversities, Kamble protests against caste and gender discrimination based on Hindu religious evil practices. She believes in dignity and self-respect because dignity is more important than wealth and that makes one a self-respecting human being. It is a documentation about her life and times which is pure action, not imagination, and an ideal of human and moral truth. Though Kamble is a strong follower of Ambedkar, she neither worships nor makes a public display of her adoration, instead she tries to follow the principles he stood for. She says that adversities in one's life can be fought bravely with the weapons of sheel and satwa. Kamble talks about the influence of Ambedkar that encourages Dalits to become graduates, empowers them to obtain wealth, and strives hard to bring comfort to their doorstep and finally shows to the world that Mahar community is in no way inferior to anyone. The Mahar lanes slowly gathered momentum and used to listen and read the newspaper *Bahishkrut Bharat* published by Ambedkar. She says that "when compassion and morality follow character, society achieves its real strength" (Kamble 125).

A new inspiration is born out of Kamble's voice that education, prosperity and comforts should not make us unaware of the problems of society. It is we, the people, have to utilise our faculties to support and guide others to mainstream, then only one can enjoy the real value of one's life. I, as a reader, understand Kamble's reformatory idea that social transformation is an external change and it begins with an internal change - the change in an individual. If we change our outlook, we can change the world around us.

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