

DALIT WOMEN'S SUFFERINGS IN BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISON WE BROKE

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Dalit movement in Indo-political history is quite significant as it has its roots from Indian social scenario. The caste divide in India was originally based on the deliberate selection of 'Karma or duty' that an individual or a family may adopt as a profession or duty to the society. But this *Varna-Vyavastha* emerged as the lifelong curse for certain sections of the society particularly for Dalit community. Dalits were treated as untouchable and could not keep pace with the progress of society. Women were the worst affected sections of the society and family. Due to lack of education, crippled social and family structures, they were compelled to live a life of morbid absurdities. They could not even raise their voice against their mental, emotional, physical and financial servitude. Baby Kamble's *Prison We Broke* is a heart-cry of a woman from Mahar society who accounted the incessant ordeal of a woman in the family, society and even at the mainstream of nation which extends equal rights to all genders and all citizens of India. Kamble's autobiography is a valid account of an oppressed, socially marginalised, so-called low-caste woman who is subjected to incessant exploitation at all stages of her life and our crippled social structures legitimize it. Social taboos for a girl-child education muffle her voice forever.

The Prison We Broke is a pioneer move in accounting the histories of Dalit women's status in India and Baby Kamble registered her agony and suffering in the form of the current autobiography. It was originally written in Marathi titled as *Jina Amucha* in 1986 and was later translated by Maya Pandit. Her autobiography has been received as a valid documentation of caste-based discrimination, exploitation and oppression of Mahar community by upper caste people; inhuman living conditions of women; illiteracy and untouchability prevalent in the society and above all subjugation and exploitation of women in Mahar community. In this autobiography, Kamble has given a threadbare account of their community and it served a window to the entire literary world. To quote the words of Maya Pandit:

The Prison We Broke is in this tradition of direct self-assertion. But it also went two steps ahead; it was a head-on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other. In one sense it is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography. (Pandit xiii)

Baby Kamble's *the Prison he Broke* is considered as an autobiography as a literary genre, but her vivid depiction of Mahar community made her writings the chronicle of Mahar's sufferings. It is Kamble's honest attempt to represent the unheard voice of Mahar community and the plight of oppressed women in that society. She admits the fact that she is writing for the Mahar community. To quote from her Preface to the original 1986 Marathi autobiography:

Today our young and educated and so-called 'progressive' people are ashamed of using this word 'Mahar'. But what is there to be ashamed of? It tells us that we are the great Mahars of this Maharashtra...the true, original sons of this soil ...Even the name 'Maharashtra' derives from my name, and though you may feel awkward using the name, I do not. I love the word 'Mahar', it flows into my veins, in my blood, and it makes me aware to the core of my being of the tremendous struggle for truth that we have waged. (Pandit xvii)

Since childhood Mahar community is subjected to untouchability. Their touch will pollute all strata of society. To quote from the text:

...the lady of the house would go to the village shop. Standing in the courtyard, keeping a distance from the shopkeeper, she would pull her pallav over her face and then, using the most reverential and polite terms of address, she would beg him with utmost humility to sell her the things she wanted, "Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin?"... "Chabu hey you can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Do not you touch her? Keep your distance. Immediately our Mahar woman gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child" ... "Take care little master! Please keep distance. Do not come too close. You might touch me and get polluted." (Kamble 14)

The so-called upper caste people also follow double standards. They do not touch the people of Mahar Community, but they accept the currency notes given by Mahar community.

The girls after Baba Saheb's awakening started going to school but they experienced another ordeal. Their classmates do not sit with them. Their school belonged to higher caste. For the first time Mahar girls were admitted to school. So "they treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us they would cover their nose, mutter 'chee chee' and run as if their life is in mortal danger. The teacher had allotted a place in the corner near the door from where we will not move till the school is over for the day" (Kamble 108).

Above quote clearly exhibits the inhuman practices and prevailing system of subjugation and above all the worst part of it is the Mahar woman's humble submission to all these inhuman practices. From generation to generation, they are subjected to this kind of treatment and their mute acceptance to it clearly exhibits their mental servitude.

The discrimination of Mahar community by upper-caste people is so deep delved that they forget to oppose or revolt against it. Mahars pray Hindu gods and goddesses, follow Hindu rituals but always subjected to hate and neglect. To present this irony of their life Baby Kamble used sarcastic remarks to express the heart-cry of her community. To quote her 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. (Kamble 18)

Deprived of education, exposure to modern thinking and scientific knowledge, they easily fall prey of superstitions. It became a vicious cycle of their life that they are unable to come out of it. Baby Kamble lamented on this situation in the following words:

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper caste had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a rotten way of life. (Kamble 37)

In such a social scenario as depicted by Kamble, women come at the bottom in social hierarchy and the worst was the condition of a daughter in law. They do not have access to medical care, not enough to satiate their appetite and they were wrapped in rags. To quote from the text:

Once five suwasinis gathered in the house, the woman of the house kept a wooden plate in front of them...One girl would be asked to mix the jaggery and water well. Then seven to eight chapatis were crushed to crumbs...and kneaded well with the jaggery mixture...the poor daughter -in-law would sit quietly, their eyes fixed on the plate. Hordes of flies hovered over the plate and many fell into mixture. Several kids related to them in different ways, accompanied the daughter-in-law and they would attack the plate...The daughters-in-law, worried whether any food would be left for them at all, stared anxiously at the quickly depleting mixture on the plate. Since they were

daughter-in-law, decorum demanded that they eat only after the children had finished. The poor souls could do nothing but just stare at the plate, licking their lips, hoping against hope that some food remained for them. (Kamble 27)

In the social hierarchy women and daughter in law are at the bottom. When karbhari distributes the food in equal portions children started to snatch food from their parents' hands.

However, without saying a single word with their eyes glued on the food, the poor daughter-in-law would helplessly wait for their turn to eat. Just in case a *sasu* noticed this, she would contemptuously throw a morsel on her daughter-in-law, saying. 'Push that down your throat, your shameless hussy...You evil eye, will make the child choke. Don't you know how to behave like a good daughter-in-law? (Kamble 30)

The above description clearly exhibits that a daughters-in-law's share in Mahar community is leftovers. They must thrive on leftover meals. It was the only succour for them.

Another ritual that requires special mention that in almost all religious processions, rituals and religious congregation women get possessed in Mahar community. Women yell as they are giving voice to their subdued tones. They demand for their wish-fulfilment as they cannot even dare to demand normally. They are adorned with Kumkum and turmeric powder and after repeated appeasement by menfolk of the community they are pacified. Psychological analysis of all such incidents clearly exhibits the alteration of their identity by so called 'spirit' and whatever subdued emotions and feelings they express, they can shun away the responsibility for that. Many Mahar women get possessed during religious processions. Such mass hysteria can be interpreted as the expression or revolt against their inhuman plight. They can be an outcome of sexual assault or chronic depression. Such oppressive conditions clearly exhibit the social maladies of society. To quote the text:

Some woman would become possessed and the spirit of some goddess would speak out...Many young girls on the threshold of life succumbed to death. One in every ten lost their lives during childbirth. (Kamble 6)

New mothers had to go hungry. They must undergo a brutal behaviour during their 'confinement' after childbirth. Kamble points out:

Labour pains, mishandling by the midwives, wounds inflicted by onlooker's nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating-everything caused the new mother's condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever...There would be neither food nor money! Only unlimited grief and suffering. (Kamble 60)

The entire text is divided into various chapters and every chapter unveils the inhuman condition of women and heinous attitude towards them. Their character assassination was rampant in the society. To chop off the nose of a married woman was also a common practice, "It is because of the *sasu* who would poison their son's mind" (Kamble 98).

There are incidents of corporal punishments to the wives. Husbands used to flog off the wives till the sticks broke away. The following quotation reveals a gruesome incident, "Everyday Maharwada would resound with the cries of helpless women in some house or the other" (Kamble 98).

The worst exposure of their social systems was that Mahar women were tortured by their in-laws and were not protected by their maternal family. If they would try to run away from such incessant tortures, they would be followed by her in-laws and "nobody, neither her in-laws nor any of the others, had any sympathy for the poor tortured girl. The husband ...would beat her to a pulp. Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask the in-laws to take her back. The poor girl numb with pain and hunger, was forced to return to her husband's family" (Kamble 99).

Another ordeal she must face when *sasu* pours venom in her son's head. To quote the incident from the text,

Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? ...She must be having an affair. You are her husband but obviously bitch prefers someone else...No, no! I do not want such a slut in my house. She wants to ruin your life. Don't let her off so easily. Dhondya cut off the tip of her nose; only then will my mother's heart breathe easy! (Kamble 100)

Thus, it becomes a chain reaction from one generation to another. One day the nose of the girl would be severed and she would be thrown out of the house with a profusely bleeding nose and she would be called 'mudy' and her entry will be banned in so called 'good houses' (Kamble 101).

On all such inhuman episodes, Kamble wants to analyse the deep-rooted psychology behind that. She came to conclude that the vengeance of sasu is behind all such crimes. "She would feel elated that the harassment she had suffered was being finally compensated for. An innocent girl would thus be sacrificed to atone for the sasu's sufferings" (Kamble 101).

The entire text is full of all such stories of oppression and the reason behind all this is that Dalit man has been traumatised by the Brahminical patriarchy and they transfer their agony to the person who is weaker to them. Women are the weakest chain in this link. Dalit men receive slave like behaviour from their masters and they started enslaving the woman-folk of their community. They think that "woman was not a human-being for her in-laws but another piece of wood" (Kamble 99).

To imitate the behaviour of high-caste Hindus, they started misbehaving their woman-folk in the Mahar community. To quote from the text:

The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So, we made our own arrangements to find slaves-our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them. (Kamble 87)

Throughout the text, we find the references to Baba Sahib Ambedkar and some new awakening in the society due to it. When the Mahar girls face ill-treatment by upper-caste girls, they 'never listened to them' as they 'have greatly emboldened by Baba's brave spirit' (Kamble 108).

Baba Sahib's teaching and guidance was a great force in changing the condition of Mahar community. To quote his words:

From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from God. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. Your family your life will improve. (Kamble 64)

Baby Kamble as the representative of entire Mahar community laments that till the new beginning given by Baba, "We were imprisoned in dark cells, our hands and feet bound by the chain of slavery. Our reason was gagged" (Kamble 49).

The entire narration in Baby Kamble's *the Prison We Broke* is a journey from the dark era to the new awakening of Mahar's community. How the preaching of Baba Saheb helped them to come out of dark prisons to see the new light in Post-Independent India. To quote the words of Baby Kamble, "I made a firm resolve...to lead my life according to the path sketched by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, the light of my life" (Kamble 115).

Baby Kamble's explained in an interview how her subjective experiences became the voice of every woman of Mahar Community. She shares, "Well I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine" (Pandit 136).

Thus, in this autobiography, dalit women's sufferings have been narrated. They are exploited not only by the upper caste people but also the men and the sasus of their own family. Due to this poignant theme of this autobiography, Baby Kamble's literary creation got acclamation from all literary spheres. We can summarise its importance in the words of Gopal Guru:

First, Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prison We Broke* is an important text which offers us an insight into the possibility of understanding the tension between modernity and tradition. (Guru 163).

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