

Social Protest: Baby Tai Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*

Dr. Ohm Shrivastava

Assistant Professor, Department of English, K.S Saket P.G College, Ayodhya, U.P

Paper Received on 06-01-2026, Accepted on 07-02-2026
Published on 08-02-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.348

Abstract

The Prison We Broke by Baby Tai Kamble is an impressive work of autobiography that serves as a social protest that is based on the experience of living as a Dalit in the twentieth century India. This piece of writing reveals the highly ingrained systems of caste oppression, gender discrimination and social exclusion that constitute the day-to-day experiences of marginalized populations. Kamble offers personal torment not as an individual phenomenon but as a social condition that a strict and unreasonable social system has placed upon him through a self-confident and unembellished story. The autobiography turns out to be the protest against the supremacy of upper-caste ideologies and the questioning of the ethical right of the traditions that contribute to inequality and humiliation.

The novel is also a prefiguration of the twin oppression of Dalit women who are not only oppressed in the wider caste structure, but in their own patriarchal societies. The dignity, self-respect and the right to education and social mobility that Kamble speaks of makes personal testimony political, and Kamble is using this voice to represent the people. Inspired by the thinker of the Ambedkar school of thought, *The Prison We Broke* expresses the sense of social awakening and mass resistance as the powerful means to liberation. This paper looks at the text as one of the notable instances of Dalit women writing, with reference to its contribution to the redefining of literature as a social change agent and protest against systemic injustice.

Key Words: Social Protest, Dalit Autobiography, Caste Oppression, Untouchability, Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination, Social Injustice, Marginalization, Voice of the Oppressed, Resistance.

Introduction

Newly born baby Tai Kamble- *The Prison We Broke* takes a central seat in the pagoda of Dalit autobiographies and is a prominent work of social non-compliance in the literature of contemporary India. The autobiography developed as a response to the actualities of caste oppression and gender marginalisation based on the real-life experiences of the Dalits, especially the Dalit women that have historically suppressed their voices and voices. Kamble uses personal experience as a shared story of depression, struggle, and liberation, unlike other traditional autobiographies that prefigure personal success, which reinvests autobiography as a political and liberational experience.

The ideological framework of the text is mostly based on the metaphorical meaning of the title *The Prison We Broke*. The prison does not just mean the strict caste system that the Brahmanical Hindu society enforces but it also means the internalized oppression that is reinforced by the patriarchal system, religious superstitions, economic deprivation and social exclusion. Kamble reveals how the Dalit women are subjected to a two-tiered marginalization oppressed by the upper-caste society at one end and limited by the patriarchal societies in their respective communities at the other end. She says, "...When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish!" (57). She criticises the way the labour of Dalit women is used to maintain the comfort of the upper caste when the Dalits are being oppressed. By so doing, the autobiography also identifies itself with the issues of Dalit feminism, which anticipates the intersection of caste, gender, and class to be at the center of Dalit, women lived experiences.

The mainstream feminism and male-dominated Dalit discourse are the two aspects that are confronted by Dalit feminism as presented by Kamble in his work. Although the feminist narratives of the upper caste frequently fail to recognize caste-based violence, and the Dalit male narratives are usually biased and under represent the plight of the Dalit women, *The Prison We Broke* does not think that the voices of Dalit women should be ignored in the narratives. Kamble is open about domestic violence, illiteracy, early marriage, reproductive exploitation, low social status, and she thus shows how caste oppression is very gender-based. According to her story, social liberation is impossible without the emancipation of Dalit women and, hence,

the text is a seminal contribution to Dalit feminism. She says, “The people in the maharwada were large-hearted. They were poor, of course, but they were very affectionate and simple, ready to even lay down their lives for someone they loved” (16-17). Another characteristic of the autobiography is the power of the ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is in ambedkarism that Kamble is able to see her life and community in the ethical and political framework. Ambedkar was an under scorer of education, rational thinking, self-respect and opposition to religious orthodoxy in the text. Kamble records how the ideas of Ambedkar have changed the Dalit community and especially how social awareness has been awakened and oppressive traditions have been denounced. Her story reveals that Ambedkarism is not just a political ideology but a philosophy that can be lived and in this way, Dalits can liberate themselves out of centuries of social oppression.

Moreover, *The Prison We Broke* is an example of a prison autobiography resistant. Kamble is a challenge to the cultural monopoly of the upper-caste narratives by telling the stories, which usually were not represented in literature and historical accounts. The writing as such turns into a rebellion - a way of re-establishing voice, dignity and agency in history. The text breaks a gap in prevailing literary styles, by focusing on lived reality as against artistic elegance, emotional sincerity as against stylistic choice, and collective memory as against the self-glorification of the individual. At least in this regard, the autobiography is a counter-discourse to the canonical Indian literature that tends to ignore or smooth out caste realities.

To sum it up, *The Prison We Broke* is not just a life narrative but a progressive and radical document of a social protest overlapping Dalit feminism, Ambedkarite philosophy and defiant autobiographical practice. Through foreshadowing the experiences of Dalit women in their lives, Baby Tai Kamble broadens the boundaries of Indian literary discourse and establishes the purpose of the literature as an instrument of changing the social order. The book continues to be a crucial source of caste, gender, and resistance in the present Indian society.

In his autobiography *The Prison We Broke* the baby Tai Kamble is a product of the highly oppressive social environment of the Mahar community in Maharashtra at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's. The piece has to be interpreted in the backdrop of the strict caste system in India, which formalized social

inequality, humiliation and marginalization of the so-called untouchable castes. Dalits were rejected the right to an education and the right to temples, the right to the wells, to decent livelihood, and were beaten up on regular basis and segregated socially. She expresses, "...But how had we been reduced to this bestial state? Who was responsible? Who else, but people of the high castes! They destroyed our reasoning, our ability to think" (57-58). Kamble rails against the dehumanizing impact of the caste system and places the blame for this on upper caste hegemony. Traditionally, the time frame of the story being described by Kamble is also the era of colonial India, when the social reform movements gradually started gaining certain strength. But even though modernization was being propagated by the British, the issue of caste oppression was deeply rooted in the daily life. Dalit groups remained left out and were living in the fringes working in menial and degrading jobs and being denied of human rights and dignity. Women of these communities were hit twice, as Dalits and as women, they had to endure domestic violence, forced labor, child marriage and very little to do with personal freedom. Another social impact on *The Prison We Broke* is the emergence of the movement of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that made the Dalit communities politically aware and self-respectful. The insistence on education, rationalism, and abandonment of Brahmanical domination by Ambedkar had a significant influence on the consciousness of the Dalits. The text by Kamble represents the transformational influence of the Ambedkarite ideology that invited the Dalits to oppose the religious superstition, patriarchal practices and internalized oppression. As a social institution, the autobiography speaks the internal hierarchies and retrogressive practices within the Dalit circle itself including blind faith, manipulation of religious personalities, and oppression of women. Kamble cynically captures the role of traditions and customs as a form of prison, which confined intellectual and emotional freedom. The use of metaphor prison therefore does not just mean caste oppression by higher castes but also the psychological and cultural enslavement of the community. She says, "We, the daughters of the activists... were enrolled in School no. 5 for girls... we were like fiery gadflies burning for vengeance" (134-135). In this respect, the play *The Prison We Broke* turns out to be a social protest and resistance. It records the struggle of Dalits and in particular women to escape centuries of humiliation and silence. The autobiography is a historical witness to the slow awakening of the Dalit consciousness and struggle to gain the dignity, equality and social justice in the contemporary India.

The Prison We Broke is also an autobiography of Baby Tai Kamble, about Dalit women. It is a strong form of social protest against the deeply-rooted caste, sexism and cultural isolation in Indian society. The article argues that it is lived experiences, communal memory and acts of day-to-day resistance that are the source of social protest, not the work of organized political movements. She says, "You played with our lives and enjoyed yourselves at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything, but never the truth" (43-44). Kamble manages to turn personal anguish into a broader critique of social processes and therefore redefine protest as an individual and collective assertion of dignity.

The major point of Kamble's complaint is that caste persecution had made the group of Mahar the social, economic and moral outcasts historically. The jail in the title is not just a symbol; it is a real place, a symbol of the physical, ideological and cultural exclusion which the caste system caused. Kamble demonstrates how close the caste system is by recounting tales of how Dalits are treated poorly in school, religion, work, and in their social lives. Her act of writing is a protest since it goes against the silence of Dalit women and changes the stories of upper-caste people who have been discriminating against their voices for a long time. She says, "We are very protective about the kumkum on our foreheads. For the sake of the kumkum mark, we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands" (52-53).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has a big impact on the concept of the social protest in the book. He gives the people a means for protesting and respecting themselves. Kamble does not just talk about the role of Ambedkar as a political leader; he also talks about him as a person who brings psychological freedom. She says, "Once, Baba sent a telegram asking us to exert our rights as the sons of the soil, by forcibly seeking entry into temples and hotels" (134-135). The acts of education, conversion to Buddhism, and renunciation of Hindu rituals are all acts of rebellion that become an act of willful disobedience towards the caste oppression. She says, "Education is your right, you must go to school — were stamped on our hearts" (134-135). In this scenario, the protest is known as the "social awakening", and it begins with a change in the way one views things.

One of the most crucial things about the protest led by Kamble is that she puts gender-based oppression before caste-based oppression, in the caste system and

in the Dalit community. Dalit women are victims twice: once, as they are untouchables, and second time, as they are women who are also slaves to their men as they force them to be child-married, beat them and make them work as prostitutes. Kamble calls attention to the experiences of women as she satirizes the male authority in reform movements and argues for the need for Dalit feminist opposition. She says, "She was an easy prey. Anybody could torture her as they wished" (98-108). The book then extends the concept of social protest to cover the struggle against internal hierarchy as well.

The Prison We Broke is a notion that considers that protest is something that everyone goes through together, not something that one person does alone. Kamble also loves to use "we" instead of "I" to stress the point of communal solidarity and working together against anything. The transformation of the society is presented as gradual, as a result of education, organization, and long-term resistance rather than through revolution. This group voice only asks questions related to the past of the elites and says that the communities that are left out are the ones who are making changes.

In short, Baby Tai Kamble's idea of *The Prison We Broke* is that a social protest is an intersectional, immersive and transforming process. She discovers her voice through writing about her own life and reveals how unfair the system is and paints a picture of a society based on equality and respect for all people. The writing is an historic addition to Dalit literature and the writing is a kind of protest. "When I saw my community's suffering, I found my own suffering unbearable... their experiences became mine" (134-135).

Kamble's resistance is much gendered. As a Dalit woman, she faces difficulties both in the matter of caste and patriarchy. She challenges domestic violence, social silence and traditional expectations imposed upon women. , Kamble shows her dignity and rights, rewrites the concept of womanhood in a Dalit framework. Her narrative criticizes male-dominated reform movements and advocated for social transformation of Indian women.

Emancipation in *The Prison We Broke* is described as a slow process that is accomplished through awareness, education, and solidarity. Kamble suggests that the

true freedom is not only in the legal reforms but in the change in social attitudes. The text focuses on collective uplift rather than individual success which reinforce the message that emancipation is not complete unless the whole community is able to advance together. The most important emancipation presented in the text is the breaking of the prison of the mind - the internalization of the sense of inferiority imposed by the caste society. Kamble pleads with the Dalits to reject the concept of impurity and subordination. This psychological liberation is required to attain social equality and self respect. *The Prison We Broke* is a potent declaration of resistance and emancipation from life. Baby Tai Kamble shows the resistance as common struggle and emancipation as collective awakening. The autobiography not only provides a record of oppression, but also a celebration of courage to challenge oppression, and therefore the text becomes an important contribution to the Dalit literature and social protest writing in India.

Baby Tai Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* is a very powerful narrative of social protest against the rigid caste system and patriarchal oppression inculcated in Indian society. Through her autobiographical voice, Kamble lays bare the humiliations that are part of everyday life, economic exploitation, and social exclusion of Dalit communities particularly Dalit women. The "prison" she refers to is not just a physical area but an intensely ingrained social order induced by caste hierarchies, religious orthodoxy and gender discrimination. The text serves as an act of resistance against dominant narratives that have historically marginalized voices. Kamble's critique against the Brahminical practices, blind faith and internalized oppression opens up how social injustice is not only perpetuated by the upper castes dominance but also by the passive acceptance of suffering within the oppressed community. By writing organized experiences instead of abstract concepts and theories, her work turns personal pain into collective protest. Ultimately, *The Prison We Broke* is not simply a chronicle of pain, but a manifesto of awakening and self-assertion. It calls for social reform, education, rejecting the oppressive traditions. Baby Tai Kamble's work makes a significant contribution to Dalit feminist discourse, by asserting the dignity, identity and right to equality. As a text of social protest, it powerfully calls upon readers to awaken to the injustices and to join in the struggle for superiority for social liberation and human dignity that is ongoing.

Works Cited

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Black Swan, 2008.

Kamble, Baby. *Jina Amucha* [*The Prisons We Broke*]. Majestic Prakashan, 1986.

Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Black Swan, 2004.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan, 2006.

Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. Sage Publications, 1994.

How to Cite this article?

Shrivastava, Ohm. “**Social Protest: Baby Tai Kamble’s *The Prison We Broke*.**” *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.348