

**From the Voiceless to Self-proclaimed Dalits in Baby Kamble's
*The Prisons We Broke***

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Abstract

The Prisons We Broke is the first Dalit autobiography in Marathi language entitled as Jina Amucha. The Prisons We Broke has got published in the form of book in 1986. Autobiography is the celebration of self- struggle, hardships. The Prisons We Broke is a book which brings out plethora of women belonging to lamentable Dalit community and their dealing with poverty. Dalit women are double suppressed. Baby Kamble portrays the conventional beliefs which distorts life dalit people affected by different circumstances of life. She appreciates and considers the contribution of Baba Saheb and Mahatma Phule for uplifting the dalit. The Prisons We Broke exposes the poor life of Mahar community. The Prisons We Broke interrogates to patriarchal society which dominated lower caste as the subordinate, the other it becomes very hard for Dalit people to survive there is the biggest achievement in the conventional society which still believes in caste , creed , color and religion.

Keywords: Equality, Dalit Literature, patriarchy, communal Division, autobiography, hegemony, superstitions, marginalized.

Introduction:

The prison we broke 2008 is an English translated version of JinaAmacha(1985), a Marathi Manuscript by Baby Kamble.The writing is translated by prof. Maya Pandit as The Prison We Broke which is “narrative of pain” deals with the lives of Mahar Community of Kamble's village Veergaon in the state of Maharashtra. The writing unfolds the accurate portrait of suppressed class and how masculine dogma is stuck in Indian society. The Prison we Broke unfolds the painful

saga of Mahar community which is dominate under brahmin superiority. In India castes are the practicing religion. Caste system is the threat to India's democracy. According to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar who has the saviour of Dalits said that "the slave should revolt against slavery to make slave aware of slavery." The Dalit women are the twice suppressed human beings first being a Dalit Second being a woman-"The other." Dalit women are the most vulnerable community against suppression and sexual exploitation because of their social, culture and economic upheaval. Dalit women are the victims of "caste and masculinity." In *The Prison We Broke* reveals the unfolding pain of Dalits who are discriminated socially, economically, mentally and politically by Brahmins under the cover of God and Hinduism. The plight of Dalits in *The Prison We Broke* is lamentable they are irritational people, mentally spell bounded. Mahar are animals without tails, conditioned to be slaves. The question which arises here is about their reduced bestial state? who is responsible for their pathetic plight? The upper dominating class murdered their moral reasoning. Mahar class was considered as the illness possessed by the God and Goddess or possessed by unsatisfied soul. In the following words the writer says that:

The possessed women were called goddesses or mothers. When they started dancing, the potraja too slipped into his element. The Goddesses got more and more frenzied. The potraja would alter the rhythm and the women matched their dancing to the changing beats. The portaja would get tried, but the women to stop, the mothers would get terribly annoyed. They fixed him with hard stares, and vigorously nodding their heads, signaled him to go on. The poor guy would get exhausted. Then he urged the mother, that is, the spirit of the goddess possessing the poor woman, I beg you, oh mother, please don't get so agitated! Please leave this tree, this woman whom you have possessed. I promise you. You will play again. But later, after some time. Now please leave this poor woman and go home. (Kamble 33)

The conditioned slaves Mahar are given leftover food. Their homes are next garbage pits, small huts amidst all the filth. Dalits also the victims of superstitions where it is believed that woman body is possessed by evil spirit who would speak out, 'The Girl would be possessed by an evil spirit. That hailed from the place, shertate possesses her. She has come in the house lodged in the feet of a neighbour. The girl met the spirits eye exactly at twelve o'clock. Now they would use the remedy that. They would take some oil, jawar beaten jawar, Kajal, Kumkum in a bowl, move the bowl

over the girl's body and then put it under the banyan tree at midnight. The evil bitch ties a swing to the banyan tree and sits swinging there to her heart's content. She was evil; they would tell her the evil. She would simply take away the body she has been possessed.'

The *Prison We Broke* is a revolutionary autobiography of a Dalit woman. As Maxine Bernston affirmed in the introduction to Marathi version of Jina Amucha that, "The customs, rituals, festivals and the Jattras that she describes are indeed a source of unexplored treasure for a sociologist" (qtd.in Maya Pandit's introduction xiv). The *Prisons We Broke* is the protest against prejudice and Hindu Hegemony. The following words of Kamble suggests that how Mahar are slaved ideologically. She states: "The suffering of the woman be beyond endurance. Even the onlookers found it difficult to watch her plight. Her family smeared her forehead with ash from the chulha. Two or three days would pass like this. People around her would try to soothe her with kind words. Life in that poor mother gradually diminished and she would finally sink. Many young girls on threshold of life succumbed to death. One in every ten lost their lives during childbirth, Infants died as well. The fear of death drove people to the goddess Satwai and they would perform all the customary rituals." Kamble describes the poor conditions of life of marginalized Mahar community on the margins of village in Maharwada (Dalit colony/settlement). Kamble's autobiography, *Jinja Amucha (The Prison We Broke)* is an important social text which creates understanding about caste system, community and identity. Kamble's *Jina Amucha* is a life story of a woman who herself had been involved in Ambedkar's movement. *Jina Amucha* traces the history of Mahar struggle and asserts its specific identity from pre-independent time till present. The author narrates the class struggle of Mahar community to survive in inhuman conditions. The author unfolds the journey of a woman being the participant of Ambedkar's movement. How she observes the communal transformation which goes slowly and steadily. *Jina Amucha* is the first Dalit autobiography which sets the benchmarks for Dalits to be treated as humans. *Jina Amucha* raises questions for their communal dignity, modernity, tradition, gender struggle and identity issues in caste-ridden India. Kamble makes her literary work *Jina Amucha* worth interesting for a reader to progress with reading by adding humour for the serious issues of poverty for instance Dalit women refers their huts as palaces which they would

polish with cow dung. Jina Amucha has the criticism of orthodox Hinduism. Jina Amucha is the bourgeois genre which has the narrative style of autobiography from 'I' to 'we'. The self in this autobiography is for both individual (Baby Kamble) and for collective (Mahar Community). The self of narrative represents the promising future for the Mahar community. Sharmila Rege in her book writes; "The writer wrote her account to record the making of history by Dalits and making the young generation of Dalits realize the great deeds of Dr, Ambedkar so that they will not ashamed of their history of struggle which they have to take forward. Some Dalit readers of Dalit autobiography question the relevance of highlighting the past life, which has been neglected by the community. (Rege 21)

Dr. Ambedkar's decision to convert himself to Buddhist was misinterpreted as the political move. Gopal Guru in the afterwards writes "Dalit people held meetings in the villages to discuss the matter and these was a tension between conservative Mahars and reformist Mahars on giving up their ancestor's religion and embracing the another. After such debate, the decision was taken collectively" (Kamble 64)

Dalit's past offers a stepping stone to articulate a new future. The historical writings of Ambedkar introduced a new narrative style of Indian history as Buddhism against Brahmanism. The legacy was taken forward by the Baby Kamble whose autobiography Jina Amucha is the critical construction of Dalit history. Jina Amucha summons the truth from the past, Truth about poverty and helplessness of Dalit in Pre -Ambedkarite. The main emphasis of Baby Kamble in her autobiography is on Dr. Ambedkar who plays a pivotal role to bring dignity to most downtrodden people. The reformation of Mahar Dalit community becomes difficult due their own internal communal conflict. She writes that there are three groups within the community such as "Modern Mahar" (Malhari), "Traditional Mahar" (Karbhari) and yerkar Mahar. Kamble narrates one of the incidences from her childhood where Mahar are divided among themselves. There was a debate Malhari and Karbhari about the intervention of Ambedkar in Dalit Community. The traditional Mahar (Karbhari) resists any kind of intervention in their religious and cultural domain. The modernist Mahar revolt against orthodox tradition but they face stringent opposition from the conventional Mahar. People who tries to protect their old cultural identity.

Conservative Mahar says to the Modernist “Ambedkar has spoilt your head with this strange. He has become the Christian. This is not he polluted?”(136) this conversation reveals that how Mahars are mentally chained by the upper caste. Another example of the heated tension between the traditional Mahar and reformist Mahar comes out when they talk about the religious sanctity of the Murali custom in the Mahar community. Kamble provides description about a girl who has to be offered to God as Murali. The suppression of a woman and sufferings due to caste is well elaborated by the author when she talks about dedicating a girl in a temple is a part of custom . “In south India, Devdasi belonged to a particular non-Brahmin caste but not untouchable castes. So, for them there was some economic arrangement for the girl could exert her power to some extent due to her high ritual status” (Chakarvarti 88). On contrary, Murali are mostly taken into prostitution for her survival and served clients. Division within a community remains a point of clash where two divided sub groups stand against each. This conflict appears within Mahar community. Baby Kamble unfolds her experience under the shade of Dr. Ambedkar who appealed untouchables not to offer innocent children to deity. There was a conflict between reformist Mahar and conservative Mahar reformer agreed to give up this orthodox custom while the latter ones attached offering of children to deity to spiritualism. The conservative Mahar would argue that the marriage of a Dalit woman with Khandoba is a rare privilege while reformist affirms that it is a mere reduction of human beings to exploitation. The life of educated Dalits is comfortable but their zero involvement for poor Dalits is painful. Baby Kamble describe How Dalits survived on stolen breads! On the other hand the work for Mahar is not defined their job is to assist the patil, the headman of the village in both public and private tasks, carrying messages across the villages, and assist him in receiving official visitors. They are worthy for worthless work they are responsible for the disposal of dead cattle, public notification of deaths, cleaning funeral pyres etc. Although Mahars are considered to be the government servants but their remuneration was paid by villagers. It was named as ‘watan’.

The pride of Mahar is an illusion Mahars considered ‘watan system’ as their pride which is an illusion. Upper caste believed in providing atrocities to Mahar. Grandfather of Baby Kamble finds himself in the heated argument with the Karbhari

the headman of Mahar who said that “they are born for this work, it is their scared duty”.(67)

In order to be the part of upper caste - system the underprivileged has to follow the procedure of Sanskritization. “The Sanskritization of customs of the lower castes have happened due to economic betterment, the acquisition of political power and the desire to move up in the hierarchy”.(47)

The Prison We Broke is not merely an autobiography but an alarm for those sleeping educated Dalits who are not concerned about the most deprived section of their community. The Prison We Broke is the reminder how Dr. Ambedkar sacrificed his life to give comfort to those who are denied. The Prison We Broke has the shades of caste violence in various forms. The very owned ritual of Hindus by Dalits is the consumption of liquor, sacrificing the animals and finally abandoned to beg for food. The basic dignity is denied to Dalits who consider suppression as their fate. Ambedkar's move has great impact on the lives of Dalit who were able to break down shackles of caste and oppression. Dalit converted in Buddhist. Dalits are rebellious now to question the dominance of upper caste. In the context of Ambedkar's struggle, the educated youth who are working for the movement received the telegram from Ambedkar to protest against the visible caste symbols by seeking entry into the temples and hotels. Educated Mahar youth made plans to enter into the Vitthal temple. The news broke out and Brahmins were upset and chased Dalit youth with lathis but fortunately Dalit boys escaped violence. Priest announced that the touch of Dalit has polluted the temple and breached the sanctity of the idol. Dalits are the victims of such violence in the society of upper-class. Here Dalits not only subverted the orthodox custom but they shook the tight hold of religion by Brahmins.

Subversive practices of Dalits and stepping out of caste position through education, self-respect and economic prosperity would directly refute the power of upper-caste which would lead to their animosity towards Dalits. Mahars are not physically dominated but they are suppressed mentally. Baby Kamble also talks about Dalit patriarchy. Dalit women are twice suppressed one being a lower caste second being a woman. Baby Kamble illustrates how Dalits survive in the caste prejudiced society. Baby Kamble defames Dalit culture for being superstitious, considerate of oppression, accepting rituals of upper caste and imposed food habits

of eating dead animals. It is something to be rebelled against she also points out the intra-family violence which makes victims to children and women. In Dalit social structure masculinity is associated with male power. "keep her under your thumb, otherwise you will be disgraced in public" (96) The plight of Dalit women is lamentable, there is no runaway place for them. The only action which a Dalit woman can take is to surrender in front of a man.

Dalit women are worst hit by several tides of life poverty, patriarchy, uneducation, superstition, dominance many more. Pranjali Bandhu points out how child marriages spoil the life of Dalit women "Early marriage between the ages of 14 and 16 prevails due to the girl's vulnerability to sexual oppression by upper caste men, or the fear of an inter caste or an inter community marriage. In an older son is being married it is economical to marry off a much younger daughter at the same time" (Bandhu 111). Child marriage is the shackle of patriarchy which distorts the psyche of a girl child by curbing her childhood. Mahar women who run away from their marriages are immoral, ill-omen symbol and the only remedy is to get rid off them. Baby Kamble would whisper into his ears: "Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair. You are her husband, but obviously the bitch prefers someone else. I suspect that this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us. No, no! I don't 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! Don't bring shame on your father's name." (Kamble 100)

Kamble provides vivid description about the atrocities which a woman faces. The subjugation of Dalits is the procedure moving on for centuries. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon point out, "In the formation of caste, according to Ambedkar, the Brahmins bound themselves, the rest of society imitated them and so other castes came into being. It is possible that the concept of female chastity in the tying of the marriage bond, and the practice of child marriage, come to the untouchables from the upper-castes through imitation of this kind" (Kamble 104)

The life of Dalit women is under so many layers of suppression, poverty hits them harder, zero access to the hospitals, their confined life style; “If a man dies, there is no rule that says his wife must immediately go into white saris nor that she must behave in such and such manner. She will carry on in her usual way. And this is because, even when her husband is alive, it is not compulsory that a woman must bear a bottu on her forehead, nor bangles and other jewellery about her person, nor smear herself with turmeric, have a bath, and dress herself up with bottu and flowers? She runs to work at dawn and comes home after sunset. So whether her husband is alive or dead, she will follow the same routine she might, perhaps, remove her tali. On the other hand, some women never wear a tali, though they marry and live with their husbands. Talis are not that important among us”. (90)

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