

## BABYTAI KAMBLE' NOVEL *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*: FROM WOMEN AND DALIT PERSPECTIVE

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Babytai Kamble's autobiographical work *The Prisons We Broke* was originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* and was later translated into English by Maya Pandit. For study point of view, it can be seen as two sections according to manifestation of ideas put into the biography. Firstly, portrayal of Dalit women within their own community. Secondly, the role played by fellow women in upper-caste Hindus in the social order.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Babytai Kamble uses her life as a source to identify Dalit oppression painting a raw imagery of the crude realities of their world. Growing up in a *Maharwada* in Maharashtra puts her in prime position to witness Dalit oppression at one of its worst, because *Maharwad*s are the epitome of the prejudices of the Hindu caste system which are most prevalent in and around Maharashtra. *Maharwad*s usually consist of close to 15 families belonging to the *Mahar* caste situated in the outskirts of villages of Maharashtra, which ironically owes its etymological origins to the *Mahars* who are the original inhabitants of these regions. Maharashtra being one of the states where the caste structure is most prevalent, *The Prisons We Broke* is justified in being a comment upon Dalit oppression.

That is not to say that this dominance has not been met with backlash. In fact, Maharashtra has witnessed Dalit rebellion in literature, war, religious practices inter alia over centuries. *The Prisons We Broke* is one such attempt, albeit one of the firsts by a Dalit woman justifying its narrative on women's issues as well as Dalit's causes.

Babytai Kamble was a pioneering voice of intersectional feminism in India. As a Dalit woman, she understood the complexities of caste, class and gender-based oppressions and their overlapping nature. Her life and work through which he exposes the social dichotomy, provides a critical lens into the intersectionality of feminism.

Scholars have categorized feminism in three broad waves in India, where the first two waves (extending from 1850 to just before independence) consist of characterisation of feminism solely by elite upper-class men with a saviour complex since political consciousness ran low in Indian women then as they were kept on a leash using familial and religious institutions. Even within the third wave feminism, there are three recognised sub-categories, namely (1) *The Period of Accommodation*, (2) *The Period of Crisis* and (3) *The Period of Empowerment*. During the '*Period of Accommodation*' which can be said to have gave way to the '*Period of Crisis*' somewhere around the 1960s, socio-economic issues were the major concern of the feminist movement in India.

### **Confluent Distinctness of Dalit Women**

The central theme apparent in *The Prisons We Broke* is the intersectionality of the troubles of Dalit women. Babytai asserts in subtle ways throughout the book that if Dalits were seen as an othered community by upper caste Hindus, Dalit women were subject to the same treatment by men within their own community. This she ascribes to the established patriarchal social practices within the institution of family which make themselves most apparent only in the lowest social strata.

In fact, she goes on to point that power dynamics accruing on account of familial and sociological relations mean women are pitted against each other as well leading to worsening conditions for women in general. She cites specific examples of the relations between a woman and her mother-in-law and those between a Dalit woman and an upper-caste Brahmin woman to corroborate her argument in *The Prisons We Broke*. Babytai states it was commonly observed in *Maharwadas* that a woman would falsely accuse her daughter-in-law (aged around ten years at the time) of doing deeds she would not even comprehend, driving the young girl to death and coaxing her son into re-marrying a widow. She provides psychological reasons for this behaviour being one where the woman being incapable of projecting her pent-up emotions towards the society finds solace in her victory over an inferior being, even if it is at the cost of her life. It is this otherness of women which presents itself in intersectional forms that Babytai chooses as the subject of *The Prisons We Broke*.

### **Imprint of Dr B. R. Ambedkar**

Babytai sets the record straight at the start of *The Prisons We Broke* when she says she is addressing the millennials of her own community solely. In the second part of the book, Babytai recognises that the living conditions of Dalits have taken a turn for the better and that Dalits everywhere owe their betterment to Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar. However, she believes that the magnitude of his contribution to the Dalit cause is not understood in its entirety by younger generations because of their newfound socio-economic rise. She also believes that the role of Dalit women in the uplift of Dalits should not be disregarded as well because they form as integral a part as any in spreading the gospel of Dr B. R. Ambedkar and paving the way towards a better future than lifelong shit-shovelling for their children.

### **Feminism and Dalit Reflection in the Novel**

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Babytai states that the *Mahars* were a superstitious people. Diseases of the body were typified as being possessions of the soul by gods and goddesses, further justifying a person's death due to such disease as their entry into the metaphysical realm. This was because *Mahars* had neither finances nor access to medicines, but mostly because of a culture against education perpetrated by the upper castes to keep the *Mahars* from bearing the fruits of civilisation. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar changed such fundamental thinking of *Mahars* when he arrived in villages attired in a three-piece suit exhorting them to aim better material well-being and give up on the lifestyle designed for them by the Hindu caste system. Babytai remembers that *Mahar* women who were anything but rebellious up until that point in time would now go against the head male patriarch of the *Maharwada* in educating their children, adopting the practice of not eating dead animals and giving up superstitious rituals after the instruction of Dr B. R. Ambedkar.

These details validate her original argument of the cruciality of women in defying age-old customs and ultimately leading their people to prosperity, which was kept from them by the higher ups in the *varna* system. Also, especially this part of the book makes the title *The Prisons We Broke* clear in its entirety. The superstitious practices forced by the Hindu religious order upon the *Mahars* for eons have been referred to as prisons in the title of the book metaphorically, and Babytai claims that *Mahar* women were instrumental in rising up against these social evils designed to keep the *Mahars* in professions such as manual scavenging, skinning of dead animals and boot polishing amid other practices which corresponded to lowly remuneration to ensure their animal-like existence for generations.

One of the major reasons why Babytai's writing was path-breaking is because there had been many chronicles of Dalit lives written before her time, but there wasn't much literature on

Dalit women. Her book gave us one of the first critiques of twofold patriarchy – an experience of Dalit women’s lives recognizing their dual oppression: by gender and caste.

Babytai Kamble recounts in detail the reproductive labour of Dalit women. After giving birth, the woman’s stomach would be tied and she would require soft food to line her stomach. But there was no soft grain to be found, despite Mahar women putting out a call in the village for soft food. Women would then often have to swallow the hard *jowar* for the pain in the stomach.

They would return to their maternal homes to have their first child. Often there would not be enough cloth to stem the flow of blood after childbirth. Many women died in childbirth or after it, so women continued to have children until menopause to ensure at least two to three surviving children.

Babytai also recounts in great detail the influence of Ambedkar. As per caste and religious diktats, all Dalits had to bow in front of Savarnas as they travelled in the villages. When young married women did not follow this custom, the offended Savarna men would shout at the Mahars loudly in the village square, questioning how the Mahars could possibly deign to get so high and mighty.

The girl’s father-in-law and other male elders would profusely apologize. Then they would come back to their own houses and shout at the girl asking if she wanted the entire community to be let down. Their mothers-in-law and other neighbours would also join in.

When women went into the villages to sell firewood and grass, Brahmin women buying it from them would sit on their shoulder-high sit-outs (the architecture of the houses was designed to maintain caste hierarchy and exclude Dalits) and haggle for the lowest prices. Once this was done, they would shout at the women to carefully inspect the product to ensure no hair or thread belonging to the sellers was left on it, lest it “polluted” the entire Brahmin household. Once this was done, the Brahmin women would throw a few *paisa* their way as payment, without coming near them.

Once Dalit children started attending school, there were inevitable clashes between them and Savarna children, with several exchanges of harsh words against Ambedkar and Gandhi from either side. Dalit children were segregated in school, while fighting Savarna children at the school tap for water as the Savarnas tried to block their access and teachers placing Dalit children at the back, far away from the blackboard.

Babytai urges her community to remember the lessons from Ambedkarite struggles. She decries those who take to temples and idol worship and encourages remembering Dalit struggles of the past and the way of life before Dr Ambedkar. Her words have immense relevance today as we see the continued prevalence of pernicious caste practices.

The novel is devoted entirely to descriptions of everyday existence of the Mahar community. A great emphasis is laid upon the festivities and rituals of the community. Kamble describes the nine-day long marriage ceremony, the buffalo fair, ritual baths, the jattras, and the festivities of the month of Asadh in minute detail. It is because of such descriptions that Maya Pandit, the translator of the novel, asserts that Kamble’s book “is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography” (xiii). There are very few references to her personal life in her autobiography. On being asked about this dissonance, Kamble instinctively replies: “Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their

experiences became mine. So, I really find it difficult to think of myself outside of my community” (136). Kamble reports that most of the stories she read about the Dalits were wrong. One such story was of Vrinda, a Shudra princess. The upper caste’s mythologizing of the repression of the Shudras infuriates and compels Kamble to write her side of the story. She views writing as an effective method of defying Brahmanical hegemony. “I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered” (146). Thus, writing for Kamble becomes a means of countering the misrepresentation of Dalit people in the Indian literary and cultural discourse and reaching a larger audience at the same time. But writing itself is an impossible task for lower caste women. Kamble had to make sure that no one saw her writing in her home. Being extremely scared of her husband and her son, she had to hide her daily write-ups in the most dusty and untouched corners of the house. As a result, her autobiography was published twenty years after she had finished writing it. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* performs a dual function. It challenges Brahmanical oppression on one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. Taking the matter of patriarchal dominance into account, the text attempts to destroy the myth of a ‘democratic’ Dalit patriarchy. It shows the brutality of Dalit men towards their own wives and daughters. Baby Kamble informs her readers that the Mahar women lived with the belief “that if a woman has her husband, she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her (41). Their thought process depicts a deep internalization of the patriarchal notions of a ‘*pativrata*’ woman. Women’s identity and existence remain solely dependent on their husbands. But what does women get in return of their unquestioning devotion? Baby Kamble doesn’t mince words while describing the physical, mental, and emotional traumas that are a part of everyday life of the downtrodden and muted Dalit women. The text abounds with instances of pain, suffering and humiliation that highlight their subaltern position. It is further distressing and pitiful to read gory details of noses being chopped off of women, who falter from falling in line with the prescribed patriarchal dictums. Maya Pandit in the introduction to the text states “if the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men” (XV). About the situation in her own family, Baby Kamble writes, “My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in the cage” (5). The more the restrictions imposed upon women, the greater the respect and honour of the family. Prof M N Srinivas calls this a process of Sanskritization or ‘emulation of upper caste practices’ in order to achieve a higher social status. The Dalits internalization of the Brahmin patriarchal ideology makes them impose restrictions on women’s mobility, education and sexuality. Baby Kamble’s own position in the private and public domain is similar to that of her mother’s. But more than her mother, her situation is akin to the Aai we encounter in Babu Rao Bagul’s short story of the same title. The story depicts a socially crippled man, who vents all his frustrations on his wife. In order to sustain his ego, the husband attempts to wholly suppress and control his wife. As a result of his insecurities, he suspects his wife of adultery. He is perennially suspicious and constantly watchful of her comings and goings. In a similar vein, Kamble reveals in her interview with Maya Pandit that she, like many other women, had to suffer unbearable physical violence at the hands of her always-suspecting husband. Such male aggression is an assertion of male patriarchal power, but it is at the same time a sign of their desperation. The violence is so common that women never complaint about it. Rather, they negotiate their ways around it. Kamble admits to not writing about this in her autobiography because “it was the fate of most women; I wasn’t an exception. So why write about it, I felt” (156). The autobiography enumerates many more fronts on which women have to suffer. Marriages at an early age, followed by successive pregnancies shatter a woman’s physical and mental well-being. Kamble notes “a mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause” (82). Further, the pregnant women

are the greatest victims of malnourishment. The only food available to them is the gruel made from stale rotis and jowar. As the outer and inner worlds bound the Dalit women into chains of slavery. They also find their own slaves, which are their bahu (daughters-in-law). Another woman, the saas (mother-in-law) in most cases, is the perpetrator of harshest calamities on her daughter-in-law. She is treated as nothing more than a work machine. As the bahu attains puberty, the saa keeps a hawk's eye on the couple to prevent them from sexual intercourse. Wanting her son to always remain under her shadow, the mother never misses a chance to fill his ears with false allegations regarding his wife's idleness, or lack of respect for elders. She even goes to the extent of alleging the bahu's involvement in adulterous relationships with other men. Thus, an infuriated husband beats his wife black and blue. Kamble's autobiography shows us how the women of her community bore the most degradable atrocities and still persevered. II Kamble's autobiography recounts the numerous segregation laws that were prevalent in pre-independence India. The segregation of the spaces was such that Mahars were not allowed to use the same roads as the higher castes. If somebody from the upper castes was travelling on the road. The Mahars would have to come down and walk among the thorny bushes along the roadside. If the Mahar women encounter any high caste male member on their way, they are expected to perform an act of most humble submission by bowing down and uttering the words: "the humble Mahar women fall at your feet master" (52). Any negligence on their part incurred the wrath of the high caste community. Also, each Brahmin house had a high platform in front of their houses to prevent the Dalits from coming in direct contact with the house. This space was solely reserved for their dealings with the Dalits. Kamble notes the different attitude of the yeskar Mahar in different spaces. While going out from his house for his begging round, with his stick in hand. He feels a sense of pride and honour. But as soon as he enters the village space, he is forced to bend his head and ring the bell to announce his arrival. As even his voice could pollute the upper castes. This shows that the feudal/public space has a 'diminishing effect' on him and all other Dalits. It is only after returning back to his colony that the yeskar regains his confidence and composure; treating his black shawl (used for begging) as the coat of a barrister. However, during the Ambedkarite movement the Dalits begin to question this allocation of inferior spaces to them. For instance, during a mahila mandal meeting, the Dalit women aren't given any chairs to sit on. They are expected to sit on the floor. But the Dalit women immediately ask the queen of Phaltan to allow Dalit women to also sit on chairs in the front rows. In this manner, the allocation of space is democratized. But things were not as easy as they might appear. It takes Kamble and her fellow schoolgirls two years to gather the courage to finally enter the Ram temple, which was situated right in front of their school. Kamble's autobiography exposes the upper caste double standards in innumerable ways. For instance, most Mahar women contribute to the family income by collecting firewood and grass from the wild and selling it in the village. They are always paid less than the cost of the work done. And after having bought the firewood, the upper caste Kaki asks the Mahar women to stack the firewood in the backyard. Along with that she instructs them to look closely and make sure that not even a strand of their hair or clothes remains struck in the sticks, as that would pollute the entire house. The irony is the upper castes readily cooked their food on the firewood brought by the Mahar woman, which didn't pollute them. In a similar fashion, the Brahmin who would be invited to conduct a Mahar wedding would stand at a distance and conduct the rituals. This was due to his fear of pollution. But when it came to taking *dakshina*. He made no compromises with that. "That he took away without any fear of pollution" (89). The prisons we broke shows us how the Dalits who were the victims, also became active participants in perpetuating the ideology of purity-pollution. They considered an upper caste body sacred. The internalization of this ideology of purity-pollution forced a Mahar to keep his clothes folded and close to the body, fearful of touching the upper caste and thus polluting them. On one occasion, as an upper caste boy comes too close to a Mahar woman. She cautions

him, "Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted" (14). The Dalits acceptance of the purity-pollution binary helped in sustaining the caste hierarchy for many generations. Children closely observed and then emulated the behavior of their elders and the customs followed by them. Small kids, in their games, would become potrajas and pretend to go off to beg for food. So, as they grew up, they never questioned their lower social status. It appeared natural and deserving to them. Thus, the community continued to follow the same traditions and customs generation after generation. Baby Kamble was greatly inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, like many other radical Dalit writers. The political edge to her critical scrutiny of Mahar community's oppression is influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's radical, self-assertive politics. Kamble in her story traces the trajectory of the Ambedkarite movement. And tells the readers how Ambedkar's speeches made the Mahars aware of their social oppression, and they were then able to critique the caste system in an effective manner. When Dr. Ambedkar arrives in Jejuri for his first meeting. The Mahars are shocked to see him. 'They had never expected their own man to arrive in a car, dressed in European clothes' (63-4). Ambedkar's radical ideas and speeches compel the Mahars to reform their community. He inspires them to send their children to schools, to discard their superstitions, to stop cleaning the filth of the village, and finally, to stop the inhuman practice of eating dead animals. Most importantly, Ambedkar forces the Mahars to think. Debates and discussions begin to take place in Kamble's chawdi. Everybody began to understand, argue and consider" (69). The conservative Mahars firmly oppose Ambedkar's intervention in their inner cultural/religious practices. The fiercest opposition comes from the karbhari: "Listen, we are born for this work. That's our sacred duty. Why should we give up our religion, our duty?" (67). Something as dehumanizing as being a potraja is considered a rare privilege by the conservative Mahars. It is difficult to demobilize the Mahar from such practices. The women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement has been specifically highlighted in Kamble's autobiography. They were greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's opinion that only women could bring the community out of the darkness of superstitions. Women who were the worst victims of the caste hierarchy became a driving force towards education and change. Kamble herself opens a grocery store to fund her son's education. She is able to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth and in doing so she displays that emancipation is possible for the Dalit male and female.

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