

# Education ennobles and liberates : A reading on Baby Kamble's "The Prisons We Broke"

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## Abstract

***The paper centers on Baby Kamble's The Prison We Broke, probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman, not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. It throws light into the lives of Mahar community , especially Dalit women; the victims of double disadvantages of caste and gender. The very stale customs and practices of the Mahar community gave them nothing, but utter humiliation and tortures throughout their lives. Kamble realises that education is the only resort and solution for their problems. The community is totally ignorant and unaware about their right to live as " human beings ". To claim their rights, to live as normal human beings, it is mandatory to get educated. Like the great Ambedkar, Kamble tries to spread the value of education among the Mahar community. She firmly believes that it is the best way to come out of the 'age old poisoned bread'. The upper caste people made Dalits as their slaves, it is ironical to note that, animals are given better treatment than the Dalits. The ignorant community blindly swallowed the words of upper caste people.***

**Keyword: Ignorance, gender, upper class domination**

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Marian Wright Edelman says, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it". Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. It is perhaps one of the most important ingredients to a happy, successful and constructive life. In fact, having good access to education during one's childhood and adulthood can make a real difference in later life.

"Subaltern" is a British word for someone of inferior military rank, and combines the Latin terms for 'under'(sub) and 'other ' (alter). Subalternity is subordination, inferiority, exploitation, hegemony by the superior on the inferior which became inevitable in the present capitalist society. Social oppression is a concept that describes a relationship between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation and injustice directed toward a subordinate group. The relationship between whites and blacks in the United States and South Africa, between social classes in many industrial societies, between men and women in most societies - all have elements of social oppression.

Baby Kamble portrays real picture of the degraded position of the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. Her autobiography is not completely an account of her own self. She kept her own life out of her autobiography because she had her women and community to consider. She was a staunch follower of Ambedkar. She began working for the uplift of the downtrodden in Maharashtra. In the work, she talks about the life in her village, Veeragon. Mahars never had a prosperous life. Ignorance, poverty and epidemics spread everywhere. The twelve chapters keenly portray the real faces of Mahar community. Kamble doesn't focus on any single character and its development, instead, her book is a manifesto of her community. Moreover, it is the representation of double disadvantages of gender and caste faced by Dalit women.

In Translator's Introduction, Maya Pandit says, "if the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men"(Kamble, xiii). Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices

against women. She graphically describes the physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both public and private sphere. In "A Vindication of the Rights of Women", Mary Wollstencraft rejected the established view that women are naturally inferior to men. The unequal nature of gender relations, she proposed, was because of lack of education. She was one of the first thinkers to propose that gender roles are not natural but social. Sex is biological but the values and meanings associated with the male and female body are socially ascribed. Judith Butler develops a post-structuralist analysis of gender when she proposes that gender can not be treated as an essence, but must be taken as a performative construct. She says, there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constructed by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. Kamble writes, " just as the chaturvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since.

In those days, the honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. "My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage" (5). From time immemorial, there spread the false notion of 'women as inferior to men'. Even women accept this inferiority. The sole reason behind this acceptance was nothing but ignorance. The women of Mahar community always have pseudo beliefs and superstitions about 'womanhood '. Kamble says, "we believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing to her"(41). She ridicules, it's another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and sorrow.

The girls of the community were married at the age of eight or nine. The living conditions of eight or nine year old daughters- in-law were worst than what one can imagine. The community's desire to show power was exerted upon these innocent daughters-in-law ; "and we too desired to dominate, to wield power, so we made our own arrangements to find slaves- our very own daughters -in-law!" (87). The girl child would embark upon a new life that was harsh and arduous. The poor child had to break all the ties of love and go to her in-law's house to lead a married life, without knowing what

a husband meant, or what it was to be given away. She was compelled to do back breaking household chores one after another.

Women led the most miserable existence. In the ninth chapter Kamble says, "in those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off" (98). Then they would drive the poor woman out of the house, with blood pouring from the mutilation. Women had to face extreme physical violence both in public and private sphere. The maharwada would resound with the cries of hapless women in some house or the other. Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. Many daughters-in-law would try to run away to escape this torture. Nobody, neither her in-laws nor any of the others, had any sympathy for the poor tortured girl. The husband or the in-laws would beat her to a pulp. She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just another piece of wood. The in-laws have complete control and right over their daughters -in- law. She had to face the same physical violence if she failed to greet an upper class man or her pallav was not in the right place. Kamble says, "the life of the women in the lower castes was thus shaped by the fire of calamities. This made their bodies strong, but their minds cried against this oppression"(102).

Pregnancy period and delivery were nightmares for the Mahar women. The so called treatments of the old women were life threatening. The community were totally unaware about medication. In the first place, the girl generally would be very young as all girls were married off at a tender age, they were physically underdeveloped. "The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed"(58). It was a battle with death. Tetanus was associated with every childbirth. But the Mahars did not know about medicine. They used all kinds of superstitious remedies. Heated discussions would follow. Many remedies, which did not cost any money, would be freely prescribed and followed.

It is ironical to note that the women of the community were treated as "goddesses" when they became possessed. That was the only moment in which a mahar woman got any worth. The men literally fell at possessed

woman's feet. They begged her not to be angry with them. At other times, they commanded great respect as fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law. The celebrations and rituals in the month of Ashadh were an outlet for their oppressed souls, how they tried to find some solace in their terrible lives. Bama, in her seminal work, "Sangati" explores the psychological stresses and strains which may be reason for Dalit women's belief of being possessed by spirits. Bama says the reason; "from the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the field there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. The stronger one manages to survive all this. The ones who don't have mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys"(Bama, 59).

Kamble depicts the way in which Indian society is so imbedded in the caste system that everything is organized on the basis of castes. B.R.Ambedkar theorized that untouchability originated because of the deliberate policy of upper caste Brahmanas. Kamble painfully writes, "we could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. 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. We were reduced to a condition far worse than that of the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the high castes"(Kamble,49). The upper castes had never allowed the lower castes to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations rotted and perished by following superstitious beliefs. Mahars were the true heirs of Maharashtra, but the upper class people never acknowledge the original inhabitants of the place. The irony can not be missed that the upper castes strive on the services rendered to them by the downtrodden.

The curse of 'untouchability' continues to this day. The Brahmins spread the notion of 'being polluted'. The architecture of upper caste houses in the village was designed in such a way that it would help in keeping the polluting Mahars at safe distance. In order to cordon off the upper caste from ritual pollution, the exterior of the houses had raised platforms around it. Kamble narrates an incident in which a Mahar woman went to buy 'shikakai' from a Sahib, she begged him with utmost humility. She addressed herself as 'despicable Mahar

woman'. The shopkeeper gave instructions to his children, "Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Keep your distance"(14). The shopkeeper threw things into her, but the money given by the woman was 'not polluting' for the shopkeeper. The lower class people were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the higher castes. When somebody from the upper caste walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside.

Dalit women used to sell firewood to the upper class houses. The women had to carry the bundles to the backyard, then they had to untie the bundles and stack all the wood neatly. Thereafter, they had to pick up each stick and check it for any strand of long hair, or thread from their saris that may have stuck to the wood. The Brahmin kaki would shout, "listen carefully, you dumb Mahar women, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. Your carelessness cause us heavily. Our house will get polluted"(55). Kamble vehemently criticises Hindu religion, she is of the opinion that the prosperity and wealth enjoyed by the upper class people is the very life blood of the Mahars. The Brahmins drank Mahar's blood and slept comfortably on the bed of their misery. She adds about the Brahmin priest who is invited to solemnise marriage; the priest would stand at a distance for fear of pollution, but he never made any compromise on his dakshina.

The story brings out how the body of a Mahar is tormented with the tension between the moment of folding and flowing. She has offered an insightful observation, which suggests that the moment the yeskar Mahar entered the feudal space, he was forced to bend his back in honour of the upper caste. He was supposed to ring a bell to announce his arrival in the public sphere infested with caste and the ideology of purity-pollution. It is interesting to note that a Mahar's body begins to undergo painful compression because the public sphere is occupied by the upper caste presence. The Mahar is possessed by the fear of the upper caste, who keeps scaring him even if the latter is not physically present in the public sphere.

There were caste rules and codes for wearing sari. Mahar women wore the saris in the traditional way, the front

pleats had taken through the legs and tucked behind. They had to tuck it in such a way that the borders remained hidden; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high caste. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. The Mahar women tried to imitate the ways of upper caste women in their circle; they talked and wore the sari like the high class woman. Kamble asks the readers, "what other evidence does one need to know how the Mahar woman craved to live like a Brahmin or a high caste Maratha or Patil woman? They, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery" (80). The acceptance of purity- pollution by Dalits tends to sustain asymmetry of cultural relationship between the Mahars and the upper caste.

Kamble was a staunch follower of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. With the emergence of Ambedkar, a low caste Mahar from Maharashtra, on the National Politics that the Dalits of India found a role model whom they could trust and follow. He had faced oppression and humiliation at each step in his childhood and youth. This filled his heart with strong hatred for the caste system. His intellectual ferocity and open disdain for Hindu religion won him the support of Dalit masses all over the country, transgressing all regional, linguistic and social barriers among Dalits. Kamble sincerely writes about Ambedkar's influence in her life; " the son of Morality, saviour of the world. It is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts. It is because of him that I have understood truth; that I can see how morality is being trampled upon. It is because of him that I got the inspiration to join the struggle against oppression and contribute my small might to it"(102). The entire community took up the words of their saviour, he gave vision to the blind community. The addressing of Ambedkar goes like this, " 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. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this" (64). The author joined in school, she took revolutionary steps against the age old oppression and superstitious beliefs, one was their venture to enter into the Ram temple. The

boys and girls of the community faced utter humiliation from the fellow students and even teachers.

Towards the end of the novel, she proudly says, many of our children are graduates. She owed every credit to Dr. Ambedkar. Her words are for the present generation and the posterity. She says, "you must fold your hands to this great man, this self-sacrificing soul, and introduce him to our children. He has made us what we are now. It is to that we owe our present prosperity" (123). The words of Ambedkar were so true, it is nothing but education was the key to open the iron doors of slavery, oppression and suppression. Education made them aware about their right to live as "human beings" and the courage to resist against the pseudo beliefs, customs and practices of upper caste community as well as their own community. It makes them better individuals, it ennobles and liberates them.

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