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## The Plight of Dalit Woman and Dalit Community in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

Kamble Sachin Gundurao

Assistant Professor

Arts and Commerce College, Vaduj, Tal. Khatav, Dist. Satara.

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The decade of 1960 witnessed the emergence of dalit literature. The thoughts and movements of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule was behind it. Dalit writers came forward to tell their life story or autobiography. Though a very few in number, Dalit female writers were also ahead in this campaign. Baby Kamble's autobiography – Jina Aamucha is notable in this regard. It is translated as *The Prisons We Broke* into English by Maya Pandit in 2009. The present paper will focus on the plight of dalit woman and dalit community. It will search the answers of the following questions:

What was the plight of dalit woman in Patriarchy? What was her experience in caste based community? And what was the plight of dalit community?

Baby Kamble focused dalit community rather than her individual experience. In this regard, it is different from other dalit autobiographies. She says while exposing her role of writing autobiography.

“Mahar community was nothing but the slave in past 50 years. My motto is to reveal the plight of the community to grandson and granddaughters who do not know the inhuman past of this community. What past these

people had! Youngsters should know our past and the legendary contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar." (1)

From this, it is obvious that she wants to tell more about her community rather than her individual life. This autobiography can be divided into three parts. The first part tells about her individual life. In this part, she talks about her village, her maternal village, her father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, maternal uncle and aunt. It is not in detail. But it informs some names and their nature. For ex. - at the very outset, she tells about her birth. Before her, her mother gave birth to a son and three daughters. But these daughters were died early. When Kalubai, the Goddess, blessed her mother, Baby Kamble was born. She became seriously ill and on deathbed after one and half year. All supposed that she died. They dug out a ditch for her body. Her mother requested to keep the dead body on her lap for a night. All agreed when her father convinced others. In the early morning, suddenly Baby woke up. All became astonished. And they buried a cock instead in dug out ditch. In this context, she says,

"Our community was merely in darkness. If I would have died, how did it possible to wake up for me? Many children, like this, were buried. Illness causes children to be cold and in darkness, they felt to be dead." (P.28)

Further she talks about her father who was honest dam contractor. He was in torn dress. British officers did not have faith in him when they saw him first. But when he started work of canal, He became favourite of them. They had been given other constructions of canal to my father.

When she was child, she was at Veergaon which was her maternal village. She had attachment for other Dalit houses. There were 10-12 dalit houses who had affinity towards Baby. She used to suppose all dalit houses of herself. In her words,

"I used to call all dalit men, uncle and aunt to all women, to their father and mother, grandpa and grandma. Those houses were my family. My father named my brother Babu and me, Baby. All those families in Veergaon used to call me 'Begabai' ..... I used to visit all houses." (P.35)

After this, she remembers her life at Phaltan and the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. His teachings, inspiration and motivation changed the life of Baby and her family. Her father sent her to school because of the preaching of Babasaheb.

The second and important part of this autobiography is the portrayal of the plight of dalit society. She very minutely describes dalit houses. She writes,

".....poverty stricken life in all houses, these were made by stone and mud, small pottery for drinking water in front of every house. It was called as 'keli'. In a corner there was 'hearth' beside big mud pots..." (P.45)

### The Portrayal of the Plight of Dalit Woman

What Kamble points out that is, the plight of dalit women whose painful life she shows. She also depicts God, religion and unjust prevalent traditions, social customs and the exploitation of dalit woman. For ex. When the girl becomes 5 to 6 year old, she was forced to marry. Even she did not know the meaning of husband. At husband's house, she must have to wake up early, to cook for them, to fill the jars at river which was far away from home. If she committed any mistake, she used to suffer a lot. When she became physically mature, her mother-in-law did not allow coming together with husband. She used to suffer for false charges of her mother in law. In her menstruation, she had a difficult test to go at river for bath. She had no other piece of cloth to wear. In this way, dalit woman used to exploit. Sometimes, she used to elope from her husband's house due to tyranny to her father's house. There also, she was badly beaten and forced to go at her husband's house. Her mother-in-law spread fake rumours of her character to poison the married life of her son and daughter-in-law. This mother-in-law used to say to her son,

"Eloped wife brings shame to family and to her husband. The bitch must have affair with someone. You should cut her nose, don't be eunuch, and be a 'man', proud to be you are son of ours. Bring dignity to your father's name." (P.58)

Dalit woman's father-in-law also used to participate in this tyranny. He used to help his son to cut the nose of his daughter-in-law. The community and relatives did not support the woman. No one used to permit the woman to enter in their house. What they used to suppose this dalit woman, that is, a wretched and shameful to the honour of family and relatives.

Baby Kamble also discusses superstitions, traditions, marriage, rituals, the fair of the buffalo, eating the meat of dead animal, baths and worships in the month of Ashadh of mahar community.

### The Plight of Dalit Community:

The third part of this autobiography is also important. It is about social life and social system of dalit community. It speaks about her uneasiness towards the suffering of her community. When dalit woman offers a bunch of wood to high caste woman, she used to say,

"oh! You, wretched mahar woman, take care not a thread of your cloth would come in my house. Otherwise, we have to clean everything of our house. Even we have to bath our Gods. They will also become impure."  
(P.61)

Baby Kamble expresses the anguish towards this untouchability practiced by high caste people. She responds,

"Your prosperity is based on the blood and sweating of dalit. When dalit woman brings a bunch of wood for you, her sweat and blood fall on wood which enter your house, you willingly accept it but, by mistake, thread of her cloth or saree enters in your house which impure you, your God. What you eat, we take pain for that.

Your skin doesn't rotten when you eat the food for which we take pains. You suck our blood. It doesn't make you impure? You took the undue advantage of our ignorance and helplessness, is this religion? We have come to know your selfishness in the name of religion due to our saviour Dr. Bababsaheb Ambedkar." (P.85)

Further she talks about the customs in Mahar caste. There was a custom among Mahars to offer the first child to God Khandoba who would become waghya if he is male. And if she is female child then she would become Muralis or Devdasi. Later the devdasis were put into the trade of flesh by the temple authorities. This custom of offering the first child is inhuman narrated by Baby Kamble.

To get relief from the life of utter poverty, hunger, exploitation Mahar women find solace in being possessed by ghosts, Goddess Satwai or Mari Aai. It is very interesting and amusing to know that the Mahar men possessed by Laman Pathan could be able to drive away the ghosts from mahar woman. Laman Pathan was the brother of Goddess. There was custom among Mahars of offering goats to the Laman Pathan.

To suffer from hunger and poverty was the fate of Mahars. Most of the mahar women die during child birth due to malnutrition and hunger. They could not even afford to buy the cheapest food like Jowar. They suffered from the diseases, like tetanus due to careless attitude towards infection. Baby Kamble narrates the incident of the ignorance of the mahars led them to perform the rituals rather than going to doctor. She says,

"The suffering of the woman would 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 of that poor woman gradually diminished and she would finally sink. Many young girls on the threshold of life succumbed to death. One in every ten lost their lives during 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." (p.61)

There was superstition among mahar community that Bramha had a pen with which he made Satwai to write the fate of the baby. There was a saying very popular among mahars that Barama's words and Satwai's writing are indelible and can never be wiped off.

In severe poverty, people in mahar community used to discuss about the woman who possessed by Goddess and a coloured stone God. They follow many rituals and worship many Gods. The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstition. For this, Baby Kamble responds; *"In reality, they don't have anything in their life. Man must have something in his life to live."*

The month of Ashaadh is an important month for mahar community for worship. During this month, bathing, washing and cleaning were common in every dalit house. They used to eat a little bit sweet in this month. This month was relief for them. It was a little relief from the pain which they would have in other months. It was prestigious, respectable and important for sages, Potraj and women who possessed by Goddesses.

While talking about the begging tradition of mahar community, Baby Kamble comments that begging in poverty stricken life was prestigious for them. She narrates, "one of the dalit women used to say with other neighboured dalit woman,

"Saru, your father-in-law was tiger. He was always getting more by begging. His two bags were full of food by beg. Even he was feeding neighbours" (P.17)

Those who were begging, they had proud of it. How were these people ignorant? If anyone wanted to preach them about school and slavery, they didn't convince with his words. If anyone tells them, don't beg, don't eat the meat of dead animal. Then, he would be answered,

"Enough, your Christian father's knowledge, you tell this escape from this wretched traditions. We are the children of this earth! Our forefathers were doing the same but they didn't give up begging and eating carcass. Don't teach us this futile knowledge. We don't want our children become teachers! Don't want to become Brahmin." (P.66)

".....oh! Malhari, this right of begging stick is not only sounding stick. It is our right. It has previledge....." (P.67)

This kind of boasting of traditions and severe ignorance had been ruined the upliftment of mahar community.

In high caste marriages, mahar was assigned to work for 8-10 days. He had the duty of bringing wood and cleaning. But the owner of the marriage house did not remember him till all enjoy feast. He used to remember for cleaning after all the

ceremony took place. And he was offered the left food which eaten by others. Still he used to satisfy because he knew the value of food. When he was hungry, he would eat what he got. Hunger is his helplessness.

In this way, Baby Kamble vividly portrays the plight of dalit woman as well as dalit community who had minus value in this chaturvarnya system. She also explains the attitude and psychology of this community which was relevant to exploitation.

It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who was the savior of all dalits, who fought against this system. His call for them to convert and give up religion which exploit them and bind them in inhuman slavery and superstition brought about an immense change in the attitude of mahars. They now challenge the authority of Hindu religion and its gods. Baby Kamble expresses her anger towards Barama and Satwai in the following way,

"Today, if we come across Barama and Satwai, we would like to give them both a sound thrashing and ask, 'Barama and Satwai, you ruined the lives of generation after generation of the Mahars! You wrote our fates, didn't you? Religion must have bribed you quite well to do this. Otherwise why you should have done this? Religion must have handed over a stamp to Barama instead of a pen to Satwai, you kept stealing our fates with your writing!'" (P.62)

In a nutshell, Baby Kamble presented a vivid picture of dalit in past 50 years living in western Maharashtra. She candidly showed her anger toward the chaturvarna system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order predominant among Mahars. This autobiography is self-critique of Hindu Social system and patriarchal order among dalits. Through her narration she brings to the forefront the plight of dalit woman and the plight of dalit community.

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