



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

**Exploring the Horizons of Change: A Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***

**Amit Narula**

**Abstract:**

Baby Kamble in her autobiographical narrative problematizes the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the way the dalit Mahar community adopted the Ambedkarite vision of a casteless society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. *The Prisons We Broke* is a graphic revelation of the inner world of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. What is important in Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is a constant interrogation of the beliefs and practices prevailing in the dalit community itself. She criticizes the so called dalit leaders for not allowing the dalit women to get education and economic empowerment.

The paper intends to present how Baby Kamble in her autobiographical narrative presents and critiques the condition of dalit communities and highlight their collective resistance to reconstruct a new 'alternate' social order. The present paper highlights how autobiographical narratives serve as a form of political assertion by providing dalits an entrance into the public sphere and announces the need of a new social order based on liberty and equality for all.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Equality, Autobiographical Narrative, Casteless Society Resistance

Baby Kamble's autobiographical narrative *The Prisons We Broke* is unique because in critiquing brahminical domination in Indian society, it also speaks out for maharwomen - presenting an unflinching portrait of women, subjugated by both caste and patriarchy. Baby Kamble minutely and painfully portrays the tortures, a dalit woman had to undergo. She had to suffer domestic violence in the form of thrashing, nose chopping, work overload and what not. She had to suffer because of her birth, her caste, her gender and her poverty.

Dalit autobiographical narratives including Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, through struggle and resistance embedded in them, have tried to throw away the yoke of the enslavement of dalits. The agony and anguish of dalits are expressed so delicately and clearly that these writings became a tool of resistance. Through their writings, the dalit authors have very clearly exposed the irrationality of those who believed in the theory of casteism and untouchability. The degrading and horrendous misbehaviour is resisted through such



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

writings. Besides, the expectations of dalits to be treated as human beings have also been profoundly expressed.

It is admitted that during Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's period, dalits realized the need for self expression and retaliation. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was inspired by Jyothirao Phule, had a great influence on the people of Maharashtra. Ambedkar being a mahar himself, having educated as a lawyer, wearing decent clothes, talking the tongue of the British and still working for the rights of dalits has a great impact on the lower castes in Maharashtra. His ideals were imbibed by most of them. Therefore, Marathi dalit literature is hugely influenced by Ambedkar and his ideals. Sharan Kumar Limbale calls the period of Ambedkar in the dalit literature as the period of revival. Influenced by Phule and Ambedkar, Baburao Bagul and others start taking part in the Dalit movement vis-à-vis literary movement. His notable works are *Jevha Mi Jat Chorli (When I had Concealed my Caste)*, *Maran Swasta hot Ahe (Death is getting Cheaper)*. Later works of comparatively new writers like Baby Kamble, Arjun Dangle, Sharan Kumar Limbale stood as representatives of dalits in the recent times.

Dalit autobiographical narratives play a very important role in Indian Literature. Autobiographical narratives got literary recognition in Marathi dalit autobiographies. This trend further developed in other languages by getting inspiration from Marathi language. At least around two decades before, an autobiographical narrative *Main Bhangi Hoon* by Bhagwan Dass published in Hindi. Further *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki and *Apne Apne Pinjre* by Mohandas Namishrai presented the plight and ruptures in the life of downtrodden people. Even autobiographical narratives by dalit women writers also present the pain and humiliation suffered by dalit women in society. In Marathi, the writings of Kumud Pawade, Baby Kamble, Mallika Amar Sheikh, Shanta Bai Kamble and many others got recognition in dalit autobiographical narratives. Another autobiography by dalit writer Kaushalya Baisantri *Dohra Abhishap* presents the trauma of seventy three years old woman who after spending four decades with her husband, decided to start a movement against inhumane patriarchal social order. Kaushalya presented the economic and social backwardness of women and torture being faced by women in society. Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* presents how dalit consciousness impacts and interacts with women consciousness also. This narrative



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

is a revolutionary literary masterpiece because it not only discusses the ruptures and rumblings of dalit women but also presents the revolutionary mindset necessary for annihilation of caste. This is also the beginning of the inspiration for dalit women to overcome all kind of oppressions in society by following the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar.

In *The Prisons we Broke* Kamble narrates how she is humiliated, harassed and discriminated against not only by her classmates but by her teachers also. However, what is interesting to note is that Kamble and her classmates belonging to mahar caste would fight against their Hindu girl fellow students. The school in which Kamble is getting education is a girl's school. She and her friends are not scared of their classmates at all. But their teachers are in favour of Hindu students and punished Kamble and her friends always. Also, most of the teachers are Brahmins who hate the mahar students openly. She writes:

We, the daughters of the activists in the movement, were enrolled in school no. 5 for girls. It was basically a school for Brahmin girls, with a few girls from other high castes. There were some ten or twelve Mahar girls spread over in various classes. So each class had only a sprinkling of the polluting Mahars. All the girls in the class had benches to sit except us Mahar girls. We had to sit on the floor in one corner of the classroom like diseased puppies... We were like fiery godflies burning for vengeance. (62)

According to then tradition of times, Kamble is not free because she is somebody's wife. Her husband exercises full control over her. She does not enjoy freedom to do anything if she wishes to do. Whenever she happens to go against the patriarchal norms, she is brutally beaten up by her husband. *The Prisons We Broke* reveals in detail how Kamble is a victim of her husband's male chauvinistic mentality. She remembers:

Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely.... The



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train. (155)

Kamble's narrative in *The Prisons We Broke* is more collective than personal. Like an auto ethnographer, Kamble depicts family life of the mahars in great detail. She portrays, more or less, everything about her community forthrightly. She is proud of being a member of her mahar community and tells about her passion to work as social activist. She has established an orphanage for children from the backward classes. She is involved in the activities of educational institutions. Like Laxman Gaikwad, she plays several constructive roles in her life. She has set up a grocery and vegetable shop. She has launched a school and she is a lyricist and poet also.

Given the rigidity of casteism in Indian social system, it cannot be denied that the ruling class has always perpetrated what Spivak calls a process of epistemic violence through the manipulation and distortion of the dalit image and hegemonic silencing of the dalit voice in the Brahmanical literature; and thus continued to monopolize the historiography of the Indian nationalism. However, in the post colonial era, the dalits soon understood that their culture was distinctly different from that of the caste Hindu.

Baby Kamble narrates that it is essential for every dalit women to be polite and most reverential if she wants to get the required things. 'Her touch spreads pollution but not her money'. Kamble in her autobiographical narrative presents a critique of Hindu social order which has discarded the lower caste people. Hindu rituals are outlets for their oppressed souls. She says:

Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts. For our poor helpless women, the haldi-kumkum in their tiny boxes was more important than even a mine full of jewels. We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on. And yet no one tried to understand us... (18).

Kamble observes that mahars are hoping against hope that they too would be able to live like the upper castes and enjoy the same rituals as them. She identifies the notions of double consciousness within mahar women. She writes:

Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished. But it is a basic human need to hope for change. The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts too. It grew tall, draw strength from the iron in their souls. (11)

The writer further tells that it was duty of the mahars to clean and sweep the house, cut firewood and stack it neatly for cooking. It was the privilege of mahars to do all the duty and laborious jobs. Mahar people are further given shabby treatment because they have to perform a duty towards dead people as well as dead animals. Kamble writes:

Just as the Mahar had a duty towards dead animals, he had a duty towards dead people too. When someone died in the village, he had to reach the news to the relatives. Scorching sun, heavy rains and biting cold- none of these mattered. He had to run without food to distant places. Very often, he would not be able to utter a single word for fear of the relatives wrath for having brought bad news. As if he was responsible for the death! (79)

Residential segregation leads to other practical difficulties for the dalits. They have to walk longer distances even to fulfill their basic needs. To fetch a pail of water, they have to wait until everybody fetches or wait for someone to pour water into their pots. From the description of the mahar community by Kamble, the reader comes to know that the way the lower castes are treated is humiliating. They are given a status no better than an animal. They have to give utmost respect to their upper caste masters and consider themselves in a sub-





**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

human status. Kamble writes that they are called human only because they have two legs instead of four. Whenever they pass by an upper caste they have to pay him his due respect using most reverential and polite terms.

Kamble is very much inspired by the words of Ambedkar. The questioning of Ambedkar is the foundation stone in the development of thought towards search for their real identity. Kamble reiterates that dalits must educate their children. It is only with education their life and family will improve. Ambedkar declares that the spread of education among their children is the only ray of their survival. He tells:

From now onwards you have to follow 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. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. (64)

The upliftment of dalits can be undertaken by strong empowered women. They can abandon all superstitions and determine to educate their children. Ambedkar puts responsibility on women to bring about a new dawn after a social change. History is witness to a new social outlook only after a revolution of masses change the face of the society. The writer tells about the endurance of dalits. How million of dalits perished but their essence of truth did not. Kamble further adds that with the advent of Ambedkar, a sign of change started to blink in the minds of dalits.

The words of Ambedkar revolutionised the writer's mind. Ambedkar advises them to advocate their children, stop eating dead animals, reform themselves and don't believe in God and religion anymore. He says that it is time to discard this maharass. But there are people like kar bhari who did not like views of Ambedkar. He is opposed to all the preachings of Ambedkar. He says that we cannot make the river flow backwards and we have



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

to follow the laws of the land. There is no need to send their children to schools and learn foreign languages. He says:

But we are real Mahars. We will last forever. God has drawn a line for us and you want us to cross it? Listen, we are born for this work. That's our sacred duty. Why should we give up our religion, our duty? We are that real original and pure Maharas! We aren't any of those half-baked converts! Listen, that Ambedkar has turned your head with his strange foreign knowledge! He has lived among foreigners. Then isn't he polluted? (69)

She further narrates that even if it was a child from the upper caste, the oldest among the lower caste had to address him with respect. The upper caste children and ladies hurl heaps of insults on dalit women. They were not allowed to use regular roads and they have to climb down into the shrubbery and walk through thorny bushes as soon as a person of higher caste walked from the opposite direction. Kamble writes:

...When he came close, they had to say, 'The humble Mahar women fall at your feet, master.' This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times, even to a small child if it belonged to a higher caste. We children followed the women, holding their pallav. Sometimes there would be a young, newly wed girl in the group and she would fail to join the chant out of sheer ignorance or awkwardness. All hell would break loose then. (52-53)

The upper caste people expect the dalit girl should know that she has to bow in front of them. They were not allowed to encounter them directly. If they did so, even by mistake, that was a big offence for which they were punished. Kamble says:

No! You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn't



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

it? But listen carefully. Next time, if anybody passes by me without bowing you've had it! No mercy would be shown to you any longer. What do you take us for? Are we Mahars like you or do you take us for naïve children? Daring to pass by me without bowing! Think twice before doing any such thing again!' (53)

Kamble like Kumud Pawade in *Anthaspot* tells about the plight of dalit women in orthodox patriarchal social order. She tells how a dalit woman is dalit among dalits. She is badly oppressed in her family, especially as a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law abuses her most of the times. Everybody, even neighbours and relatives would join and abuse the girl to their heart's content. She writes:

Everybody then vented their wrath on the poor young girl, the daughter-in-law, and took her to task. For her sasur, this would be a fine opportunity to abuse her! The sasur also joined forces with his wife, 'You bitch, Paru, will you allow us to stay in this village or not? Do you know what havoc you're caused today? Do you know how terrible it was for me today? The whole village has strayed spitting on my face. We eat their food, don't we? Should we pass by them without bowing? (53)

There is discrimination even in the way the saris are worn. Mahar women are treated as social outcasts who do not fit in the parameters of society made by upper caste people. Kamble tells:

There were caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remained hidden. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes. (54)





**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

*The Prisons We Broke* explores how a sense of togetherness and boldness came in mahar girls with the teachings of Ambedkar. The writer tells how the mahar women faces cruel society and girls of high caste hurl heaps of insults on dalit girls. She writes:

Another one would come up with, 'You know, I have to bathe again after I go home from school. My mother has come to know that Mahar girls sit in our class and she doesn't allow me to enter the house unless I have a bath. We have to go to the Ram temple. What to do now? Where do we drink water from?' (108-109)

Even the worst treatment is meted out towards mahar girls when upper class girls hurl stones and throw dust into their eyes. The writer here tells how mahar women retaliate and even cursed Gandhi for their deteriorating condition. Their quarrels are nothing than the hurling of insults at the two leaders. The upper caste girls were also humiliated by dalit students in retaliation in the classrooms. She says:

The higher caste girls also got together to surround us. They would hurl insults at us, 'That Ambedkar has educated himself, that's why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!' In retaliation, we said, 'You Shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar's name! you have your own baldy, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth! That toothless old bugger hasn't any teeth! (109-110)

Baby Kamble gives a call to her fellow community people to unite and shed their cowardice that Baba desired. Kamble emphasises about the impact of two movies *Sant Tukaram* and *Sati Savitri* in moulding and shaping her life. She says:

When we saw *Sati Savitri* on screen, some of the strength and will power lying dormant within us were awakened. There was now a



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

new determination in our hearts. Events in Savitri's life left a deep impact on my mind— such as Savitri pulling her husband's cart, braving the storms, stopping the sun from shining, the sheer grit with which she challenged her destiny, and above all, her ability to face life adversities. I wanted to be as strong as Savitri. (116)

Kamble tells that a dalit's life is worse than that animal. All kinds of menial jobs are performed by dalit mahar women and in return they did not get food to eat for four days at a stretch. They had to rely on some leafy vegetables for their survival. She writes:

We did not even dare to speak to the dog and hen in our in-laws house disrespectfully. Even when we had to shoo them away, we had to address them with respect. We did not get food to eat for four days at a stretch. We had to stealthily pluck some leafy vegetables from the fields, cook them and gobble them down without any salt. Even these would be difficult to get. We had to suffer so much! Oh, how we suffered! Just like Sita suffered during her exile.'(100)

Kamble very aptly presents the socio-economic condition of dalit women in the society. The denial of education and the domination of higher castes force them to do only certain occupations which are considered 'unclean' by the society. Such occupations are usually associated with death or human bodily waste which can cause pollution. It is the job of a mahar to announce the death of an upper caste to his family members. He has to walk to far off places to deliver the message and get cursed by the family members for bringing them the news. They are forced to clean the dead animals by eating them. They are so much used to it that they don't realise that it is derogatory for them to eat the dead animals. This is the reason why Ambedkar insisted on dalits not to eat dead animals. Ghanshyam Shah, an eminent dalit scholar opines:



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

In Andhra Pradesh, animal sacrifice is a polluting task entrusted to Dalits .... In this ghouligh ritual, Dalits are forced to bite the neck of the animal to kill it. The pollution associated with leather is so pervasive that in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra, even the beating of drums at weddings, the fear of the upper castes that the lower castes would question the discrimination against them if they get educated prevented them from acquiring literacy. They want them to remain in the darkness of ignorance. (Shah 2009: 107)

Kamble points out the ill-effects of illiteracy among the mahar community. When a girl is pregnant, the ignorant midwives would thrust their hands into the girl's vagina to see how far the baby has progressed. They would spit on their palms and clean the baby's face with saliva. She opines that it is the duty of the educated women to impress their children to portray the lives of Bhims and the Buddha through poetry and education. The participation in Baba's movement led to a change in women's thoughts about life and their role in society. Women in movement, wear white sarees and photo of Ambedkar pinned in front. This gave existence to 'Revolutionary group of Women.'

She encourages the people of her community by saying that the qualities they have in their blood encourage them to break prisons in which they live. She has revolutionary spirit in her blood. Here kamble is annoyed with people of her own community for not following the teachings of Ambedkar & Buddha. She says:

Your children have not even the foggiest idea of who Dr. Ambedkar was, and who Buddha was! You are teaching your children to believe in god! There is an explosion of ritual fasts in your families on days of Sankashti Chaturthi, Saturdays, Thursdays-you observe fasts on so many days! Bhima made you and you rub your noses before the very gods that he taught us to discard. Ganesh, Lakshmi- how many gods and goddesses do you introduce your children to? (118)



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

Kamble awares her fellow mahar people not to wipe off Baba's name because all the educated amongst them have forgotten Ambedkar because of basking in the false glory of their greatness. The internal contradiction in the psyche of dalits is very aptly discussed by kamble. Kancha Ilaiah, a well known scholar on dalit issues, feels that the Hindu way of thought is essentially antagonistic to dalit interests. He feels that the entire domineering Hindu culture has been constructed on the remains of the dalit cultural more's which went a step ahead to perpetuate the Hindu mythic system, wherein, the dalit has always been represented as a victim But Kancha Ilaiah conveniently forgets to point to easily visible internal contradictions within the dalit communities which are not homogeneously composed. He never mentioned s the obvious facts, which has been represented in *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, that the already privileged dalits also exploit the less privileged dalits. As Maya Pandit in her introduction to the text tells how Baby Kamble asserts that she is writing for her people. In her foreword to the original Marathi autobiography, she tells:

Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed off? We are the great race of Mahars of Maharashtra. We are its real original inhabitants, the sons of the soil. The name of this land is also derived from our name. I love our caste name, Mahar- it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth. (xiii)

Kamble narrates another incident of attending meetings. The element of protest and resistance is shows by ladies of mahar community when they questions Rani Sahiba about discrimination. It was a new activity for the mahar women and due to this their knowledge began to increase and they started taking firm steps. She says:

...All the Brahmin and Maratha women had occupied the chairs. They would not allow the Mahar women to sit on the chairs. Helpless, our women stood on one side. At the same time, the rani sahib started to move towards the stage, accompanied by her other followers Godbole, Velankar and Bhadkamkar. Our Thakubai rushed forward. She shook the rani by her shoulder and told her,



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

‘Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs.

(113)

Getting inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar, kamble tells that she started adopting reformist techniques for the welfare of society. She started Ashram shala for orphans of the backward classes. To provide education is the prime motive of Ambedkar’s teachings. She writes:

Baba’s words showed me the way. I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba’s advice verbatim, to the best of my ability. When shashikant Daithankar was secretary in the Maharashtra government, he granted me permission to start an ashram shala for orphans from the backward castes. Today, I am the president of Mahatma Phule Dhyan Vikas Prasarak Sanstha and I serve the community in this capacity. Two hundred children study in this school....Sheel, Pradnya and Karuna have been the founding principles of my life. (135)

Even Kamble tells in interview with Maya Pandit that it is because of women, that education became possible for the people of dalit community. The words of Ambedkar to educate their children touched the hearts of mahar women. Kamble writes:

It was only because of women that education became possible for us. Generally men would say, ‘Why put our son into school? As if he is going to become a teacher or a clerk! It’s better if he starts working as a labourer like me. At least he will earn a little money! You will ruin us with this madness! Sending children to school indeed!’ (138)

She also tells about the contribution of women to the dalit political movement and how men respond to this. Even older women, their mothers and mother-in-laws took education extremely seriously and they participated in all the programmes as well. She tells:

They would just leave their children and homes behind and participate in various programmes, such as morchas, forcible entry





**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

into temples, hotels and such others places. They got a lot of encouragement from their men folk as well. And both their young and old family members staunchly stood by them. (139)

The writer here tells how inhumanly rampant caste discrimination was prevalent in Temple of learning. There are few references of personal life of Kamble. When Maya Pandit questions her about her married life then Kamble tells that hers was one of the first marriages performed in the new manner. They followed the practice of gandharva vivaha laid down by Ambedkar. She was just thirteen years old when she got married and had just passed her fourth standard. Her husband's name was Kondiba kamble who was a student in his brother's school.

While replying to another question of Maya Pandit about political participation of women in dalit Movement in Post- Ambedkar period, Kamble tells that women played major role in Ambedkar's movement till 1956. But after his death a tug of war started to become another Ambedkar. People were confused because nobody knew who was Baba's heir and they were left far behind in the ensuring power struggles. The upper caste people were worried because they knew that they would lose their power if a new leadership and dalit community became strong.

What is important here is to mention the fact that Kamble tells about the politics of caste discrimination prevalent among dalit people. There is much difference between urban rich dalits and rural poor dalits way of looking at the world. She writes about the widespread exclusion and hatred rampant in the community of dalits:

Absolutely. In those days, it happened because the Dalits were uneducated. Today this happens because the dalits are educated. In those days, the whole village kept us down with tactics like refusing to give us water, keeping us at a distance, and through oppression and injustice. Now the educated dalits are behaving exactly as the upper caste villagers used to behave then. Educated dalits occupy top positions in the government. Their children enjoy the good life. They are not bothered about what's happening to



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

poor people. Whatever they do, they do only for themselves. The poor dalits are left where they were. (150)

Kamble highlights the internal contradictions prevalent in dalit community. She is outspoken and does not dilute her narration in self glorification of her community. Rather she is self critical and self analytical of the community, its behaviour towards its women and towards its way of life. Now the educated dalits are behaving in the same manner as the upper caste villagers used to behave. Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism and the entire mahar community followed him but in the process other communities were left out and they remained Hindus. She writes:

Let me explain. In 1956, Babasaheb embraced Buddhism. The entire Mahar community followed him and became Buddhist. But in this process, other communities were left out. We gave up Hindu religion, the Hindu gods, their worship, etc. but what about the other twelve balutedars? They remained what they were, that is, Hindus. The Chambhars, Dhors, mangs and many such castes did not change their religion. They do not want to do so. The Buddhists are isolated. So now it is the Buddhists versus the entire village, the entire town, the entire country. (150)

While replying to the solution of caste system and inhumane division of society, Kamble tells that we should spread Buddhist religion everywhere. Hindus became more aggressive and dominant since they adopted Buddhism. The revivalist tendencies are becoming stronger than ever in them.

Kamble also discusses major problems in front of dalits. There are many issues before society like big versus small, high culture v/s low culture which needs to be dealt with. Dalits have to migrate from villages to cities in search of work and those who are left out in villages, they are badly pressurised to do menial jobs, they don't have access to education and jobs. She tells:

...Basically our people are still quite poor. And now there are so many divisions. Big versus small, Ambedkarites versus non-



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

Ambedkarites, high culture versus low culture. But there is one thing I must say. Today, untouchability is not so big a problem as reservation is. That's major problem. But any struggle requires a good leader. Dr. Ambedkar, it is true, had said, 'Don't run behind jobs, get into business.' But in spite of so many banks and loan facilities, how many of these things reach the poor? Take government schemes for instance, they don't reach us. (153-154)

Maya Pandit asks Kamble about her personal sufferings as a dalit woman in particular and every dalit women in general. She tells that women are still slaves and she is not an exception. Like Kamble, Bama's autobiographical narrative *Karukku*, is the proof of heterogeneity of the dalit identity and consciousness. The community of the dalit Christians, perpetuates its own casteism within its fold- rendering dalit women doubly colonized and doubly oppressed. Her yearning to be part of her community and a burning desire to share its pain and pleasures takes a concrete shape when Bama consciously chooses to write her narrative in Tamil

Kamble tell show she found suffering of her community more important than her own individual suffering. Nowadays the things are changing because of education and jobs. The change in the mindset of people is very important which leads to a sense of achievement. She tells:

Well, he was my husband after all! I spent so many years of married life with him. Besides I had my community to consider, our lack of education, progress. It would be so demeaning. Besides this was the fate of most women; I wasn't an exception. So why write about it, I felt. Besides, the root cause of this was the male ego. Look, husbands then didn't have anything else to do. No education, no jobs, even food they had to beg for. Their male ego gave them some sense of identity, I am a man, I am superior to women, I am somebody. If the whole village tortures us, we will torture our women.' Fathers used to teach their sons to treat their wives as footwear! (156-157)



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

The issues raised by Kamble are relevant even today in several parts of the country. As we see in the text that physical segregation is one of the common forms of untouchability. Uthapuram village in Tamilnadu had a wall built in the middle of the village. This was to separate the lower castes from the rest of the society since they were considered impure. Similar to the references in the text about dalits not being allowed to enter the temple, lower caste people in Vedaranyam, Tamilnadu were not allowed to enter the temple where upper castes worshipped. It was only after people's long struggle that they were allowed inside the temple. Discriminations like the above mentioned happen all over the country Shantabai kamble in her autobiography *Chittarkatha* recounts her life as lived in the community and the caste. Like Baby Kamble she talks about food and hunger, centring the specific experiences dalit women facing inside and outside house.

*The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble articulates the problems of dalits effectively. It gives a vivid picture of the lifestyle of the mahar community, the untouchable section of the society. Poverty is life for them. The minute but significant details of their poverty stricken life do not fail to leave an imprinting mark in the hearts of the readers. It talks about how life is difficult for mahar women. Kamble herself says how difficult it was for her to write and get the book published and that mahar women welcomed it greatly because it was a realistic picture of their life.

## **Conclusion:**

Baby Kamble's narration reflects her love for her people without seeming to glorify their condition. She also brings out the internal trauma in the psyche of mahar people. *The Prisons We Broke* touches the important aspect of dalit feminist critique of patriarchy. She writes about physical and psychological violence women have to tolerate in both public and private spheres. Mahar women are 'other' for mahar men. She demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. Kamble shows ultimate dignity of women of her community in their protest and struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in the society.

## **Works Cited**



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of  
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh**

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2008.

Nagraj, D.R. *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India*. Bangalore: South Forum Press, 1993.

Shah, Ghanshyam. (ed.) *Dalit Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage, 2000.

--- *Anti-Untouchability Movement* in Vimal P. Shah (ed.) *Removal of Untouchability*. Ahmedabad: Gujarat University, 1980.