SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 7 July, 2025**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*: Creation of a Collective Identity

Rakshita Nain
Independent Researcher, MA English, University of Delhi

Article Received: 23/06/2025
Article Accepted: 25/07/2025
Published Online: 25/07/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.07.503

Abstract:

This paper situates Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* within the tradition of the collective history of the Dalit community, moving beyond its genre of autobiography. The memoir foregrounds the systemic oppression of the Mahar community of Maharashtra, followed by the awakening of caste consciousness that led to a socio-political movement catalyzed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Kamble's intentional use of the collective voice as "we" and "our" transforms individual experiences into a communal and collective narrative of inequalities based on caste, class, and gender. This research attempts to highlight the creation of an alternative 'history' by minorities who were erased from mainstream academics until recently. This is made possible through the recognition of a shared culture and way of life that help the Mahars forge a unified communal identity to take part in small and large acts of liberation.

Keywords: collective memory, Dalit women, caste oppression, Ambedkarite movement

Introduction:

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (*Jina Amucha*) transcends the boundaries of individual autobiography, emerging as a profound and unwavering collective history of the Mahar community. Situated within the rich tradition of Dalit protest writing that flourished in Maharashtra, Kamble's memoir offers a visceral portrayal of systemic oppression and internal community dynamics, along with the transformative influence of Ambedkar's movement, which served as an awakening for the Dalit community. Through the powerful deployment of "we" and "our," Kamble constructs a narrative that chronicles the historical suffering of the Mahars while tracing their arduous journey from self-pity to "assumed identities of self-assertion" (Naik 18) and the dismantling of the "prisons" that confined them for generations. This analysis contends that *The Prisons We Broke* is not merely an autobiographical account but serves as an indispensable historical record depicting the multifaceted oppression endured by the Mahar community. It also illuminates their internal struggles and resilience while underscoring Ambedkar's pivotal role in

cultivating a collective consciousness and initiating the first steps toward liberation. The title of the book, *The Prisons We Broke*, serves as a powerful entry point into the collective experience of the Mahar community under the oppressive caste system. These "prisons" extend beyond mere physical confinement, encompassing the intricate social, economic, and psychological structures that historically relegated the Mahars to the outskirts of society, stripping them of fundamental human dignity and agency. Kamble's purpose is to "subject the life of her community to critical scrutiny in order to demonstrate how Brahminical domination had turned the Mahars into slaves" (Pandit 14). This systemic denial of basic rights and social participation formed the foundational bars of their collective prison.

Further solidifying the image of shared confinement is Kamble's depiction of forced labor and economic exploitation. The narrative reveals how the Mahars were traditionally confined to degrading occupations, such as handling dead animals, becoming "masters only of the dead animals thrown into those pits by the high castes" (Kamble 57). This imposed labor, poignantly described by Kamble, forced them into a brutal fight for survival, even compelling them to compete with animals for sustenance. This economic dependence and lack of opportunities further cemented their marginalized position within the social hierarchy, reinforcing the walls of their collective prison.

Adding another layer to this understanding of systemic oppression is the deeply ingrained social stigma and humiliation endured by the Mahar community. Kamble recounts the performative subservience demanded of them, exemplified by Mahar women having to "cover themselves if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road" and utter ritualistic pronouncements of their inferior status (Kamble 60). This constant denigration collectively silenced the Mahars, preventing them from articulating their own experiences and shaping their own narratives. The psychological impact of such sustained humiliation formed yet another invisible but powerful bar of their collective prison. Kamble's personal recollections, such as the memory of living in "dirt pits on the periphery of the village, like discarded rags, ignored by society" (Kamble 45), resonate with the broader historical context of caste discrimination and highlight the "subjectivity of not just a person but an entire marginalized community" (Pandit 14).

Kamble also illuminates the internal dynamics and evolving collective identity of the Mahar community. The shared experiences of suffering are punctuated by fleeting moments of comfort, such as the anticipated Ashadh month with its "comfort of sweet food!" (Kamble 25), cultivating a collective consciousness and a shared sense of belonging within their marginalized existence. Traditional customs and beliefs, while sometimes perpetuating internalized oppression, also served as a means of maintaining social cohesion and transmitting cultural memory in the face of external hostility. Kamble's portrayal of Mahar women who laid their lives at the

feet of their husbands for the "kumkum mark" (Kamble 50), even amidst marital hardship, reveals a complex interplay of tradition and resilience, highlighting the internal mechanisms the community developed to navigate their harsh reality. Her narrative, though deeply personal, is inextricably linked to the shared consciousness of her community, as she admits in her interview with Maya Pandit that she finds it difficult to think of herself outside her community.

Her work also highlights the lives of Mahar women and their contributions to upholding Ambedkar's teachings, such as sending their children to school despite social and economic hardships. Christopher Queen observes the pioneering nature of Kamble's work, as she recognizes the intersectionality of "women's simultaneous struggles with poverty (class), marginalization (caste), and misogyny (patriarchy)" (288). There was no food or healthcare available for new mothers, and their lives were often claimed by diseases like tetanus due to the absence of medicine. Women suffered in numerous other ways at the hands of their own family and kin, as Kamble remarks, "we made our own arrangements to find slaves—our very own daughters-in-law" (Kamble 90). She unifies her community on different levels by exposing gender-based as well as caste-based exploitation, so the collective also includes the awakening of a feminist identity among women who later played a major role in the political struggle of the Mahars.

The arrival and impact of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's movement mark a crucial turning point in the collective history of the Mahar community, as powerfully depicted in Kamble's work. Ambedkar's ideology of self-respect, education, and political mobilization provided the intellectual and ideological framework for the community to understand their oppression not as divinely ordained but as a systemic injustice that could be challenged collectively. The book recounts the growing awareness of rights and dignity inspired by Ambedkar's teachings and how his name "became holy chants" for them, leading to collective action and participation in social and political movements.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's influence led to the dismantling of internalized inferiority and the assertion of a new collective identity rooted in self-respect and the rejection of untouchability. The powerful moment when the Mahars of Veergaon collectively vowed "never to eat dead animals and the atmosphere resounded with the slogan, 'Bhimrao ki jai!'" (Kamble 76) signifies a collective act of defiance and the embrace of a new identity, shedding a practice historically forced upon them. This symbolic act represented a significant breach in the walls of their imposed identity. Ambedkar's leadership, as portrayed by Kamble, served as a catalyst for a collective awakening, enabling the Mahars to walk a path toward self-determination and liberation.

The very act of writing *The Prisons We Broke* can be interpreted as a

continuation of this collective journey toward liberation. By giving voice to the experiences of her community, Kamble contributes to the collective memory and the ongoing struggle for equality. The lament, "We may be coarse and ignorant, yet you must admit that we have been the most devoted children of Maharashtra…the true heirs of this great land" (Kamble 47), underscores a collective yearning for recognition and belonging, denied by the oppressive caste structure—a collective voice demanding their rightful place. Kamble's call to action, "We have to forge unity in the Boudhdha community" (Kamble 113), echoes Ambedkar's vision of collective empowerment and the continued struggle against systemic injustice, a powerful call to consolidate the gains made in breaking free.

In conclusion, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* stands as a powerful and indispensable collective history of the Mahar community. Through her poignant personal narrative, Kamble meticulously documents the systemic oppression endured by her community, revealing the shared experiences of untouchability, economic exploitation, and social humiliation. The consistent use of collective pronouns underscores the shared nature of their suffering and struggle. *The Prisons We Broke* is not merely a historical account; it is a testament to the enduring spirit of a marginalized community, their collective awakening under Ambedkar's guidance, and their ongoing pursuit of a future liberated from caste. Kamble's work remains an invaluable contribution to understanding the complexities of caste in India and the power of collective narratives in shaping historical understanding and inspiring continued social change.

References:

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient BlackSwan, 2008.

Naik, Pournachandra. "Baby Kamble to Bama: Dalit Women Write Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 42, 15 Oct. 2016, pp. 18–19, JSTOR,

Pandit, Maya. Introduction. *The Prisons We Broke*, by Baby Kamble, Orient BlackSwan, 2008, pp. 11–14.

Queen, Christopher. "Reading Dalit Autobiographies in English: A Top Ten List." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2021, pp. 281–94, JSTOR,