

CHALLENGING INJUSTICE – ASSERTION OF SELF IN BABY KAMBLE’S JINA AMUCHA (PRISON WE BROKE)

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ABSTRACT

Baby Kamble’s autobiography Jina Amucha translated as “The Prisons We Broke” narrates life long struggle of Mahar community in Maharashtra. She explicitly portrays the deplorable condition of the people of Mahar community, especially women. The book brings out the fact that the social, economic, sexual, religious exploitation of these lower castes existed even after independence. This autobiography moves from the personal sphere to depict the stark social reality which has always been overlooked and avoided. The writer is not an individual but a representative voice challenging the age-old exploitation and injustices meted out to their community generation after generation. This voice is more or less ‘collective consciousness’ of the community. The subjective perceptions of the author objectively present the conditions that have existed in the past and still continue to do so in undercurrents. The study attempts to assess the tools and extent of exclusion of the lower castes and how the people of this caste challenged the injustice meted out to them. The present study also attempts to assess the extent of assimilation of these marginalized castes.

KEYWORDS: *Assertion, Dalit, Exploitation, Recognition, Voice*

INTRODUCTION

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. The bullocks were at least given some dry grass to eat. We ate the leftovers without complaining and laboured for others... our condition was far worse. Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste. (Kamble, 49)

Dalit Writings have unveiled the darkest facet of the sordid social reality in India and foregrounded the wretchedness of the browbeaten lower castes and also the apathy of the upper castes towards their miserable condition. The pan India socio-political awakening of the 1960’s initiated a spurt of Dalit writings in the form of poetry and fiction. Autobiographies by Dalit writers presented the squalid conditions of their existence with truth and accuracy. Dr Ambedkar’s progressive thinking stressed on education of the oppressed, instilled a sense of dignity and rebelliousness against the widely prevalent discriminatory practices and injustices carried out in the name of religion and customs.

The present paper analyzes Dalit autobiography Jinav Amucha by Baby Kamble, translated as “The Prisons We Broke” by Maya Pandit. By explicitly depicting the stark reality which has always been surpassed and overlooked, the

narrative moves from the from the personal sphere to collective one. The writer is not an individual but a representative voice, challenging the age-old exploitation and injustices meted out to their community generation after generation. By giving collective voice to the community, the book objectively presents the conditions that have existed in the past and still continue to do so in undercurrents.

A study of Baby Kamble's portrayal of the deplorable condition of the Mahar community in Maharashtra explicitly brings out the fact that the social, economic, sexual, religious exploitation of these lower castes existed post-independence. The study attempts to assess the tools and extent of exclusion of the lower castes in their regions and how the people of this caste challenged the injustice meted out to them. The present study also attempts to assess the extent of assimilation of these marginalized castes.

The practices followed by the upper castes were not only discriminatory in nature but despicable. Pushed to the margins, these communities were allowed to settle only outside the village limits. Despite following Hindu practices and rituals, they were always unacceptable in the Hindu fold. The Mahars were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the higher castes. When somebody from these castes 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. The women had to cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road. The discrimination did not end here. It affected even the apparels. Though the lowliest of the low had just rags to cover their body in the name of clothes, yet it was offensive for them to wear their tattered sarees in a particular fashion.

There were caste rules even how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remain hidden. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. (54)

The myth of being polluted by the touch of the lower castes restricted their movement. The Brahmin houses had chest high platform like a wall to prohibit the Mahars from directly reaching the door. The firewood brought by the Mahar women must be minutely scrutinised lest it should have a strand of her hair. Thus, polluting the Brahmin household.

'Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar woman, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be lot of trouble... Our house will get polluted... Hey you, why do you bring these brats along? They'll touch things and pollute everything. (55)

Paradoxically, Mahar women's sweat would have soaked the firewood. Sometimes when thorns pricked them, blood trickled and dripped on the sticks. This it was the very essence of the Mahar woman's life that was found sticking to the wood. And yet the Brahmin women objected to what they found sticking there! Baby Kamble questions the Hindu practices:

When the Mahar woman labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of the Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then? Just as the farmer pierces his bullock's nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. (56)

For generations they were 'discarded as dirt' by the Hindu philosophy, yet they dearly followed Hindu rites and rituals. Hoping against hope they dreamed of living like upper castes, enjoy wealth like them and practice their rituals, enter the temples, worship their gods. But the upper castes knew very well that their control could be maintained over the Mahars only if they kept them in ignorance and superstitions and devoid them of education. With the light ignited by Ambedkar, Mahars rebelled against the discriminatory customs. Foremost, they denied eating the flesh of dead animals.

Young men began to argue about the custom of eating dead animals. They were convinced that the custom had to be discarded it was the youth everywhere who brought about the radical change. Yet, there were some families who would secretly obtain carcasses. The young men of the community started excommunicating those families. They were not allowed to come to any weddings. (69)

After such ostracization by their own people, Mahars desisted from this custom.

My poor dear brothers and sisters, do not eat carcasses any more. Don't clean the filth of the village. Let those who make filth clean it up themselves. Let us teach them this lesson. This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that we need to bring about a revolution. (65)

Another endeavour, the Mahars made to challenge the injustice meted out to them was by sending their children to schools. This attempt too, was not easy to accomplish. There was resistance within the community and much more from the higher castes. The older generation still had firm faith in their way of life and resisted this change. But gradually, the winds of change broke down the barrier. The opposition was much stronger from outside the community for the simple reason that enlightenment would loosen the leash with which the higher castes had enslaved the Mahars. The children of the Mahars faced humiliation at the school from other children. The teachers too, thrashed them for misbehaving with Brahmin girls.

Our school was predominantly high caste. A majority of girls in our class belonged to higher castes. For the first time in their lives, they had girls like us- who could pollute them- studying with them. They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose. The teacher had allotted us a place in the corner near the door from where we could not move till school was over for the day. The blackboard would be in another corner. We could neither see what the teacher was writing on the board, nor could we raise our doubts in the classroom. (108)

The girls from dalit community at school were not allowed to drink from the school tap. The other girls would raise hell. They would hurl stones at these girls and throw dust into their eyes. Emboldened by Baba's brave spirit, the Mahar girls never listened to them. The seven or eight friends, including Baby Kamble moved together as one person. The fear of being polluted by their touch made the Brahmin girls fear these Mahar girls. Despite this ill treatment at school, the Mahar girls continued their education to fight the injustice. (108-109)

To overcome the rampant discrimination, the Mahars began to shun Hindu religion. Dr. Ambedkar gave them the clue to free themselves of the subjugation that had become their destiny by adopting Buddhism.

A new spark enlivened us. The flame of Bhim started burning in our hearts. We began to walk and talk. We became conscious that we too are human beings. Our eyes began to see and our ears to listen... the struggle yielded us three jewels- humanity, education and the religion of Buddha. (122)

The Mahars even decided to give up celebrating Hindu festivals especially, Padva, the New Year festival. It falls a couple of weeks before 14th April. Instead, Dr Ambedkar's birthday - 14th of April was to be celebrated as New Year. Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar's efforts awakened the Mahars to the bitter truth. The community worked with one voice and in one mind which led to the growth of the entire community. They realized that the only way to emancipation was education and the Mahars made every effort to educate their children. Activists were educated and in turn ensured that the others got education. Newspaper reading in the Chawdi was a daily practice bringing about awareness:

Baba published a newspaper called Bahishkrut in which his speeches were reproduced. These were also read aloud. Men from both the Mahar lanes gathered to listen to them. There would be complete silence. The readers explained the issues to the people. The entire community was beginning to be aware. (125)

Baby Kamble Aptly Remarks

Shallow water makes a lot of noise, but still water runs deep! Like the ocean that covers mountains of sin under its huge expanse, we covered the sins of the higher castes. That is why we, like the ocean, deserve the admiration of the world. (49)

Looking at the current scenario, the discrimination practically still exists. From segregated rows of Dalit houses, to separate places of worship, separate cremation grounds, the caste prejudice continues to haunt the Indian society. Education, modernization, urbanization might have given the lower castes self-respect and dignity to some extent. Yet, the dalits continue to experience the hatred and bias overtly or subtly. We have 'miles to go' before we witness the end of the deeply embedded 'caste-consciousness' in Indian society.

They were imprisoned in dark cells, their hands and feet bound by the chain of slavery. Their reason was gagged. But it is because of them that the world stands. They were the foundation. They have bravely fought the social system and managed to raise their head in pride. Yet, the realistic/ practical analysis of the social acceptance of the lower castes as equals by the higher castes seems a distant dream. The current statistics remind us of Browning's quote 'The petty done and the undone vast.'

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