

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*: Reading History through the Lens of Autobiography

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Abstract

History writing has always been a gendered project. Politics, war, and diplomacy were the fodder for history; recently subaltern history including the social conditions of the peasants, the laws and systems that regulated the people at the bottom has been incorporated. This paper makes an ardent plea to rethink the very process of understanding the subject material of history. If the feminine world has to be adequately incorporated in history, we need to pay heed to incorporation of factors related to motherhood, marriage, sexual practices – the domain of women – in the reading of feminist history. This paper argues that incorporation of autobiographies like that of Baby Kamble would help in bridging the historical gap that one finds in documentation of the lives women especially of the lower caste. The autobiography documents the travails of her dalit community from a feminist perspective pertinent for historical reading of the caste, class and gender dynamics.

Keywords : Autobiography; Dalit; History; Historiography; Women.

The noted Dutch historian J. Huizinga defines history as “the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of the past”. In its older form the term used was the history of historiography which “reminded readers that historical writing has fashions in its methods and approaches and attempted to provide as comprehensive an account as possible of the writings of previous historians” (Bentley xi). The task of historiography therefore was assumed to be either philosophical or based on empirical study. Whether it was Benedetto Croce or Eduard Fueter, or Peabody Gooch or Herbert Butterfield or Harry Elmer Barnes – each of them had their distinctive tone and point of view. They all assumed that the task of the historiographer was biographical, expository and corrective. At some point between 1960 and 1975 in most countries of the

west, history took a turn towards theory. The arrival of theoretical models brought in a sense of self-consciousness which was hitherto absent. The view that there is not necessarily a 'single way' but 'many sorts of past to talk about' is now paramount.

History, since times immemorial, has been the 'jagir' of male-centered treatises. The issues, recorded and passed on for posterity, have always been issues that the male-dominated societies felt were essential and useful. As Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* asserts that though "Women have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization" (Lerner 4), it is a sorry plight when one analyses the written records that women and their concerns were never recorded. The yardstick that was used to measure the growth of civilization never included the womenfolk that comprised half of the population that it represented. The invisibility of feminine concerns in history therefore necessitates a revisiting of history and the processes of reading history. If wars and diplomatic processes were masculine domains that proliferated history we need to now legitimize the domains of marriage, sex and sexuality, motherhood and processes of care and nurture, as also equally important alongside war, political and diplomatic matters, because these are the arenas of women activity. Trying to locate stories of women in arenas they were not given access to, is injustice. The manner in which women have been negotiating self-identity without relegating the importance to familial interaction and responsibilities is an important aspect of 'culture of women' irrespective of the history and geography that the women belong to. It is therefore important to chart the manner in which women have negotiated this terrain rather than how they established themselves within the 'male culture'. Thus the very premise of the content of the story has to change.

The role of the historian, the social commentator, is paramount in the documentation process. The very act of writing such a treatise is an empowering act. The power that the historian wields is enormous, as the act of writing would decide who would be remembered and who would be forgotten by posterity. Women's lives being considered unworthy of serious historical study have been neglected. Thus it is imperative that feminist historiographers take upon themselves the onus of (re)writing history. And it is this site that feminists have to venture into in order to gain ground. By foregrounding the stories of women hitherto relegated to the background is the need of the hour.

Indian history textbooks, as is with histories around the world, have been

records of great heroes, warriors and men; not many have heard the name of Didda, the Kashmiri Queen who ruled Kashmir from 958 CE to 1003 CE, mentioned by Kalhana in *Rajataragani*. Even the later historians have not done much to give her any credit. Razia Sultan is more popular in folklore and fiction rather than history textbooks, Chandbibi, the Deccan Queen who pioneered the Deccan Confederation and gave a tough fight to Emperor Akbar is not given due importance in Mughal history. We hardly find any mention of Bazi Bai (19th Century Maratha Queen of Gwalior), or Bimala Maji (the peasant activist who pioneered the Nari Bahini in the Teghbhaga Movement in 1946 in Bengal). While Annie Besant does appear in History textbooks, nowhere do we read about Sarala Devi Chaudhurani who founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Allahabad. In *Jibaner Jharapata*, the diary of Sarala Devi (translated by Ray 69) we have Sarala Devi noting, that the first two lines of the 'Vandematram' were set to music by Rabindranath Tagore; but the rest of the song was set to music by her at the request of her uncle – Rabindranth Tagore. Today we remember the uncle who was the composer of the first two lines as the composer of the entire song that has become the Indian national song; but we do not find anywhere the mention of Sarala Devi.

“Those who control the sources often control the judgment of history” asserts Gerder Lerner (10) in *Living with History / Making Social Change*. Thus the recovery of the feminine absences in the historical process is important; but it is also crucial that the feminine experience, feminine voices also be recovered. The recovery of the consciousness of women is very important. To gain access to the muted voices is a humongous task which can be gleaned through a thorough perusal of artifacts such as diaries, autobiographies, and correspondences; in their absence, oral histories play an important role.

There is indeed an urgent need for feminist education for critical consciousness, as bell hooks reiterates, that education from the feminist view point is important if one has to raise feminist critical consciousness amongst our generations; so that they do not commit the same mistakes that the earlier generations have committed. Education too has played an important role in the process of socialisation that has led to our acceptance of patriarchy as the norm; to undo years of socialization is therefore an uphill task which education alone needs to now handle. (hooks 19-24). Therefore, the onus lays upon the syllabus designers of the subject of History to bring about critical feminist perspectives and interventions into the manner in which history is studied as an educational subject. An unbiased curriculum is therefore the need of the hour. To incorporate sto-

ries of women only in relation to men is preposterous. To use the same patriarchal yardstick to record histories, of that of warriors and political diplomats, will rule out the presence of women. The domain of women has been the domestic front, only when due recognition is given to women who have made their contributions in the domestic section of human history, only then one can legitimately build a platform for open young minds that are free from patriarchal biases. As bell hooks makes a clarion call for, “a mass-based educational movement to teach everyone about feminism” so as to combat “mainstream patriarchal mass media” (hooks 19-24); it is important that our methodology of reading history changes. The folktales, ballads, chants, prose or verses, songs, myths and mythologies are important components that would give insight into the gender issues that have been overlooked so far. Memoirs and autobiographies can be used to read the gender complexities in the society of the times.

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank is a crucial historical record, a witness to the anxiety and trauma of the Nazi preoccupation and the terrors perpetrated by Nazi regime of World War II. But for an autobiography to be included in history is unpalatable; yet one does not deny its value. It provides an in-depth perception of the diarist as an eye witness historian of the times. Autobiographical works like *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Baluta* by Dagdu Maruti Pawar, give access to the first-hand experiences of the atrocities experienced due to the caste system that has been prevalent in the Indian society. Women were twice burdened – caste and patriarchal norms – which strengthened the prevalent patriarchal system, made them all the more vulnerable to the atrocities committed by those in power. Works like *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar, or *Cast ME out If You Will: Stories and Memoir* by Lalithambika Antharjanam and Gita Krishnakutty would be an eye-opener to the atrocities committed upon the womenfolk in the name of caste. *Adivasis Revolt: The Story of Warli Peasants in Struggle* by Godavari Parulekar would put into focus the role of the tribal women who have always been marginalized. Research work on women activists – Gaura Devi of the Chipko movement; Bimala Maji who organised Nari Bahini in Nanadigram, Midnapur, and pioneered the Tehbhaga Movement; Bai-za Bai, the banker Queen, a Scindia Maharani, known for her anti-British stance – should be incorporated in the history textbook writing project. Until then the realm of history would only remain a “No Woman's Land.”

Dalit autobiographies, according to Bhongle, “explode popular myths about human values and dignity” revealing “its blatant form of ugliness, speaks for the total disregard for the suffering humanity” as the dalit writ-

er “prefers to write out of the authenticity of experience” (159). When a dalit writes his/her autobiography, it is not used as a metaphor of the self, nor as a means to discover the hidden self; but the narrative transcends from the individual to the collective level, as it represents the plight of the community, they are part of: “The “I” in these autobiographies, therefore, is not an individual; . . . they do not represent the life of an individual but are the “collective consciousness of a community” (Bhongle 210). “The genre of autobiography reveals political and social awareness. An individual’s story becomes significant in the exploration of group identity” (Deo and Eleanor Zelliot 43). Rege uses the term “testimonios” to talk about the autobiographies of dalit women as she powerfully argues her case for the need of these voices of protest; these life narratives she asserts would help in building critical pedagogies on the prevalent caste system, a need of the hour. All dalit autobiographies are not in the protest mode. Narendra Jadhav, a fierce advocate of the positive memoir who wrote his autobiography, *Aamcha Baap Ani Amhi* (Our Father and We), in 1993, asserts, “I underplayed the injustice part because, by then, the stories of oppression had been told and retold, they had become shrill, a blame game going on with upper-caste people held responsible for acts committed by their forefathers,” says Jadhav. “So, my story was about how I made it in this world despite the oppression” (Kopikkar). Thus, Baby Kamble too like Jadhav engages in dalit autobiography as a means “to re-inscribe Dalit identity in positive, self-assertive terms” (Beth 545).

Studying autobiography or memoirs is a crucial methodology that would give access to the historical conditions of the lives of women. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* is a direct engagement with the “history of dalit oppression” (Kamble xiii). Reading about the dalit movement and its proponents in the history textbooks is a non-committal act; but if one has to “feel” and experience the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities they were subjected to, it is essential to read Baby Kamble. Baby Kamble thus rightly asserts, “In this book I have presented many details of the life of our community without any shame or awkwardness. . . . My only intention in sharing this history with my children and grandchildren, my daughters and daughters-in-law is to show them what furnaces of suffering . . . what chains of slavery had bound their hands and feet, what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through” (Kamble xvii). In the words of Maya Pandit, the translator of *Jina Amucha* which is translated as *The Prisons We Broke*, asserts that the autobiography brings out the “internal trauma in the psyche” of the dalit community to which she belonged; “the contradictory impulses they had to confront their bewilderment and doubts, their urge for self assertion, the intense struggle between the pulls of an

oppressive yet familiar way of life and the promise of a more dignified yet unfamiliar new world". Thus, the autobiography becomes a crucial piece of historical value that "brings to light a view from within, which would otherwise have been irretrievably lost" (Kamble xv).

The autobiographical work of Kamble, in a very matter-of-fact tone, elaborates upon the lives of her people, "The woman of the house would bring out plates full of dried pieces of meat from a storage jar. There would be maggots in some of the bones. She would brush them off in the hot sun. Once the meat pieces were clean enough, she would put them to cook in a big earthen pot" (Kamble 102-103). If history is to sensitize us to the doings of the past, *The Prisons We Broke* aptly fulfils this role; it gives the reader a close-up experience of the inhuman conditions in which the people of the Mahar community lived. The inability to drink the simplest Indian condiment – tea is put across with great simplicity, "The whole family could drink tea in one paisa. Yet, they could not afford to drink tea because they could not afford even that one paisa. They breathed, therefore they were supposed to be alive" (Kamble 104). Kamble portrays lucidly the grimy life of the Mahars who lived in utter poverty and total destitution with their dependence on the leftovers from the village. With great alacrity she documents their eagerness to claim their "right to the white sheet and the bamboo bier on which the corpse had been carried to the ghat" (Kamble 79) so that the cloth could be used for clothing themselves; this is elaborated upon in the autobiography without any sense of remorse and self-pity. The autobiography becomes a historical treatise that documents the harsh realities of the lives of the Mahars.

The harsh realities of life as a dalit was harsher upon the women folk, "The Mahar daughters-in-law experienced one comfort, however. There were no pots in the house to clean and no clothes to wash, because there were not even enough rags to wear" (Kamble 95). Their utter poverty was an affliction for the menstruating women, as Kamble notes, "When the sasu's monthly period started, she would go straight to the river to bathe, as she had no spare sari. There she would take off half her sari, wrapping herself in the other half. She would wash one half of the sari first. When that portion was dry, she would wrap it around herself, and wash the other half" (Kamble 95).

We have histories that elaborate upon the atrocities of war yet no historical treatise elaborates upon the violence and crimes perpetrated upon the common womenfolk of the lower class, lower caste household. Kamble does it with great penchant:

In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off . . . Everyday 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. But there was nobody to care for them. . . . Women led the most miserable existence (Kamble 98).

The inhuman practice of “cutting off the nose” of the woman and being branded a “slut” is documented by Kamble as being “rampant almost till the 1940s” (Kamble 101). The dire poverty stricken conditions in which the women of the Mahar community gave birth is too gruesome to be taken as real. Giving birth in conditions of utter destitution where filth and ignorance reigned supreme was a nightmare. And Baby Kamble paints a gruesome picture of the ordeal of the women of her community:

Many new mothers had to go hungry. They would lie down, pining for a few morsels while hunger gnawed their insides. Most women suffered this fate. Labour pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by onlookers nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating – everything caused the new mother’s condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever. On most occasions, it was tetanus (Kamble 60).

The “fire of calamities” (Kamble 102), borne by the women of the lower castes is elaborated upon by Balkrishna Januji Devrukhkar, an associate of Dr. Ambedkar, “ because of the poverty of the untouchable community, the men of the community treat their women like slaves. . . they hardly have clothes on their back, they don’t get medicine if they fall ill, they are not looked after properly during childbirth, they don’t get good food or fresh air; and thus the death rate among women of the backward community is high” (Pawar 47).

The segregationist policy instituted by the Indian caste system comes alive as Kamble describes the reactions of her upper caste fellow classmates in school, “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, mutter ‘chee, chee’, and run as if their lives were in mortal danger” (Kamble 108). When the firewood collected by the Mahar women was to be sold for a couple of coins thrown

out to them, the lady of the upper caste would make them ensure that the bundles do not have a single strand of the Mahar hair which would end up “polluting” her household. Baby Kamble dares to question the premise of such behaviour. Her strong contention rings boldly the truth, “it is not the prosperity you enjoy – it is the very life blood of Mahars! . . . Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of 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?” (Kamble 56). Such bold questioning of societal norms from a woman, that too, of a lower caste, was earlier unheard of. In this, we have Baby Kamble taking over the mantle of a revolutionary.

An elaboration regarding the caste system and its impact on the lives of those at the lowest rung is never documented adequately in the typical history texts recommended by the syllabus framers, even an overview of an autobiographical work like that of Kamble would provide one an insider’s view of the dynamics of the system that was as traumatic as the Nazi preoccupation. But Kamble’s autobiography is not a sob story. Her work is imbued with humour rare to find in an autobiography that is also a work of protest. The necessity of carrying a bell tied to a stick while begging for food around the houses of the upper castes in the village is elaborated upon with wry humour, “When the Mahar set off in the evening on his begging round, he felt great pride in the sheep-wool blanket on his shoulder and his belled stick. His chest would swell with pride. He would twirl his moustache and clear his throat as if he was a very important man. . . The stick was like a royal staff and the blanket on his shoulder, the black coat of a barrister” (Kamble 75).

The autobiographical narrative at no point loses its historical consciousness. Baby Kamble’s work though elaborates upon the blighted lives of her community she imbues her work with hope and positivity – that was made available through Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his works. Kamble, in the Foucauldian sense, understands the power that comes with knowledge as she asserts like none of her sisters of her community ever dared to question the high-handed behaviour of the people of the upper castes, “you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us the whip of pollution” (Kamble 56). She credits the understanding of their plight to the awakening brought about by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, “the one who has transformed us from beasts to human beings” (Kamble 56). He is thus “king Bhim, the son of Morality, saviour of the world. It is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts”. In lauding Dr. Ambedkar as “The man who gave birth to

the Hindu Code Bill" she shows thorough feminist political consciousness (Kamble 102).

Kamble's autobiography documents the building of the dalit consciousness in the psyche of the women of her community, the processes of dalit protest and celebration of this consciousness. In simplistic admiration she lauds the works of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, elaborating upon the cult status that he gained in the process, he was their "shining jewel of sheel and satwa", "He was our Baliraja who gave away his kingdom for Truth. . . . He was our Buddha who taught love, brotherhood and equality unto all. He was our Bhim, our king and our saviour, who blessed the blind with sight" (Kamble 104). His admonition, "Educate your children . . . Once they are educated, they can organise themselves and find out various ways of directing the struggle. And I am sure my sisters and mothers will carry out this task with an iron resolve" (Kamble 135) was taken seriously.

The autobiography is marked with instances of feminine resistance and rebellion. The tradition that touching a Mahar polluted the Brahmins was taken up as a premise for resistance. As a young girl Baby Kamble, emboldened with the Ambedkarite exhortation to protest against inhuman traditions, her autobiography notes the pranks she played upon "Gujar women" on their way to the temple, "At least one of us would then run towards them, touch them from behind and come back running. Touching them would make us feel as if we were on seventh heaven" (Kamble 110). This indeed was a very courageous attempt which would be not be taken lightly by the elders of the higher castes. This prank later gets serious as they venture out to "pollute" the temple God. At another instance her grand aunt Bhikabai gets on to the stage and delivers a speech immediately after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had spoken on the stage. The grandmother of Baby Kamble instigating the people of Veergaon to give up eating dead meat, is revolutionary.

The Mahars sustained on the meat of dead animals. For a bride to be married into a family that boasted of access to greater number of dead beasts, was looked upon as a prosperous family. The Ambedkarian call to put an end to this tradition of eating dead meat was not an easy process for the poverty stricken masses that had since ages been following the tradition. The grandmother of Baby Kamble – Sitayvahini took up the onus of standing up against the tradition and making the people resolve never to eat dead animals by resorting to a traditional prohibition, "Anybody who eats a dead animal today will eat a pig!" (Kamble 70), since even

the utterance – pig – was a prohibition, the tactic resorted to by Sitayvahini worked. Such feminine resistance has not reached the hallmarks of historical treatises; but it was for the staunch courage and fervor of the subalterns such as Sitayvahini that superstitions and traditions followed by the lower castes were given up in favour of educating their children.

Various instances in the autobiography are indicative of the political consciousness of her people. The abuse hurling skirmishes between the school girls belonging to the Mahar and Brahmin communities a fallout of the ideological differences between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is documented with humor (Kamble 109-100). The reformist mode adopted by her community – composing songs and using them to register their subversion is evident in the four lines that the girls sing along with Baby Kamble voicing their resentment as their community was not given access to worship the Gods on equal footing with the other castes that had thereby emboldened them to look upon these very Gods with displeasure. “Why should I see this Vithoba? He is nothing but a black stone!” (Kamble 112) is a strong assertion that underlies the frustration of the entire community that had been denied access to religious sustenance. The revolution that gripped the masses of the lower castes in retaliation for not being allowed to enter temples is put forth with a great deal of sensitivity and humour as Baby Kamble recounts her ordeal with her friends who venture out to enter the Ram temple (Kamble 130-32).

Since ages the Mahars were not given access to the simple act of entering a temple; thus Kamble asserts, “The creator gave us a human form and sent us down to earth, and abandoned us. He was least bothered about what was happening to us. He turned a blind eye to the goings on of our world. It was our Bhim who finally breathed life into lifeless statues, that is, the people of our community . . . He achieved what even god has not been able to do.” (Kamble118). Thus, Baby Kamble takes upon herself the onus of rousing the dormant spirits of the women of her community that has received salvation due to the efforts of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to keep his legacy alive and let posterity know about the wonders he has worked for them, “It is the duty of educated women to impress this upon their young children. They should portray this in poems and teach them to their children” (Kamble, p. 123).

Small acts of subversion are noted down diligently in the autobiography. The incidence narrating the meeting hosted by Rani of Phaltan with leaders like Thakubai Kakade, Mathubai More, Fattabai Kakade and Vithabai Kakade and women of the Mahar community gives one an insight into

the rebellious spirit of her women comrades. When all the Brahman and Maratha women were given chairs to sit on while the women of the Mahar community were not allowed to sit on one; Kamble narrates, "Our Thakubai rushed forward. She shook the rani by her shoulder and told her, "Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. I am going to forcefully remove your women from the chairs and seat my women there" (Kamble 133). Like a true revolutionary Baby Kamble issues a clarion call to all the people of her community to stand united against the casteist system that is still prevalent in Indian society, "We have to join forces to give life to the helpless, to fight the whole world as Baba's heirs, . . . We may be like rivers, streams, canals or even gutters; but all of us have to finally merge in the ocean. Our ocean is the community. We have to make it stronger. . . Discard your cowardice and unite in the spirit of brotherhood that Baba desired" (Kamble114).

Writing is a political act. And through the penning down of her autobiography Baby Kamble, the subaltern woman, one of the "lowest in the social strata and hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all-Indian groups" (Spivak 80) is given voice, rendering visible the political, economic and psychological lives of the dalit women in the Pre-Ambedkarian times. The 'private' lived experiences, of one dalit women, exposes the 'public' practices of caste, class and gender. Talking about her autobiography in an interview, Baby Kamble puts it, "the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore Jina Amucha was the autobiography of my entire community" (Kamble 157). Incorporation of such autobiographical works; that are in reality histories of the dalit woman who share the identity of being doubly cursed - "Dohra Abhishap" (another autobiographical work by a Dalit woman - Kaushlaya Baisantry); one for being a woman and secondly being a woman of the lowest caste would shed light on the historical processes that led to the revolutions from below. Such "testimonios" (Rege) or "autoethnographical writings" (Periasamy) in the reading of history would thus help in filling in the gaps of subaltern feminist history. For Rege, these are "testimonios" that "forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance" (Rege 3). Kamble's work is not only a treatise that traces and gives visibility to the "dalit women's voice in the history of India" but it also "helps in tracking the pattern and processes of social change within the society from below" (Sarvesh et al. 105). Thus when reading of history converges with the counter-narratives from

the autobiographical works of feminist writers, feminist historiography will be greatly benefitted.

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