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CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 6 No. 2 pp. 343-359
October 2025
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v6i2.2619

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as an Anti-Caste Manifesto

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Abstract

This essay will focus on the theoretical and political importance of anti-caste writings, taking Dalit feminist author Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009). It proposes that such Dalit writings need to be considered manifestos as they have an important role in advancing *manuski* or the human rights of Dalits. Anti-caste literary writings are critical foundations of the field of Dalit studies and enable Dalit theory to articulate and uphold the historical and contemporary conditions of Dalits' oppression. Such manifestoes are thus documents for a radical future that shape the field of social studies, political theories, and social movements.

Keywords

Anti-caste Writings, Dalit Literature, Dalit Feminist, Manifesto, Baby Kamble

Introduction

The anti-caste philosophical and literary tradition by Dalits is a rich epistemology of social thought and conveys the situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016; Harding, 2004) of oppressed people, whose experiences counter the dominant knowledge systems. It examines how it shapes alternative power structures to resist oppression. The history of anti-caste philosophy includes narratives of social injustice, suffering, and pain. It critiques the cultural systems of oppressors and the discrimination that these systems perpetuate through caste practices and prejudices. Over centuries, anti-caste writings have taken different forms, such as novels, short stories, poems, and critical thought that speaks against widespread casteism and cultural discrimination against Dalits. Carr (2003) mentions that the philosophy of history is the process of reconstitution of the past, where truths are often neglected in selecting and interpreting facts. He finds

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history is never 'pure' since it is always refracted through the minds of the recorder (11) and what he chooses to write. The past few centuries have been instrumental in entrenching the caste system. It is natural to ask what importance the philosophy of anti-caste thought has for anti-caste thinkers and philosophers. Why does a historical and philosophical tradition of anti-caste thought continue to be deprived of recognition? What are the aspirations and struggles within this philosophical tradition, and what might marginalized theories of knowledge have for radical, emancipatory projects?

As a field of writings, voices, and activism of India's erstwhile untouchables known as Dalits, it is argued that the anti-caste writings based on the lived experiences of Dalits should be considered as "manifestoes." Manifestos are public, political declarations that demand action and mobilize the masses for a particular purpose, ideal, or intention. I take this cue from Smith (1998), who mentions writings focusing on life as "autobiographical manifestoes". Anti-caste writings centre the lived experience of Dalits and advance theoretical and political positions within existing disciplines. Such writings explore various forms such as autobiographies, poems, short stories, memoirs, letters, narration, testimonies, and critical thought from below. This essay will focus on the theoretical and political importance of anti-caste writings as manifestoes and their role in advancing *manuski*, or the human rights of the Dalits. Anti-caste writings are critical foundations of the field of Dalit studies and enable Dalit theory to articulate and uphold the historical and contemporary conditions of Dalits' oppression. Such manifestoes are thus documents for a radical future that shape the field of social studies and social movements. Anti-caste praxis and theory counters institutionalized and historical casteism and authorizes underrepresented sections, such as Dalits, to become oppositional and powerful subjects to claim their agency back from their oppressors. These writings portray the dark horrors and inhumanities of the caste system, expresses the dehumanization of Dalits, and reclaims the agency to confront casteization.

The works and writings of the anti-caste philosophical tradition identify the political goals of liberation and emancipation and initiate the philosophico-historical production of anti-caste knowledge that can maximize the analysis of the lived experiences of the marginalized. Dalits' lived experiences entail theorizing these epistemological, empirical, and ethical erasures that never become part of the mainstream history or disciplinary canon. Such anti-caste traditions of writing and thought suggest the relationship between language, knowledge, and power, which are sites of contestation for marginalized groups. To provide an account of the histories of tormented and tortured lives, language and writing often provide the expressions for conveying the inscription of bodily bruises, hurt, harm, and injuries, as well as the psychological interiority of oppressive living conditions in caste dehumanization. The issues of death and the dehumanization of Dalits are intimately related to everyday survival and identity. Caste discrimination and the persistence of caste violence are reciprocally connected and integrated, leading to casteization and castegorization (Yengde, 2023). Discrimination and violence along caste lines have consistently been

highlighted at the global level, and numerous international agencies have called out Dalits' persecution and denial of human rights.

Conversations on caste at the global level are now amplified by anti-caste writings and narratives that gained pace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The brahminical Hindu religion and its scriptures are yet to liberate the Hindu masses, and modern, secular minds are still imprisoned within this brahminical vision of the caste and varna system. Anti-caste writings and anti-caste movements provide a radical decolonial idea to question the dominant order and to rethink, reconceptualize, and reconsider the conventions of society and history (Omvedt, 2006). These writings and their movement-based struggle mark an important reconstruction of politics and power from a marginalized perspective, a perspective that rises from the bottom, looks beneath, and digs deep to expose and explore multidimensional oppression. Critical anti-caste epistemology and pedagogy use words and books (Pan, 2022). Education and language thus remain central to disseminating information and knowledge in an otherwise oppressive and exclusionary world that distances Dalits from education and empowerment. Education for Dalits is essentially an exclusionary field, a field reluctant to admit Dalits within its fold, given the brahminical institutional orientation. Marriage remains another institution to launch love jihad to maintain endogamy and punish Dalit individuals for inter-caste weddings. The politics of marriage in India undergirds various manifestations of violence, one of them being caste (Sathi, 2023). The field of labour, too, is infested with the centuries-old traditional birth-based assignment of hereditary and caste-based duties and professions. Discrimination and dehumanization through labour are deadly and result in violence and the death of Dalits (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007).

Anti-Caste Writings as Radical Manifestoes

Anti-caste writings express the discriminatory effects of caste and casteism that result in unequal human development, inequality, atrocities, and injustice against Dalits. It demonstrates that the history of caste persecution and caste-based discrimination has legitimized a social life of violence, which Ambedkar found was resulting from the absence of social endosmosis within the Hindu religion (2015). The presence of caste hate and the lack of endosmosis render Dalits as lesser than humans, much lesser than animals, excommunicated and exterminated as disabled, inferior, and unworthy creatures. Anti-caste writings are written in the tradition of civil and secular rights to combat and counter caste oppression. International human rights law has taken cognizance of caste as a transnational force of oppression and violence similar to race. It has recognized protective safeguards—legal, political, and social for addressing casteism (Waughray, 2009, 2010). While caste confers a historical disadvantage to Dalits, it offers a historical advantage to the privileged dominant caste. Mosse mentions that caste effects are not locational; they travel from village to city and into all areas of life. He further finds that caste and development, along with their discrimination,

allow opportunity hoarding by privileged groups but humiliation and violence against subordinate caste groups (Mosse, 2018).

Anti-caste writings, one among which is the autobiographical or life narrative, strengthen anti-caste perspectives among educators, students, and practitioners (Maske, 2023). Critical anti-caste consciousness is an epistemological situatedness that provides crucial insights into how caste domination works, and anti-caste writings invoke resistance consciousness among the masses, leading to activism, opposition, and social justice. Such narratives produce anti-caste critiques and develop legal and political discourse of anti-caste interventions in various fields and disciplines to effect change and initiate critical awakening.

It is proposed that anti-caste writings need to be considered as "radical manifestoes." These writings signal the vision of looking towards the future, even when the narratives often retrospectively look back to the past. At other instances, it reflectively engages through memory to articulate the histories of torture and discrimination. Such narratives are hypervigilant, documenting the historical persecution, futuristic concerns, and possible directions for Dalit lives. The narratives are, thus, manifestoes because they offer scope for addressing questions of caste by highlighting the experiences of the most marginalized and oppressed. Such standpoint epistemologies are crucial, and as manifestoes, their importance in guiding global history and politics is urgent and critical in nature. Manifestos are expressly political and mark the revolutionary will, desire, and ambition to transform societies and the structures from dehumanization and destruction. As a radical project, the anti-caste manifestoes draw language as a signifier of caste oppression and confer the oppressed with the agency to break the cycle of repetition. By insisting on the moral agency to write back, Dalits anti-caste thinkers resist the colonization of language and marginalized cultures by brahminism. These narratives redefine the boundaries of literary, historical, and political discourse and contextualize Dalits' denial of humanity in the past, present, and future as a critical concern for society at large. It invests them with the authority to assign action and responsibility and command democratic principles of tolerance, love, freedom, and equality from all sections of society.

Anti-caste manifestoes are testimonies. It articulates testimonial accounts of oppression and discrimination expressed by survivors, victims, and oppressed people of caste. They are written to evoke outrage and induce guilt among those who legitimize and perpetuate these oppressions (Rege, 2021) or remain silent as mute spectators. The word *"testimony"* originates from the Latin word *"testis,"* meaning to bear witness and testify to the truth of some fact. A philosophy of anti-caste resistance through writings, thought, activism, and social movement offers radical alternatives to envision the global future, an inclusive future different from the oppressive past. It evidences and affirms the truth of history, memory, and knowledge of Dalits' lives. The past is not necessarily a route to repress historical memory but to relive and release the trauma of suffering and agony (Smith, 1990), without which the movement towards radical emergence and intersectionalist future cannot unfold. The history of caste injustice and its continuation in the present show the violence of casteized

dehumanization and indignity that subjects Dalits to a debilitating and degrading life. The dignity of Dalit personhood is intimately related to subjectivity and agency, and indignities' iniquitousness reveals the denial of rights and recognition as human worth (Guru, 2009, p. 2). Anti-caste writings confer personhood, recognition of rights, and respect for Dalits by documenting the processes through which Dalits create new meanings of life under oppressive cultural and historical conditions. It provides aspirations to the Dalit community and society, dignifies the labour they perform and the social practices they generate and creates new ways of living Dalit sociality that can counter dehumanization, sustain, and survive near-death experiences on a daily and deadly level.

Critical anti-caste philosophical tradition systematizes knowledge, inquiry, and interpretation from the marginalized perspective of Dalits. It transforms experience into sites of critical knowledge and translates it into practice to rewrite historical events, accounts, and investigations. Such narratives take different forms, such as stories, inscriptions, oral accounts, artefacts, life writings, poems, and documents, to provide a critical historiography of anti-caste discourse.

Anti-caste radical engagements foreground Dalits' historical exclusion. It maps the diversity and differences in anti-caste assertions to annihilate caste oppression. Understanding marginalized lives and their pasts draws attention to the political and cultural mobilization of their histories and identities and, thereby, their resistance to the dominant caste system. Cultural, political, and historical writings on the philosophy of anti-caste thought offer epistemological, empirical, and experiential ways of knowing social systems that remain marginal and peripheral. It invokes the tradition of protest and politics that overcomes the eclipsing of histories from below by dominant and hegemonic brahminical traditions. Deconstructing the interconnections between marginalization and disempowerment, such narratives assert power and challenge cultural determinist assumptions about marginalized lives (Grosz, 2000). Radical anti-caste manifestoes thus raise urgent and reflective questions for the future of anti-caste agendas and the continued investigation of dominant caste politics.

Ambedkar's Anti-Caste Philosophy

The history of anti-caste discourse in India has come to represent the ever-continuous and unrelenting struggle for justice and equality by Dalits. In its articulations, several anti-caste thinkers have left the most profound imprints behind, of which Ambedkar's remains unparalleled and central. What is India as a nation to an untouchable? How can one understand the terms of being an Indian citizen, but more precisely, what does it mean to be an untouchable or a Dalit as an Indian? Ambedkar's thinking through these questions of caste from his discriminatory birth to the ebbing stages of death and disease pushed him towards transformative struggles to bring "effective freedom" to Dalits. He emphasized the critical role of education and writing he received in India and abroad (Stroud, 2023). Ambedkar envisioned a radical egalitarian order through his conception of *Prabuddha Bharat* (inclusive India). At the same time,

his predecessor from the Sant tradition, Guru Ravidas, wanted to name his ideal society *Begumpura* (a city without sadness). In light of Ambedkar's philosophical contributions, Stroud places him as a pragmatist philosopher whose position, in the light of global philosophical thought, must be addressed and made known. In *Evolution of Pragmatism in India* (2023), Stroud explains that one of Ambedkar's contributions is the philosophical tradition of pragmatism in India, which has reconstructed the Dalit experience as knowledge. Ambedkar's pragmatist thinking has critically shaped the field of anti-caste thought and anti-caste studies through his works, speeches, and activism by offering reconstructive codes for reimagining the idea of inclusive India. Confronting the violence of casteism, Ambedkar and his philosophical thoughts contributed to the creation of anti-caste philosophy.

Language and writing have an intimate relation with the social tyranny of caste. Ambedkar pointed out the violence of brahminical books and their interpretations in his numerous works. His idea of a nation and its history was to be imagined through modern institutions of law, education, state, and constitutional democracy. Such a language of constitutionalism in everyday practice, he thought, would remove the unconstitutional dominance of caste privileges within the society and in the day-to-day governance of India's political and social history.

History has a unique place for Ambedkar because nations were created through modern historical changes. History also aligns the study of nations and communities with their future prospects. History and the future are co-created through complex knowledge, ideologies, and identity projections. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936, 2015), Ambedkar mentioned that a Swaraj with slavery was unacceptable. Swaraj or freedom as an idea of history and nation-making, was of utmost importance to Ambedkar because of its relationship with Dalits' past, present, and future, and how it shaped their lives. It is the social and political emancipation of untouchables from historical slavery that national independence was to be imagined and articulated. Interpretation of history went along with social changes and social movements for Ambedkar. It is not only through theoretical history but "doing history" and "writing that anti-caste history" that the inauguration of social changes against historical injustices can be experienced, expressed, and articulated. The Mahad Satyagraha (1927), the burning of the Manusmriti (1927), the Kalaram Temple Entry (1930), and his conversion to Buddhism (1956) are means of "doing history." He also separated social history from the category of political history and foregrounded the radical history of untouchables and outcastes. His method articulated a modern conception of political history and freedom by altering or defying the existing conventions of caste social history. The social history of caste was a multiplication of a system of various castes. Ambedkar radically changed and shaped political history through his writings to bring a different vision of social history that was formerly non-existent and impossible to imagine.

In the *Annihilation of Caste*, it is emphasized by Ambedkar that social democracy is more important for him than political democracy because it is the social endosmosis

needed to effect change in a regressive social pattern of caste . This social endosmosis is the intermingling of various kinds of people and their social histories and was to be politically imagined through enlightened ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar's conceptualization of history from the perspective of marginalized, downtrodden, untouchable people makes him the a central figure in the important philosophical tradition of anti-caste radical thought. Through everyday construction of radical social changes in laws, policies, activism, social movements, and anti-caste writings, change will be possible. This essay thus traces the continuation of such anti-caste thought through the literary work of Baby Kamble and considers '*The Prison We Broke* (2009) as a political manifesto. The work offers insight into the Dalit experience and traces the figure of Ambedkar as an anti-caste philosopher who has provided Dalits with a transformative journey to resist caste oppression. Coming before him, the Phules had been fighting against caste oppression, but Ambedkar transformed the entire untouchable movement into an anti-caste pedagogy, a domain of knowledge whose critical stake in the creation of a anti-caste blueprint can emerge.

Anti-Caste Consciousness in Babytai Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

Dalit feminist writer Babytai Kamble's novel *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) is one of the earliest women's autobiographies, first published in a Marathi women's magazine, called Stree, in 1984, then later published as a book in 1986, and further translated and published in English by Maya Pandit in 2008. The book has also seen a wider reception and became increasingly popular as a Dalit novel, writing not only about the existence of the Mahar community but also providing a critique of patriarchy within the Dalit community. It foregrounded the period of the 1930s when Dr. Ambedkar's anti-caste struggle was shaping ideas of *samaj* (community), *sheel* (courage), *satwa* (truth), and other human virtues that were generally not ascribed to the Dalits, considered outcastes and untouchables. Translated into many languages, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, French, Spanish, and English, Babytai's novel continues to demand critical attention from the caste public when she mentions that "their time would come one day" (30) to claim the human rights that the caste-dominated public and the private world of the brahmins have denied to them. Thus, Kamble's novel posits claims on behalf of the rights of the oppressed by writing for the oppressed. Also, as Guru (1995) writes, Dalit women's experience of oppression comes from their experiential worlds. Jina *Amucha* records the horrifying inhuman condition and the experiential worlds of Dalits—the nakedness of religious rituals that oppress people within the community, but which are also supposedly believed to liberate and make them forget the everyday inhuman existence of poverty, death, pollution, and outcaste life.

Jina Amucha claims to be a biography of the oppressed. In the Introduction, Maya Pandit is of the view that Kamble's autobiography is a sociography, as it has ardently

made efforts to express a picture of the Mahar community and not just one particular individual. Through such an attempt, Pandit is of the opinion that Kamble goes beyond the auto-self-I to the socio-other-we. She gives a picture of how the Mahar community lived and, thus, represents the history of the truth of Dalits. As Kamble herself expresses, her idea is not to distort and self-fabricate a narrative of oppression but to uphold "the picture as it is" so that it contributes to a clear understanding of why certain religious rituals, labour practices, and everyday lives of Dalits were practised in a particular way and the reasons why they were practised. The existence of certain goddesses and gods in the Dalit community, such as *Kalubai, Wadjai*, *Katjai, Laman Pathan*, *Yetal Sahib*, *Mad Malhari*, *Margi Mata*, *Mari Aai*, *Laxman Aai*/*Lakhi Aai*, *Agya Vetal*, *Sat Asra*, *Satwai*, *Hadal*, and others, reinforces Hindu religious cults and idol worship. As Kamble shows, these gods take up much narrative space and also the social space in the lives of Dalits, which becomes the pretext for oppressive practices such as dedicating young sons to deities known as *potraja* and the celebration of possession of women in the month of *Asadh* (monsoon), as well as the occasion of the *rede jatra* (buffalo fair). Women are made to become the sacrificial objects of the community and, through the idea of possession, become bearers of oppressive traditional practices through which the material and spiritual well-being of the community is believed to be ensured and maintained.

The customs of applying *kumkum*, *haldi*, and sandalwood on the foreheads of *potrajas* and women who became possessed indicate the close association of religious rituals and practices with the Hindu religion. However, on a metaphorical level, religion and faith, customs and practices, as seen from this basic use of *haldi*, *kumkum*, sandalwood, and some wildflowers like *kanher*, exposes the hypocrisy of Hindu religious worship that had maintained a stronghold on the Dalits even when no god came as a saviour to these people when the community experienced plagues, diphtheria, malaria and other severe diseases. The marks of *kumkum*, *haldi*, and sandal are auspicious marks of devotion and worship, yet when it came to survival and everyday existence, there was no auspicious grace that gods and goddesses bestowed on these poor folks. In multiple instances, Kamble mentions the common assumption to treat diseases through this superstitious religious worship. She writes that whenever people in the community would suffer from terrible diseases, instead of taking the person to a doctor, the person was believed to be possessed and ritual purification through priests and possession was the usual recourse to remedying illness. Crude ways of treating the patient, either by making ash concoctions or offering lemon, chillies, and salt to the gods and goddesses, were methods adopted by the community. The absence of material resources such as food, medicine, clothes, cooking utensils and even bare necessities like clean water, bathing soap, and shampoo depicted in the narrative were rare. She describes instances where a woman had brought a piece of coconut, chewed the coconut inside the mouth, and after mixing it with the saliva, applied it as shampoo on the head of children to remove lice and clean the hair. It evokes not only an imagery of disgust but also conveys the truth that Dalits have been pushed out from a life of cleanliness, health, and hygiene, education, and employment.

The Trope of Possession

Possession plays an important role in the Dalit community. *Jina Amucha's* narrative exposes the double bind of possession—first, being possessed by the false notion of Hindu gods and goddesses, and second, a kind of symbolic possession where caste slavery and caste ownership of Dalits' lives by brahmins reigned supreme. As these Hindu gods and goddesses possessed these Dalits, so were these Dalits ideologically and psychologically possessed by the brahmins who controlled and determined how Dalits should lead their lives in utter depravity. Kamble constantly critiques the façade of religious worship through her narrative, and counters the criticism of her community members, arguing that she was only attempting to depict the community's real picture. The narratorial voice often concludes at the end of each chapter (2, 3), with commentaries on labour and living practices that have been beastly, barbaric, and superstitious because of the overarching framework of caste-induced poverty, depravity, and ignorance. The fact that these rituals have an important place in the community and tend to induce forgetfulness about their inhuman existence is a cunning continuation of traditional and spiritual, hence religious and cultural practices of caste. Underneath these practices were hidden the centuries-old oppressive structures of the brahminical Hindu religion.

In the beginning, the narrative presents us with the tale at *Veergaon*, Kamble's maternal grandmother's place, where Kamble's maternal grandmother, *Aaji*, prays to *Kalubai* to give her daughter a boon of having an offspring. Soon, Baby Kamble is born. However, when she is only one and a half years old, like the other three daughters who died one after the other, Kamble's health also worsens, and the villagers assume she is dead. When her *Aaja* starts reading *Pandav Pratap* (a brahminical book) that narrates the lives of Pandavs and Krishna, the child is shown to have regained her life in the early hours of dawn. Kamble's family provides thanks to the goddess of Veergaon, Kalubai offers a sacrificial hen in the burial ground dug as a reward to please the house goddess. *Pandav Pratap* is a Hindu book on religious and mythological deities. It depicts Dalits' faith in the Hindu religion until Ambedkar is shown in the latter half of the narrative, foregrounding the discarding of these religious books and the necessity to speak out against the degraded nature of the Hindu religious system.

During possession and festivals as well, stones and rocks of various sizes decorated with *kumkum* and *haldi* were kept on raised platforms in the houses. Kamble mentions,

> *"The size and shape of these platforms indicated the status and prestige of the householder: small size, small status. Big size spelt out prestige! Big-sized gods would be placed on these large platforms. The god was a huge, round, smooth stone weighing two to three kilos, painted saffron, with long lines of bhandara and kumkum drawn on it. Some stones also had two large protruding eyes and huge moustaches painted on them. A blood-red piece of cloth would be spread in front of the gods, on which lay neem twigs with leaves gone crackling dry and a heap of green bangles." (22)*

The existence of such gods to rationalize the status and popularity of families in *Maharwada* and to remain in constant fear of the wrath of gods and goddesses to avoid the calamities of hunger, poverty, and disease, which afflicted them, angers Kamble. She explains that it was as if there was a competition to have numerous gods and the tendency to hide realities instead of introspection and reflection, absent in the Dalitwada due to the lack of education and employment. Further, these practices also validated cult worship even in homes that did not have these items. Blind faith in these rituals of possession and numerous such religious practices attracted practitioners, viewers, and participants, and it became the routine of their everyday lives and the explanation for unseen calamities. Kamble writes,

> *"Old people listening to this talk would nod reverently and add their own pearls of wisdom, 'Yes, yes, young man, you're right! The parents must have earned a lot of merit, that's why holy spirits like Laman Pathan possess their son. That god won't possess just anybody out there." (23)*

Such traditions were, in fact, glorified and faithfully followed by the Dalits and being possessed was a boon and blessing for the entire family. Ambedkar's speeches had, in fact, warned against the worship of Hindu religious gods, which needed to be stopped because it is in the name of Hindu religious gods and under which exploitative practices have been furthered and sanctioned to maintain dominance and hierarchy. It had created a culture of exploitation and discrimination of Dalits by the brahmins. Looking up to gods and goddesses and searching for a metaphysical explanation of their inhuman existence made them unaware of caste realities. Kamble narrates the journey of self-realization initiated by Bhimrao Ambedkar and the importance of education in creating that consciousness. She observed that generation after generation of Dalits perished by worshipping these stones and living their lives in utter misery. The imagery of stones here indicates the hardship Dalits have to endure, the stone-like cold existence of their lives, and their suffering in extreme poverty and hunger.

In one instance, she mentions how the god *Laman Pathan* had to be offered a *suti roti* and an opium pipe when he possessed any young man, even if there was no food in the hut. Similarly, there is *Yetal Sahib,* known for black magic, and women are not allowed to bow to him. There are instances of how a man was possessed by the *Yetal Sahib* and refused to leave, so *Margi Mata,* a goddess, entered the young man's body and fought a terrible battle with *Yetal Sahib.* Thus, one day, when a thorn pierced the young man's foot, the narrator describes:

> *"Immediately, Margi Mata entered his body and possessed him. She and Yetal Sahib fought a fierce battle over him; but who's heard of Margi Mata losing to anyone? Around sunset, the young man fell down frothing at the mouth. How shall I describe the victory of the other? The young man's tongue hung out like a goat's and he breathed his last." (24)*

Such episodes narrate the reality of Dalits' existence who lived in perpetual fear of these gods and goddesses and also sought an explanation for things they did not understand—such as sudden changes in weather, crop failure, illness and disease, and lack of food and resources in the family. Towards the end of the novel, Kamble's voice sounds optimistic when the community comes under the leadership of Bhimrao Ambedkar. Thus, Kamble believes that the gods have fulfilled their community prayers, which have not gone in vain. Babasaheb is hereafter imagined as a god to the entire Dalit community.

Depictions of Corporeal and Spatial Untouchability

Baby Kamble's narrative shows the plight of the Dalit community and the villages they inhabit. The *Maharwada* at *Veergaon* and *Phaltan* mostly had desolate houses without proper civic facilities like water, sanitation, or employment opportunities. *Jina Amucha*, or the *Prisons We Broke*, exposes the multiple cages and the prisons that the fourfold caste system, or varnashrama dharma, had created for Dalits. The cages and prisons symbolize the stark poverty of the homes where there is only hard, stone-like *bhakris* (dry bread), mysterious illness and death as curse from gods and goddesses, and the oppression of Dalit women by their mother-in-law, called *sasu*, and their father-in-law, called *sasra*. Kamble's sociography also points towards the discursive and material marginalization, isolation, and alienation of Dalits who lived outside the social imagination of dominant castes (Pandit, 2008). The *Maharwada* is situated outside the social imagination of caste Hindu society as well as lives at the edge and outside the village topography.

In the narrative, there are descriptions of each Dalit house having only some clay pots and pans. Poor houses had barely two or three pots and pans. The Mahar of the sixteenth share, or the Yeskar Mahar, who begged for food in return for the services each Dalit household carried out for brahmins, would have more like five rows of pots and pans. In one instance, Kamble highlights how the relationship between brahmins and Dalits was inhuman and undemocratic. Dalits were almost regarded as beasts and animals by upper-caste people. Snot-nosed boys, lice-infested bodies of Dalits, grime and sweat, puss and blood of animal carcasses on their hands, which the Mahars had to take care routinely, evoked images of beastly, uncivil life without dignified existence to the brahmins. The irony of the slave consciousness that the Mahars had ingrained in their minds without questioning the authority of religion, gods, and brahmins is critiqued and described in the following lines by Kamble:

> *"Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin? The shopkeeper's children would trickle into the courtyard for their morning ablutions. He would teach innocent children social behaviour. Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance." (26)*

The Mahar woman would immediately caution the children not to touch her and would call them little masters while spreading out her *pallav* (end part of her sari) to receive the things from the shopkeeper. However, when she offered the money, the shopkeeper would touch and take it without considering it polluting.

Thus, inside the Mahar's hut, all the Mahar had was a small makeshift *chulha* of three stones. Broken pots and pans were covered with leaves, while one big clay pot, one mud bowl, and a cracked coconut shell with a piece of wood nailed to it served as a spoon. This was all the wealth that a Mahar had. The oppressive structures of untouchable existence also lay bare the despicable quality of food that Dalits were forced to consume. Having no alternative, most families had to go to the town and beg for food. They came back with bags overflowing with rotten and decaying food. After putting all the rotten food in the big clay pot and the stone-hard *bhakris,* the mixture was then made to boil. Due to its sour quality, it was known as *ambura.* However, after it was cooked, it was known as ukadala. Kamble mentions this as their daily routine, and the Mahars feasted on the rotten food as some kind of delicacy.

Mahars were also routinely called to clean shit, carry the news of the death of upper castes to their relatives, beg from house to house, and clean animal pens. The *Yeskar Mahar,* or the Mahar of the sixteenth share, had this special duty. A particular *Yeskar Mahar family* was required to serve for six months. Thus, it was a popular notion that a *Yeskar Mahar* was relatively well-off because he could get a regular supply of leftover food in the form of stale bhakris at the end of the day in return for his services, unlike the ordinary Mahar. However, what was the role of the Yeskar Mahar? The Yeskar Mahar' had a staff, a stick with a bell, and he had take it along with him every day during his caste duty. When he was about to reach the village, he had to ring the bell on the stick because his voice was considered to pollute the brahmin households. One is reminded that Dalits are not only untouchable but also unseeable, unapproachable, and unhearable (Ambedkar in Rodrigues, 2002).

During times of animal diphtheria, every Dalit family would wait for animals to die so that they could lay claim to the animals once they were dead. When such plagues arrived, these Mahars were called to remove the carcasses and clean the pens. The animal pens often had maggots, blood, pus, shit, animal secretion, and a putrid smell, which Mahars cleaned with their bare hands. However, these Mahars would do these tasks excitedly because they now had lots of food. The animal pens takes on the symbolic representation of caging, not only the presence of the animals within it but also metaphorically and realistically the cage-like existence of the Dalits, who were considered worse than animals. As eaters of dead animals and cleaners of dead pens, they were pushed away from and outside the respectable worlds that brahmins enjoyed. Kamble describes the condition of dead animals that Mahars considered delicacies. Horrifically, the dead animals were anything but life-threatening and poisonous to eat.

> *"The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organs like the liver,*

> *for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat." (89)*

The images of rotten organs of animals, some as hard as stones, others as mushy as boiled rice, evoked feelings of disgust. But that disgust is outsourced and supplemented onto the Dalits, who are forced to eat and clean these dead animals. This cultural and ontological "supplementation" (Sarukkai quoted in Guru, 2009, p. 50) of disgust arising out of the stench of the dead animals, transferred onto the bodies of Dalits as stigmatic and untouchable like the animal carcass therefore, gets displaced and supplemented from the dead animals to the Dalits. It perpetuates further aversion of Dalits as untouchables from the brahmins. The smell of putrid, rotten carcasses filled with pus and maggots, the dead meat, and maggot-filled pens takes on symbolic overtones of the stench of the caste system, but also the pus-filled maggot-like existence of brahmins who feed like parasites on the bodies and labour of the Dalits. The caste system, worse than hell, had kept Dalits like animals and beasts and made them eat carcasses. Forced to eat and consume poisonous, leftover, stale, and rotten food and considered untouchables, the Mahars, Kamble writes, continued to live the lives of animals and beasts, distanced from horizons of emancipation and without an understanding of their oppression. Descriptions of Dalits running like kites and vultures to collect such carcasses to sustain their lives creating elaborate stories of gods and goddess worship and living on the fringes and peripheries, somewhat started changing in the 1930s. Kamble's narrative foregrounds this communitarian change in the *Maharwada* that started flowing in the air with the coming of Bhimrao Ambedkar and his message of social emancipation and liberation.

From Bestiality to Humanity: Ambedkar and Hope of Emancipation

Kamble's narration records the Mahar community's historical movement and its journey of facing oppression through various phases of community consciousness. Initially, the narrative focuses on the struggles of daily existence without food, clothes, and material necessities, and its engagements in different superstitious practices. Such traditions, however, should serve as a critique of Brahminical Hindu religion, which embeds the structural and material conditions of caste within it to perpetuate exploitation and injustice. *Jina Amucha,* Kamble proposes, acts as a cultural repository of Dalit community practices, sheds light on Dalits' cultural and material existences, and exposes the hypocrisy of Brahminical domination. The critique of such religious practices shows the context of the exploitative nature of the caste system that remains

in the background and through which these cultural and ideological practices have become entrenched as part of the daily lives of Mahars.

The narrative in the concluding sections takes a different turn when the *Maharwada* receives the news of Ambedkar's arrival from England. News of Ambedkar's role in expressing and articulating the plight of Dalits rapidly leads to the collectivization of the entire *Maharwada* around issues of untouchability, rejecting eating dead animals, degraded labour, illiteracy, and slavery. Schools, campaigns, and meetings begin in *Maharwada*. Kamble describes Ambedkar as a plant, a sapling that has taken root in the Dalit soil. It has grown into a large tree to give shade and shelter to the oppressed Dalits. The botanical image of a sapling growing into a tree can be symbolically interpreted as the growth of the Dalit community under his leadership. His ideas branched out to various community sections and contributed to the spread of liberal ideas of fraternity, civic association, humanity, and respect for fellow humans. The lines from Kamble's work describe him as a figure of transformation and change.

> *"The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts, too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls." (24)*
>
> *"And then a small sapling grew out of this enriched soil. It went on to become a huge tree of light and truth. It gave shelter to millions who were suffering. The tree transformed the beasts into human beings. This tree was that ideal human being, our very own Buddha. From 1930 onward, his name started reaching villages like a gentle breeze that brings succour in the scorching sun. Our Bhimraja decided to awaken his people who had sunk to the level of subhumans." (69)*

The theme of hope recurs through dreams, saplings and birth. In one instance, Ambedkar is likened to the awakening sunrise that will end the dark presence of a long, fearful night.

> *"We ate dry husk and told ourselves we were eating rich food; we considered our huts great mansions; we considered our terrible poverty the golden peak of affluence. We dreamt and floated among the clouds, waiting for one little ray of hope to lace our dark dreams." (47)*

Hope occurs when the sapling emerges despite human deprivation. The image of a mother giving birth to a precious son like Ambedkar is also reiterated. Kamble's anti-caste sensibility and critique of the caste system come from Ambedkar's crucial role in mobilizing and engaging Dalits in the anti-caste struggle during his time. The entire *Maharwada* changed overnight. People gathered at the *Chawdi*, the shared meeting place, to discuss issues raised by Ambedkar. The first meeting of Ambedkar with Dalits at *Jejuri*, where God *Khandoba* is worshipped, was welcomed enthusiastically by the community, although Kamble mentions, there were dissenters. Having come from far-off places, devotees waited for Ambedkar to speak, who arrived in a car wearing an English suit. The new sight of a well-dressed, educated man from such an

oppressed community brings new hopes and visions of a different future. In his speech at *Jejuri*, he declares:

> *"Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance. My poor dear brothers and sisters, do not eat carcasses any more. Don't clean the filth of the village. Let those who make the 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. Let three-fourths of our people die in this endeavour, then, at least the remaining one-fourth will be able to live their lives with dignity. At least, their future will be better. I appeal to you, my mothers and sisters, be the first ones to step forward for reform." (71)*

Reminiscing about the earlier times of darkness and commenting on the change in the present time of illuminated consciousness, Kamble writes:

> *"But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is. And the one who has taught us this, the one who has transformed us from beasts into human beings, is the architect of our Constitution—that shining jewel of sheel and satwa, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar." (63)*

Education becomes an important instrument for social change. Messages of Bhimrao Ambedkar are circulated to take charge of their own lives by educating their children. Dalits of *Maharwada* open hostels, schools, and colleges and Baby Kamble also gets enrolled in a girls' school along with other upper-caste students. Meanwhile young men in the Dalit community composed songs and performed *jatras* (performing troupes) to convey the social message of Ambedkar. Crucially, Ambedkar's call to discard social markers of caste, including degrading food and eating habits, clothes and copper ornaments, shaped a space for critical anti-caste consciousness within the community. Celebrations of *Ambedkar Jayanti* in the *Maharwada* during the period 1938-1940 testify to the transformation the Dalit community underwent during those days. Instead of having *Guru Padva* as the Marathi New Year, Dalit activists, leaders, and people in the community started celebrating *Ambedkar Jayanti* as the New Year of their community. *Jina Amucha* records the social transformation when Dalits joined the Ambedkar movement, giving up eating dead animals, cleaning filth and shit, and educating themselves. Babasaheb, Bhimrao, and Dr. Ambedkar became holy chants for the Dalit community (107). The community headed towards a new dawn of social empowerment in the Ambedkarite period.

Despite the social awakening by Bhimrao Ambedkar, Kamble finds that the prison house of the caste system continued to hover over the ontological space of their lives. *Jina Amucha*, or *The Prisons We Broke*, needs to be considered as a social and political commentary on the enslaved existence of Dalits in the caste system. The historical consciousness of Dalits that began to emerge with the figure of Bhimrao Ambedkar marks a crucial transformative shift in ushering in the meanings of dignity, freedom, self-respect, and humanity. Baby Kamble's narrative in portraying her life trajectory from a Mahar girl to a social activist and a Dalit woman writer expresses the

progress of her own life, despite all odds. Kamble finally opens a school for socially backward students at *Nimbure* in *Phaltan* and continues to address numerous Dalit women's meetings and rallies, spreading the message of Ambedkar far and wide. Her writings have thus become the source and medium to communicate the experiences of oppression of Dalits and also contributed to the language of constituting a radical politics of resistance by Dalits.

Conclusion

Anti-caste manifestoes drawing from the philosophical traditions of Ambedkar and anti-caste writings are thus "action manifestoes" and indicate epistemological and political directions for anti-caste/Dalit studies. It is a term that I draw from Charles C Diggs (1972), who provided crucial policy recommendations on several African countries to the U.N. Considerations of the effects of caste and improving the lives of Dalits are existential and immediate political responses that Dalit and anti-caste writings seek to establish. It aims to provide crucial paradigms for anti-caste resistant and activist tradition (Guru, 2004), which can initiate action and strategies to combat casteism. The writings engage in a free-flowing exchange of ideas and record the connections and relations between survival and dignity. The untouchable as an embodiment of the inequities of caste, exposes the violence of being born in a brahminically ordained, superior world. Dalits' existence in that world is a violation of that order, and the penalty that they face as outcastes continues to provide legitimacy for the upper caste and dominant privileged people to augment new modes of outcaste life. Anti-caste writings break the violence of these ongoing structures by creating radical consciousness and a deeper analysis of the phenomenology of violence that surrounds them. It integrates an examination of the evolving position of Dalits. It provides attention to identity, self, and free will that can be conscious of the society Dalits hope to create for survival. Consciousness and society, history and existence have meanings for present and later generations, and the radical writings of anti-caste thinkers and literary writers like Baby Kamble explore and foreground such questions in their writings through the changing manifestations of caste violence and untouchable existence.

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