

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 6 June 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

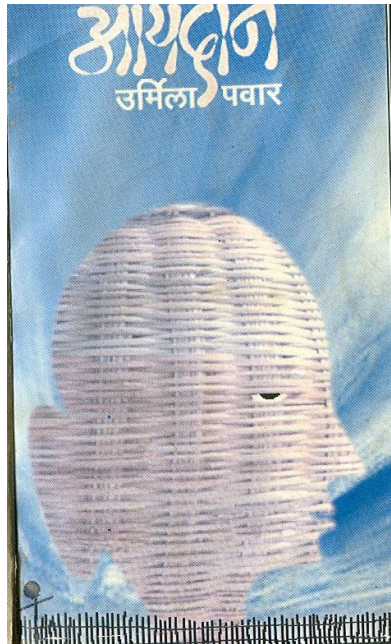
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar



Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

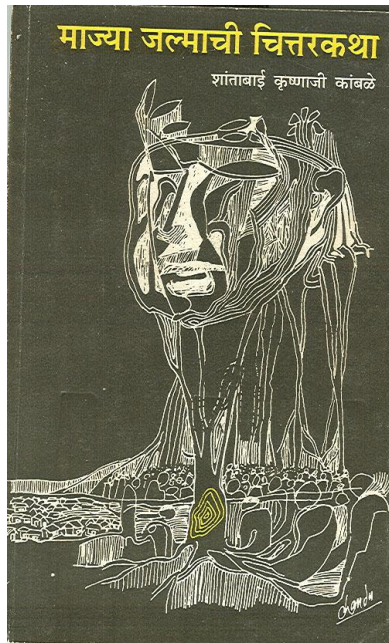
A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

Comparison of Two Dalit Autobiographies of Women Writers

The present paper compares two Dalit women writers' autobiographies entitled *The Prisons We Broke* from Maharashtra and *Karukku* from Tamil Nadu. Both the books focus on the degradation and inhuman treatment of the Dalit community brought about by the Hindu caste institution. Caste division is a creation of Hinduism and its perpetuation is based on the caste consciousness, which has been so deeply entrenched that no Indian in general, and no Hindu (including the Dalit) in particular, has been able to get rid of it. Both the books focus also on how the Dalits converted to other religions are still subjected to subordination, etc.

Baby Kamble's book was published in the year 1986 in Marathi and later on it was translated and published in English in 2008. Bama's *Karukku* was published in the year 1992 in Tamil, and then translated into English and published in the year of 2000. *The Prisons We Broke* has twelve chapters in total. The chapters do not have titles as such, and they are written with figures like 1, 2, 3, and 4, etc. *Karukku* contains nine chapters. Like *The Prisons We Broke*, its individual chapters are not written under any particular titles. They are written in words such as One, Two, Three, and And Four and so on and so forth. Both are in the mould of autobiography and present the personal life history of these two authors.

Baby Kamble



Baby Kamble lived her life as a Dalit in Hinduism till her conversion. *The Prisons We Broke* contains incidents and events in the life of Kamble before the mass conversion of the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

Dalits in Maharashtra in 1956. So, *The Prisons We Broke* is a Dalit autobiography written in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the first Dalit woman's autobiography in Marathi and in India as well. Shantabai Kamble's autobiography, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* is also regarded by some scholars as the first Marathi Dalit woman's autobiography. However, since Baby Kamble started writing her autobiography in the pre-independence India, though not published in the form of a book then, it is in a sense the first Marathi Dalit woman's autobiography. Maxin Burnson states in the introduction to the Marathi version of *The Prisons We Broke* that: "Sister Baby's book has historical importance as the first Dalit woman's autobiography in Marathi." (Translation mine)

Being a Dalit woman, Kamble suffered more at the hands of the caste Hindus and her husband because the Dalits and women were all considered far more inferior human beings. Kamble's early life was a world of ignorance, enslavement, force, and superstition in Hinduism.

The Prisons We Broke

The Prisons We Broke relates that the Dalits in Maharashtra had to do only menial works. From the treatment given to them it may be said that they were not considered even equal to animals. Also, they were terrorized. If anybody was born into a Mahar family, they were supposed to be lifelong slaves to the caste Hindus. They had to work from morning till night, and in return they were offered stale food. They were made bonded labourers. To quote Kamble: "The labour of the entire family was paid for in the form of Bhakris (pieces of bread), which the *yesker* (a Mahar bonded laborer whose work was to collect food at caste Hindus houses in the evening) had to go and collect from house to house every evening." (74 -75)

Kamble exposed the plight of the Mahar women. In the caste Hindu society, the Mahar women were reduced to inanimate objects. They were banned even from meeting their basic needs. Therefore, according to Kamble, the caste Hindus are sinners. She forthrightly blames them: "They (Dalit women) could not get even simple rags to clean the flowing blood, this much sinful the public was." (Translation mine) (49)

Moreover, the Mahar women were made to believe that what was happening to them was right. Kamble not only blames Hinduism for the ill-treatment given to the Dalits, but also condemns it as a religion of animals. Besides, she declares that the pride of the caste Hindus is at the cost of the lives of the ignorant Dalits. She states emphatically: "What a beastly thing this Hinduism is! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy - it is the very life blood of the Mahars!" (56)

In Praise of Dr. Ambedkar

The Prisons We Broke describes (page number/s from 105 to 135) that Dr. Ambedkar was the most educated Dalit and therefore he could lead them to the truth. It is he who asked the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

Dalits not to believe in gods and goddesses. He criticized the gods and exhorted the Dalits to get their children educated. He created awareness among the Mahars; they were immensely influenced by his thoughts and ideas. He became a great topic of discussion for them.

Dressed in rags, they would be lying in some dark corner of a hut, crying with hunger. They would have served the high castes day and night, been flogged for small mistakes; they would have to survive on flogging than on food. The monopoly over leftovers from high caste houses would be yours. It was our Bhim who rescued you from such a terrible fate. He showed us this golden day. You must fold your hands to this great man, this self-sacrificing soul, and introduce him to your children. He has made this new life for us. It is to him that we owe our present prosperity. (123).

The Prisons We Broke is also explicitly critical about the educated Dalits who have not stopped following the Hindu culture.

Some Events Described in the Autobiography

Kamble's autobiography has depicted a realistic picture of the society in which she was raised. The following are some selected incidents and events in the life of Kamble, narrated in *The Prisons We Broke*.

The Prisons We Broke has portrayed a realistic picture of the Mahars in Maharashtra. There was a trend in the past that children used to stay not at their parents' house, but at their maternal grandparents' houses. Similarly, Kamble lived her childhood life in the maternal grandparents' home in their village. She has recorded that the Mahars were so ignorant that they could not know whether a child suffered from a fever was alive or dead. Kamble herself was declared to be dead when she was two and a half years old because she was not feeling well and had fallen unconscious. She was about to be buried. However, one of her elderly relatives there noticed that Kamble was still alive. That was how she was saved. Kamble says that many such alive but unconscious and unfortunate children were buried in those days just because of a lack of awareness among the Mahars.

Like other Dalit students in the past, Kamble was humiliated, harassed and discriminated against by not only her classmates but by her teachers also. However, what is interesting to note is that Kamble and her classmates belonging to Mahar caste would fight against their caste Hindu girl fellow students. The school in which Kamble was getting education was a girls' school. She and her friends were not scared of their classmates at all. But their teachers were in favour of the caste Hindu students and punished Kamble and her friends when caste Hindu students made complaints against them to the teachers. Also, most of the teachers were Brahmins who hated the Mahar students openly, Kamble writes.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

Kamble has recorded that she was the only girl child of their parents. She was a beloved daughter and granddaughter of her parents and maternal grandparents. She was married at the age of thirteen. Before she got married, she was considered to be an aged girl for marriage. Kamble as an unmarried person experienced the life of the traditional untouchable. In Veergaon, the village of her maternal grandparents, she had a good rapport with all the Mahar families. She behaved well with the members of those Mahar families as if they were her close relatives.

Kamble was married at an early age. But, unlike other daughters-in-law in her community, she was not harassed and humiliated by her parents-in-law. Her mother-in-law was very supportive of her. Kamble helped her husband to run a small grocery shop. She would be the shopkeeper and would sell material to the customers. That was how she was making money. At the same time, whenever she had free time she read books, which were meant for packing groceries for the customers.

There is no mention of Kamble's conversion to Buddhism as such. But since she became a staunch follower of Ambedkar, she began to practice what he had said. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956. As a consequence, Kamble began to practice it. She devoted herself to the Ambedkari movement. She began telling the Dalits to follow what their protector had said. She began working for the uplift of the downtrodden in Maharashtra.

According to the then tradition, Kamble was not very much free because she was somebody's wife. Her husband often had control over her. She did not have freedom to do anything if she wished to do. Whenever she happened to go against the patriarchal norms, she was brutally beaten up by her husband. She suffered a lot at the hands of her husband. *The Prisons We Broke* reveals in detail how Kamble was a victim of her husband's male chauvinistic mentality. She remembers:

“Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profuselyThe same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train.” (155)

A Social Activist

Kamble is also a social activist. She has established an orphanage for children from the backward castes. She has been involved in the activities of educational institutions. Like Laxman Gaikwad, she has played several constructive roles in her life. She has set up a grocery and vegetable shop. She has launched a school; she is a lyricist and poet.

The Focus is on Mahar Community

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*



The Prisons We Broke is more collective than personal. It describes how Mahar mothers were more concerned with getting their children educated than men. Also, what is more remarkable is that there were no concessions for the downtrodden then, yet they were enthused to get education. Kamble has depicted family life of the Mahars in great detail. She has portrayed more or less everything about her community forthrightly. She is proud of being a member of her community, Mahar.

The Prisons We Broke points out that the Mahars were leading their lives in ignorance and abject poverty. They were not aware of the human existence as such. They would not dare to go against the social norms and challenge the caste Hindus. They were greatly superstitious and obeyed their oppressors. If any Dalit woman happened to break the entrenched practices of the caste system, she would be humiliated not only by the caste Hindus but also by the Mahar people. They were so ignorant that they were not able to lead a common human life. The men would not treat the women folks properly. Women were considered to be the lowest beings in their community. Among the Mahar women, the daughters-in-law were the worst victims. They had to suffer at almost everybody's hands, including their own fathers and brothers. Most of the Mahars were ignorant and poor. They were god-fearing masses. They donated their eldest sons to their goddess. Some of the Mahar women would get possessed by goddesses.

The Prisons We Broke exposes the fact that the Mahars were not allowed to have good, dignified and auspicious names. They were supposed to give inauspicious and insulting names to their children. *The Prisons We Broke* presents an embodiment of such names. Dagadu (27) is the name of one Mahar man. Dagadu denotes a piece of stone. Dhondu (27) is also the name of another Mahar man. Here, Dhondu means a small piece of stone. Jungalu (84) is the name of a Mahar man. Junglu means *jungali* man, an individual from uncivilized preliterate community. Kondakaku (30) is the name given to a Mahar woman which means "dust aunty". Bhikabai (54) is yet another name given to Mahar women. The meaning of this word is beggar lady. However,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

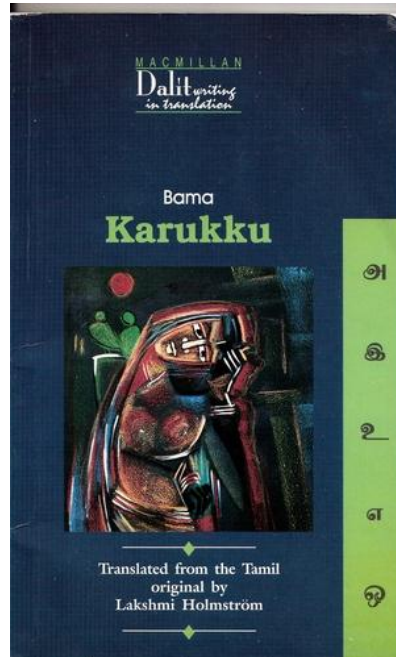
11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*

in course of time, the Mahars became aware of their inhuman lives and made attempts to come up. Kamble is one of them.

***Karukku* – A Description of the Dalit People in Tamilnadu**



Karukku deals with the Dalit people in Tamil Nadu. Bama does not mention any of the Dalit leaders well known in other parts of India such as Phule and Ambedkar. Bama expresses her grief over the pathetic and helpless condition of Dalits: “They never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour.” (47) Above all, Dalit women are easy targets of the non-Dalit men for sexual harassment, mental torture, and exploitation.

Bama’s assessment is corroborated in studies such as the one by Kannan and Francois Gros:

Taking advantage of the difficult season when agricultural work is over and day labourers have no jobs, a rich, married Reddiyar offers Taili work in his house where she can earn the grain she needs. She accepts and he persecutes with his advances. (40)

The Status of Dalit Christians

Conversion to Christianity has not reduced this sorry state of conditions. The non-Dalit Christians never assimilate the Dalit Christians into their fold. Bama points out, “The upper caste Christians had their own cemetery elsewhere.” (25)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama’s *Karukku*

Karukku deals also with the problem that Christianity continues to face in Tamilnadu. Those who have converted to Christianity from the non-Dalit communities are not integrated with the members of other castes who have converted to Christianity. Christians also follow the same caste system of Hinduism, resulting in caste hierarchy, caste subordination and exploitation. Above all, spousal exchange between the Dalit Christian castes and non-Dalit castes is very rare. *Karukku*, among other things, depicts the casteist practices of a Christian priest who shows preconceived notions about Dalit Christians: “The priest’s first response was to say, “After all, you are from the Cheri (a Dalit locality). You might have done it. You must have done it.” (17)

Bama’s Life Experience as a Dalit Woman

Karukku portrays a realistic picture of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. They are not educated people. As a result, they are not aware of the stratagems of the caste conscious and casteist non-Dalits, which degrade the Dalits. They live their lives as bonded labourers. They are very poor agricultural labourers. Since they are the worst victims in the Hindu caste system, some of them embraced Christianity. However, they could not get equal and just treatment by the Christians in Tamil Nadu. Since their human existence has remained as it was, Bama makes attempts to bring about awareness among them by saying that they should know the truth and uplift themselves. Bama has devoted her life to better the pathetic condition of the downtrodden in Tamil Nadu. She no longer tolerates the discriminatory practices of the caste Hindu Christians against the Dalits. When she herself saw such treatment given to the Dalit students in her convent, she gave up her job there.

Karukku portrays a picture of a lack of unity among the members of different Dalit sub-castes. When there was a communal fight between caste Hindus, and members of the Chaaliyar and Paraiyar castes, the other Dalits in her village, the Pallars, another Dalit sub-caste, were found to be in favour of the caste Hindus. Pallar boys told the police where the Paraiyar men were hiding after having a fight against their oppressors. It indicates that the Dalits, though victims, are quite unable to overcome the influence of communal feelings. Pallars are victims of the caste system, but they are not serious and aware about their inhuman existence. When Bama’s grandmother came to know about the dangerous and self-defeating activity of the Pallars, she expressed her anger:

“It seems that Pallar men had tipped off the police that some of our men might actually be hiding inside their houses. When Paatti (the author’s grandmother) heard this she was furious. She railed against them in a single breath. “Look at these Palla boys; they’ll betray their own people.” (33)

Bama has focused on the great importance of education for the liberation of the Dalits. Her elder brother convinced and encouraged her to study hard and excel in her studies so that

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama’s *Karukku*

other students would automatically want to be her friends. As a consequence, she would not be discriminated against and alienated. *Karukku* reveals that Bama was a brilliant student. Even though she was a Dalit Christian, she could mingle with other non-Dalit students just because of her studious nature and excellent academic performance in the examinations.

Bama has depicted that the non-Dalits would not support the downtrodden to come up in life. Therefore she has lost hope in the non-Dalits. She is determined now to improve the pathetic condition of the Dalits. She has documented in her autobiography that whenever she came across any caste conscious non-Dalit, she found them highly discriminatory against the Dalits; they are highly prejudiced. So, Bama warns the Dalits that they must not believe and depend on the non-Dalits. Regarding this, she poses one question to the readers: “Is it likely that he who finds his comfort by exploiting us will ever change, or ever allow the system to change?” (68)

To Conclude

One is tempted to conclude from the narratives of both Kamble and Bama that neither Hinduism nor Christianity offers any concrete solution to the agony of Dalits. They seem to claim that their personal experience both as Hindu Dalit and Christian Dalit reveal the dominant features of Dalit suppression and subordination. Both take the point of view that the Dalits can liberate themselves from the shackles of suppression and subordination through their own effort of education and social activism. Kamble is more vocal in the criticism of the educated Dalits who forget their roots and ignore the Dalit cause. She is also very critical about the educated Dalits adopting Hindu ways of life. While this scene is quite common among the educated Tamil Dalits also for various reasons, *Karukku* of Bama focuses more on the suffering of less educated and illiterate Dalits.

=====

References

Bama. *Karukku*. Trans. by Laxmi Holmstrom. Chennai: Macmillan, 2000.

Kamble, Baby. *Jinan Amuchan*. Pune: Sugava Prakshan, 2008. Third Edition.

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

Kannan M. and Francois Gros, “*Tamil Dalits in Search of a Literature*,” *South Asia Research*. 22, 1, 2002: 40.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama’s *Karukku*

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Pondicherry University
Pondicherry 605014
Union Territory of Puducherry
India
byashpalm@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 6 June 2011

Banshelkikar Yashpal Murhari, Ph.D. Scholar

A Comparative Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Bama's *Karukku*