“Shadow” is a sign of “ominous oppressiveness, or sadness and gloom” (“Shadow,” def. 2). It also refers “to a position of relative inferiority or obscurity” (def. 2.2). The word ‘shadows’ in context of Dalit women, in this chapter, refers to their inferior position in the caste pyramid because of the triple oppression of caste, class and gender which makes them obscure. Shadow also symbolizes “partial or complete darkness” (def. 1.1) which signifies lack of awareness among Dalit women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) refers to “Paolo Friere’s notion of “conscientization”” (136). According to Paulo Friere, “There can be no conscientization of the people without a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures...conscientization is not properly speaking to fabricate the liberating idea but to invite the people to grasp with their minds the truth of reality” (85). It is only through an understanding and consciousness about their marginalized position in the power structure and critical perspective of the oppressors that the oppressed will be able to free themselves from oppression.

Dalit women are the most “vulnerable victims of repression and of discrimination” (Manorama 258). They suffer oppression of marginality and powerlessness. They are ‘other’ in relation to Dalit men in Dalit community and outside Dalit community they are ‘other’ as women and as Dalit women. They are subject to attack and harassment. Socio-cultural oppression makes their speaking difficult. A sense of being ‘no person’ haunts them: “At the level of consciousness, the sense of “no person” and “powerlessness” has permeated every aspect of their life” (256). Over a period of time Dalit women are becoming aware of their powerless position and dehumanizing condition in the social structure.

This chapter focuses on Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) in Section I and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* (2008) in Section II. In both the life narratives, Dalit women narrators have recorded their memories and experiences of marginalization and victimization. They have broken “the culture of silence” and have created the “space for utterance” (Manorama 259) both in literature and in society. Through writing, these two Dalit women attempt to emerge from the shadows of oppression and their inferior position by gaining self-awareness. Besides, through
their life narratives these Dalit women are reconstructing their identity and emerging as agencies for social change.

*The Prisons We Broke* is about Dalit women’s oppression. *The Prisons We Broke* is not confined strictly to Baby Kamble’s life, or her experiences, or hardships she faced, or happy moments enjoyed by her. It is a reflection on the wounded psyche of Mahar women. As life narrative is always organized around ‘spaces of sociality,’ *The Prisons We Broke* reflects on the lives of the women of her community with whom Baby Kamble shares “collective memory” (Halbwachs 80) of oppression. By recalling the sufferings of the women of her community Baby Kamble narrates her own suffering thereby emphasizing Dalit women’s “collective identity” (Eyerman1) and “collective lived experiences” (Brien 75). Baby Kamble finds it difficult to separate herself from her community’s women. In an interview given to Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble affirms, “I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community” as “The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine.” So “I wrote about what my community experienced” (Kamble, An Interview 136). *The Prisons We Broke* shows the evolvement of the ‘social self’ of Baby Kamble which joins voices of Mahar women with Baby Kamble’s personal voice: “…the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode” (Rege, *Writing Caste* 14).

Moreover, the title of the narrative “The Prisons We Broke” emphasizes this unity: “And the pluralisation of the subject ‘We’ in “The Prisons We Broke”…instead of ‘I’ confirms Baby’s formation of…individual consciousness filtered through…collective” Dalit women’s consciousness. The word ‘prisons’ signifies the evils of caste system and patriarchy and “the breaking of those prisons confirms her [Baby Kamble] convictions to the cause of” Dalit women’s consciousness “raising movement” (Banerjee 131).

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Life narratives, through the memories they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time, and in relation to their own ever-moving pasts” (*Reading Autobiography* 30). Hence, life narratives are records and re-interpretation of the past events. They are grounded in history. The act of memorizing history can be seen as:
…duty… a Remake of History… as long as one can still vividly remember, reporting is perceived as an urgent duty with regard to the next generations and mankind: society and humanity are to be reminded, they should not be allowed to conveniently forget. To put the past on record is a duty of justice to the ancestors. Keeping record of their agonies and efforts to survive is to redeem them. (Poitevin)

Baby Kamble sees the act of remembering as a duty aiming to preserve the history of the Mahars, especially Mahar women’s agonies and sufferings for the coming generations.

In her Foreword to Jina Amucha, her original Marathi personal narrative, Baby Kamble asserts:

I have described in this book the details of the life of our community as I have experienced it during the last fifty years. The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realize what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. (qtd. in Pandit, Introduction, The Prisons We Broke xiii-iv)

the ordeal of struggle which Mahar women have passed through should not be forgotten. Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke is grounded in the history of sufferings of Mahar women. Maya Pandit, who has worked extensively on marginal literature and translated Dalit writings into English remarks, “Obviously, the fire of emancipatory struggle characterises this recasting of history. Memory becomes a device to inculcate the urge for resistance in future generations” (Introduction, The Prisons We Broke xiv). Remembering and recording the past struggle is important because it exhorts the future generation as well as readers to resist the injustice. Baby Kamble through The Prisons We Broke aims to keep alive the fighting spirit in Mahar women against victimization and prejudice.

The Prisons We Broke is divided into twelve chapters. The number twelve signifies the twelve stages of the life cycle:

The Buddhist teaching on samsaric existence is […] depicted in the Wheel of Becoming. […] The rim of the wheel is divided into twelve segments and scenes. These show how beings pass from one realm to another, and are call the nidanas. […] These scenes depict Buddhist teaching on Dependent Origination: the causal chain which ensures that the Wheel of Samara keeps revolving. (Clive Erricker, qtd. in Taylor)
Baby Kamble’s life narrative’s division into twelve chapters signifies the twelve segments of the journey of life. The chapters are numbered, not titled. The life narrative focuses on the position of Dalit women within Dalit family, in Dalit community and in Hindu society.

Baby Kamble evokes the memories of humiliation suffered by Mahar girls in school. According to Katherine Nelson, “…we learn early in childhood what people around us and, by extension, our culture expects us to remember” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 22). As “Childhood is seen as the “natural” foundation of the adult self” (Gullstead 4), the life narrator lurks a lot over good as well as painful memories of childhood. The secondary girls’ school in Baby Kamble’s town Phaltan was full of upper caste girls. She recalls how those girls ran, shrieking with disgust when Mahar girls passed by:

For the first time in their lives, they had girls like us – who could pollute them – studying with them. They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose, mutter ‘chee, chee’, and run as if their lives were in mortal danger. (The Prisons We Broke 108)

Mahar girls were made to sit near the door away from the blackboard in a corner. So these poor girls could: “… neither see what the teacher was writing on the board, nor could we raise our doubts in the classroom” (PWB 108). When Mahar girls went to drink water, the high caste girls followed them in a group; abused and threw stones and mud at them.

However, due to the spread of awareness by the Dalit movement, Mahar girls too became conscious to fight collectively against caste prejudice. The period was 1938-39. In Maharashtra, under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit movement was at its peak. The people of her town used to meet at chawdi: “The chawdi started getting a newspaper and reports of Baba’s public meetings and speeches began to be read out to the public. There were constant discussions about the public meetings that had been planned, and those that Baba would attend” (106). Therefore, chawdi became the third space for Mahars where they could discuss and plot their emancipation from oppression: “…third spaces…a place where the oppressed can plot their liberation” (West 53).
*Chawdi*, the third space, enlightened the Mahar girls of the value of joint efforts in fighting against caste atrocities. Consequently, Baby Kamble and her friends many a time unable to bear constant humiliation and taunts from the upper caste girls retaliated. They collectively broke into the upper caste girls’ group and thrashed them until the high caste girls ran away:

> If we went to drink at the school tap, the other girls would raise hell. But we never listened to them….The higher caste girls would hurl taunts and abuses at us…would hurl stones at us and throw dust into our eyes. Then we would get angry and attack them. Tucking up our long skirts, we would just barge into their groups like battering rams and scatter them. They would run away and those left behind would be prey in our hands. We would attack them furiously, pull their long plaits, push them to the ground, pinch their cheeks and hands, and torture them as much as we could. (*PWB* 108-09)

However, the Mahar girls got “back all of this and more, once we entered the classroom” (108-09) as the upper caste girls’ complained to the teachers, who in return hurled abuses on Mahar girls, hit them and punished them by making them touch their toes. But after school Baby Kamble and her friends again caught hold of the girls who had troubled them to give them a good beating. These fights were an everyday affair but the incidents did not weaken the spirit of Mahar girls who pledged to create a better future for themselves by attending school for education.

Baby Kamble recalls her childhood memories of *Maharwada* in Veergaon in Purander Taluka in Pune district. Veeragaon was Baby Kamble’s maternal grandparents’ village. Baby Kamble’s father Pandharinath “was a contractor by profession” (3). He travelled a lot for his work. Therefore, Baby Kamble, along with her elder brother Babu and their mother lived at Veergaon with their grandparents who did not have a son. She remembers *Maharwada* symbolized “utter poverty and total destitution” (80).

Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* narrates the collective lived experiences of poverty, humiliation, helplessness which she shares with the women of her community in *Maharwada*. Her life narrative is replete with memories of hunger. Mahars were “have-nots” (Sadangi 126). To face the monster of hunger they had to die a thousand deaths: they had to do all those things which no human being could dare to do. Baby Kamble recalls the victimization of Mahars at the hands of upper castes who “turned
Mahars into slaves…” (Pandit, Introduction, *The Prisons We Broke* xiii). Keeping Dalits deprived of basic amenities like food and making them dependent was one of the strategies employed by the upper castes to exploit Dalits’ labour. In their penury, Mahars survived on “stale and dry roti” (*PWB* 44) and the bodies of dead animals but even to get that they had to compete with the vultures, kites and dogs: “Everyone would rush to the place, as did the vultures, kites and dogs that competed with the Mahars!” (85-86).

Many a time for the sake of food for the hungry children, Mahar women were compelled to collect meat from the dead bodies of animals:

After a woman kept the basket on her head; her children would give the stick to her. The woman would balance the basket on her head with one hand, and with the other, she would continuously ward off flies and birds, all the while chanting ‘ghar, ghar, ghar’.…Their heads would be drenched with blood, puss and other putrid secretions oozing out of the meat. Rivulets of sweat mixed with the blood and puss would run down their faces and onto their bodies, already coated with grime and muck….Anybody who came across these women would have easily taken them for a group of hadals. (86)

When there was nothing left to cook, the women asked their husbands to gather cactus pods for the children:

‘Listen, the kids are starving. They haven’t eaten anything for the last three days. They look like living corpses. For how long can they survive on water? Let’s go and collect some cactus pods. At least we can eat that.’
‘Well, they taste, fine but later…’
‘We aren’t eating them for fun! We have to stay alive.’ (82)

The children, empty stomach, would create ruckus the whole night. However, after eating pods they slept. Although eating cactus pods lead to problems in attending nature’s call in the morning. This reflects the struggle of Dalits for survival.

A sumptuous meal, for these hunger stricken people, was “leftover food” (46) given to them during the marriage ceremony or other functions in the upper caste community:

On the occasion of marriage, sweet chapattis filled with jaggery and channa dal were prepared….One adult and three to four children would eat from the same plate. Their sweat, the dirt on their hand, the sticky stuff flowing from their nose and saliva dripping from their mouths—
everything would keep dropping into the plate….The sticky leftover would be poured into one huge basket….The owner would summon the Mahar waiting near the garbage pits….‘Look here Ghurya, the feast is over. First sweep the pandal clean. Then you can take away those two baskets of leftover food.’….all of them [Mahars] would eat the leftover food and go to bed, savouring the sweet taste on their tongue. (76-77)

Another luxurious occasion for Mahars to eat enough good food was Buffalo fair. Mahars impatiently looked forward for the arrival of Buffalo fair as it gave them beef to eat: “Memories of the buffalo fair would help them survive their miserable and wretched lives” (35). These few occasions were the memorable moments for Mahars as it satiated their stomach’s hunger. Besides, remembrance of the delicious taste of the rich food, that is “sticky leftover” (76) helped them to eat stale and dry roti everyday.

Baby Kamble focuses on the life of drudgery, almost a living hell, that the women in her community were forced to live. On many occasions Mahar women were unfortunate even to get a dry roti to eat. Mostly Mahar women left for work empty stomach early in the morning to return in the afternoon with bundles of firewood on their heads and pangs of hunger in stomach:

The women would be drenched with sweat running down their bodies. Their throats would be parched dry…they would return to their houses and look for basket of bhakris. Most of the times these baskets would be empty….Having had no breakfast in the morning, and with no food in the house, hunger gnawed at their empty stomachs like wild fire. What could they eat? They would go looking for some crumbs in their friends’ houses. (51-52)

The memories of Mahar women’s hunger and craving for food are re-inscribed in The Prisons We Broke. On a ritual occasion the work of Mahar women increased. Ashadh is celebrated as the month for ritual baths, house cleaning, polishing floors and food preparation. Mahar women worked indefatigably during these rituals. They cooked meat but were the last ones to eat, and the daughters-in-law were even deprived of that share: “…with their eyes glued to the food, the poor hungry daughters-in-law would helplessly wait for the turn to eat. Just in case a sasu noticed this, she would contemptuously throw a morsel at her daughter-in-law, saying, ‘Push that down your throat, you shameless hussy!’” (30). In Hindu society, “women eat their meals after their husbands. The remaining who eat with their husbands are older women who are being accorded respect
because of their age‖ (H. Ghosh 7). Hence, if Dalit women are at the lowest step of the caste pyramid, in Dalit family daughters-in-law are pushed at the furthest lowest base. If a hungry Dalit woman saw others eating and desired to have food before her in-laws, that would result in stinging words and abusive showers from her mother-in-law. The daughter-in-law is treated: “...as a servant of the family, whose only duty is to obey everyone, to wake up earliest and to sleep late, to eat whatever remains after others have eaten and not to complain anything about it to anyone” (R. Sharma 124).

Mahar women not only suffered hunger pangs but also humiliation of nakedness. *The Prisons We Broke* is a saga of the “nakedness” (*PWB* 8) of poverty stricken Mahar women. A Mahar woman usually had only one sari which she washed once during the celebrations of *Ashadh* or on any other celebration. When a Mahar woman had to wash her sari, she took off: “...her sari and wrapped herself in a longish rag...[The] sari...looked like a tri-colour flag, a piece of cloth made by stitching together different rags. It had big holes; the borders were folded and stitched, and stitches looked like thick strings. The cloth was rough and coarse, thick as a bed sheet” (16). Mahar woman’s life without food, living space and clothes reveals their “permanent deprivation” (79). The dirty rags and torn clothes assigned to the bodies of these women establish their identity as Mahar women and direct the narration in the life narrative as the narration of the destitute.

Mahar women like other women longed for dress, jewellery, make up, etc. But for them these things were a distant dream: “Their hair, never touched by a comb....Their saris were rags and their blouses mere tatters” (46). The only thing these women possessed was *kumkum* about which, they were ‘very protective.’ The *kumkum* was the only ornament for them:

The tradition of wearing Sindoor by married women has been explained with the help of mythology...vermillion is a symbol of the female energy of Parvati and Sati. Hindu mythological legends regard Sati as the ideal wife who gave her life for her husband’s honor....Hindus believe that Goddess Parvati protects all those men whose wives apply vermillion to their parting of hair. (Pathak)
Hence, in Hindu society, wives are supposed to give up their lives for the protection and well-being of their husbands and in this context Mahar women despite domestic violence were:

…very protective about the kumkum on our foreheads. For the sake of the kumkum mark, we lay our lives at the feet of our husbands. We believe that if a woman has her husband she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her….Still the kumkum that we apply in their name is the only ornament for us. It is more precious than even the Kohinoor diamond. (PWB 41)

The vermilion is first time applied on the parting of the woman’s hair by her husband on the day of wedding. After this, she applies it herself every day. From the day a woman gets married, vermilion becomes her identity. She is called as somebody’s wife. Her existence depends on her husband’s existence. As long as her husband is alive, she applies it every day. At the death of husband she becomes a widow and kumkum is removed from the parting of her hair as her life is now barren, bleak and meaningless:“….the kumkum (vermillion), the nose-ring, the anklets, etc., as symbols of…discrimination and imposing restraints on women” (Vrinda Nabar qtd. in Kanwar Singh 45). Women are not allowed to have an identity of their own outside the shadows of their husbands. They are just bodies, the sexual objects who belong solely to their husbands. Kumkum, manglasutra, etc., are prisons in which the identity of Mahar women is caged. The Prisons We Broke is Baby Kamle’s narration of the repression of Dalit women’s desires, hopes and longings.

More than “a hundred years” after Muktabai’s essay “Grief of Mang-Mahars” written in 1855, which talked about the dire conditions in which Mahar women gave birth to children, Baby Kamble also narrates “in detail about the reproductive labour of women in her community…” (Rege, Writing Caste 207). A pregnant woman needs a well-balanced diet but Mahar women were deprived of any such supplement: “Adequate nutrition needs to begin during a mother’s pregnancy and continue when a child is born” (The State of the World’s Children 11). Due to poverty the Mahar women delivered of a baby in an unhygienic and inhospitable environment. The new born baby as well as the mother suffered malnutrition and low vitality. During pregnancy and after childbirth, due to lack of food, Mahar women were forced to tie up their bellies to suppress hunger:
In those days, there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice. After the baby comes out, the stomach needs soft and light food. But from where could Mahars get such food? With the hunger gnawing her insides, the poor woman would just tie up her stomach tightly and lie down on rags, her body a mass of aches and pain. (PWB 57)

In such situations, many a time, Mahar women went to the neighbouring houses to beg some grains or jowar. A gruel prepared from the jowar was then given to the mother to satiate her hunger.

Due to extreme poverty, a Mahar woman during pregnancy could not afford to visit a doctor or health care centre. She was dependent on the ignorant midwives who kept thrusting their hands inside the pregnant woman’s vagina which many times got swollen, obstructing the baby’s path, and which sometimes also led to the death of either fetus or mother or both: “There would be several wounds and cuts inside, which throbbed with unbearable pain….Life in that poor mother gradually diminished and she would finally sink. Many young girls on the threshold of life succumbed to death. One in every ten lost their lives during childbirth. Infants died as well” (59-60). Mahar women could not afford cotton or cloth pads to clean the flowing blood: “Why, the girl would be fortunate if her family could find even some dirty rags for her. This was the extent of their poverty!” (59). After birth a mother’s body “loses “balance” and enters “a cold stage” due to the loss of blood” (“Post-delivery confinement”). Therefore, healthy food is given to the mother to maintain the balance: “During the postpartum period, hot foods such as chicken drumsticks, dried fish, and greens are considered good for lactation…” (Purnell 301). Mahar women, for whom a proper one day meal was impossible, could not afford such expenditure. The only thing in plenty in their house was firewood. So after delivery, the mother was given ample of painful hot baths.

The subjects in life narratives are defined and identified in terms of their body. The body is a site of autobiographical knowledge, therefore, the memories, experiences and identity associated with body cannot be ignored. In The Prisons We Broke, the subject is Mahar women. Baby Kamble writes the story of Mahar women through their body. Numerous descriptions of corporeal and each bodily image highlight the oppression and victimization of Mahar women. Mahar women had visible markers of
identity, for example, these women wore copper anklets made by their brothers-in-law as bangles. The copper bangles were a sign to identify that “she was a Mahar” (PWB 99). These women were forced to follow fixed dress codes to differentiate them from upper caste women:

They wore the saris in the traditional way, the front pleats taken through the legs and tucked behind. There were caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remained hidden. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes. Their foreheads were smeared with huge kumkum marks. Their blouses were also made from rags. (54)

The inferior identity of the Mahar women was framed on these pedestals of rules and codes which led to the destruction of Mahar women’s self and raised their resentment towards the upper caste society. Socio-cultural oppression suppressed the voice of Mahar women but they were not blind to their victimization.

The Mahar women designed their own ways to critique the dress code assigned to women of different castes. Baby Kamble reminisces an incident when a Mahar daughter was given a dead body’s white sheet by an upper caste woman. She wrapped it around her body like a Brahmin woman and mimicked: “Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don’t touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion.” The next moment she imitated “a Gujar woman, draping the pallav in the Gujarati style, and finally, a Mahar daughter-in-law, pulling the pallav from her head down to her nose” (80). The Mahar daughter imitating Mahar daughter-in-law “pulling the pallav from her head down to her nose” underscores the awareness of the Mahar daughter about the subjugation and miserable life of Mahar women: “The dalit women from Kamble’s village often used this piece of cloth to critique the dress code of the women from the different upper castes...” This shows “what is discarded as obnoxious can be resignified as a weapon to make a comment on the dress code...” (Guru, Afterword 168).
Traditionally, the sheet on the corpse is considered unclean and polluting: “…the cremation ritual is considered in Hinduism as hygienically unclean and polluting” (“Antyesti”). Since Mahar women were a source of repulsion and pollution to upper castes they were entitled only to the dead body’s sheet. Mahar daughter, an obnoxious object (for the upper castes) used another obnoxious object, that is dead body’s sheet given by upper caste people to critique and resist the gender and caste repression on the Mahar women’s bodies. However, Mahar women had to be submissive as they knew that if they raised their voice against the caste norms, they would suffer at the hands of their own men/community as well as at the hands of upper caste men. Baby Kamble comments, “They, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery” (PWB 80). Mahar women, therefore, never mustered courage to speak out against the caste hypocrisy openly.

The identity of the people is always related to the space provided to them by the society. The physical separation, both geographical and corporeal, connotes the identity of Mahar women. Baby Kamble outlines various instances when Mahar women were subjected to spatial segregation by the upper caste people. There were not only “stigmatizing corporeal rules, like those assigning to Dalits the most abject activities, such as scavenging” but there was also the “spatial segregation” (Correa, Petchesky and Parker 60). This separation infused in the psyche of Mahar women that they were born low and had to maintain distance from the upper caste people. When Mahar women went out to sell firewood, they were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the upper caste people. On the contrary when somebody from the upper caste came from the opposite direction, Mahar women “…had to leave the road…and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside. They had to cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, ‘The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master.’ This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times….“ If a “newly wed girl” would fail to join the chant out of ignorance “All hell would break loose then” (PWB 52). A Mahar woman faced violence not only in the upper caste public space but also within the community. The wrath of in-laws, relatives and neighbours resulted in torture on the girl:
‘You bitch, Paru, will you allow us to stay in this village or not? Do you know what havoc you’ve caused today? Do you know how terrible it was for me today? The whole village has started spitting on my face….Do your parents belong to the Kolhati caste? Don’t they have this custom of bowing down before the masters of their village?….‘Her father must be a Patil, you know, that’s why she’s behaving so! What does she know about our customs! Impudent Bitch! They are our masters, do you understand? We must behave according to our custom, that’s our religion! Was your mother a she-donkey that you behave so? Didn’t she teach you anything? Your sasra moves among respectable people and you have blackened his face!’ (53-54)

All these abuses were enough to break the spirit of the ‘newly wed’ bride. The narrative depicts Mahar women caught in a strange situation where they were forced to appease both the high caste Hindus and their own community. The constant humiliation and suffering within the community and society at large made Mahar women realize not only their powerlessness but also their place/position at the extreme periphery of the social system.

Selling firewood was a big ordeal for the Mahar women. Mostly all their firewood was purchased at throwaway price by the people in the Brahmin lane: “Dalit women’s personal narratives are a kind of protest against the exploitation by the state on the one hand and market on the other” (Guru, Afterword 160). Incidents recollected by Baby Kamble offer testimony to the wide spread exploitation. No money to buy food and children’s hungry faces forced Mahar women to remain silent against exploitation: “But what could the women do? Even god in trouble, they say, has to fall at the feet of a donkey.” Moreover, Mahar women suffered ignominy as Brahmin women told them to clean each stick for any strand of hair or thread from their saris as it would pollute the Brahmins’ households: “Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar women, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. But what’s that to you? Your carelessness will cost us heavily. Our house will get polluted.” However, the Mahar women’s submissive reply: “’Kaki, we have taken out every strand of hair and thread from the sticks. Each stick has been checked. Have we gone mad that we will pollute your house? You are god’s own people. Don’t we know even that?’” (PWB 55), was satirical: Brahmins are the so proclaimed ‘god’s own people’ have the right bestowed on them to torture, humiliate and oppress the ‘polluted’ Dalit women. The
reference to ‘god’s own people’ raises some pertinent questions. What happens when Dalit women are raped and molested by ‘god’s own people?’ Are not they polluted then? How and why do these Brahmin women accept their men after these incidents?

The attitude of Brahmin women highlights how caste hegemony turned Dalit woman an outcast when she entered the “feudal space” (Guru, Afterword 165), the space which never accepted her and identified her as an obnoxious object. Brahmin woman stood on a chest-high platform in front of the house which “…was the place where the higher castes conducted all their transactions with the Mahars” (PWB 75) to maintain purity of the house. She “would throw from the above, to avoid any contact, a couple of coins on each palm” (56) of the Mahar woman. Baby Kamble condemns and gives a critical appraisal of this pretense of upper caste people to subject Mahar women to humiliation and degradation:

Let me tell you, it’s not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy—it is the very life blood of the Mahars! Mahar women’s sweat would have soaked the firewood. Sometimes when thorns pricked them, blood trickled and dripped on the sticks. Sometimes they cut their own limbs instead of the wood and blood poured down, drenching the wood with blood. Thus it was the very essence of the Mahar woman’s life that was found sticking to the wood. And yet the Brahmin woman objected to what they found sticking there! When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them 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? Just as the farmer pierces his bullock’s nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. (56)

These experiences, according to Gopal Guru, “narrated in the text draw[s] attention to the production and reproduction of the caste, body and the text resurrects the history of experience to reflect and to contemplate upon and thereby use the experience radically to annihilate the structures which renew and underlie this experience” (Sathe 28). The narration of the experiences of victimization is used as a weapon to rebel against the institutions which lead to discrimination.
Baby Kamble, through a Mahar woman, who while visiting a shop took all precautionary measures not to pollute anybody by her touch, illustrates how the degraded caste conventions and practices become a part of Mahar women’s identity and beliefs:

Standing in the courtyard, keeping a distance from the shopkeeper…using the most reverential and polite term of address, she would beg him [shopkeeper] with utmost humility to sell her the things she wanted. ‘Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin?’ (PWB 13-14).

The shopkeeper at once instructed his children to keep distance from her: “Chabu, hey you, can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch her. Keep your distance” (14). Immediately Mahar woman, who was grounded in and conditioned to caste hegemony, gathered her rags around her tightly so as not to touch the child, and addressed him:

‘Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.’ The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav, which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him! (14)

This explains the internalization of caste practices among Dalit women due to caste hegemony which forces them to accept their subordination. Hegemony is:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci 12)

The ruling class reaches the mind of the ruled ones and the ruled ones become a party in their own oppression. In this context Karan Singh too admits:

The humility and fatalism slowly became the hallmark of dalit life and with time these attributes were internalized. The concept of ‘dharma’ produces and sustains certain gestures and attitudes in hierarchically low castes and manufactures willing slaves who echo the ideology of their masters and submit to them. The centuries of subordination of dalits makes it very difficult for them to break out of this prison....This master-
slave relationship is naturalized through almost universal and sustained ideational outpourings. (170-71)

The notion of ‘dharma’ makes Dalits accept the Brahmanical hegemony which endorses Dalit complicity in their own slavery. Taking things thrown from a distance, not to walk on the road in front of any upper caste man or woman, not to sit beside any upper caste person; a barber who even shaves cow and buffalo cannot shave a Dalit—are the legacy of Dalits.

The descriptive encounter of Mahar woman, who went to purchase some provisions at the shop owned by a higher caste man, highlights the internalization of caste practices not only in Dalit women but also reveals how even the children of the upper castes have been conditioned to see Dalit women as untouchables. Baby Kamble disparages the attitude of self-effacement in Dalit women. She believes that the subordination of Dalit women initially might have been imposed by force, but their ultimate surrender was secured through their ideological conditioning. Mahar woman’s gathering of the folds of her sari around her tightly so as not to pollute the child; her body language in the public space show that “public sphere is occupied by the upper caste” (Guru, Afterword 165), it is their sole domain and Mahar women have no place in it.

Mahar women were not only unaccepted in society at large but also did not have space within their own community. Mahar women were not pushed towards the margin, rather brutally thrown beyond the periphery as loathed objects. They laboured equally with their men for livelihood but remained marginalized within their own family and community. It was always Mahar men who were at the centre and had decision making power in the community as well as in the family. Their interests were always the priority. A feeling of superiority was felt by the males of Mahar community by dominating their wives as they were dominated and rebuked by the upper caste people: “No education, no jobs, even food they had to beg for. Their male ego gave them some sense of identity, ‘I am a man, I am superior to women, I am somebody. If the whole village tortures us, we will torture our women’” (Kamble, An Interview 156-57). Their suppressed anger and frustration found outlet in their assertion of their male ego on their women. Like Baby Kamble, Bama in her novel Sangati (1994) also traces the cause of domestic violence
among Dalits to the male ego, and oppression and humiliation which Dalit men bear at the hands of upper caste people:

Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. Is it the fate of our Dalit women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (65)

Baby Kamble shows her anger towards the unjust system prevalent in Mahar society, where patriarchy crushed woman, through the memory of the young daughter-in-law who became the butt of abuses, taunts and physical violence at the hands of everybody in the house: “The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves—our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them” (PWB 87).

Marriage for a Mahar girl in childhood meant nothing but a calamity: “The child was not even allowed to sleep. When the cock crowed at three in the morning, the sasu would wake her, dragging her by her hair.” The girl was forced to do all the household work. Her mother-in-law “would make her clean the grinding stones” her “tiny hands often could not pull the heavy stones and she would have to stop frequently. Her palms would get blisters. Later on they would harden…If the bhakris weren’t perfect, her sasu would examine the kneaded flour and slap the girl on the face with the unbaked bhakris, pinch her cheeks, and shower a million abuses on her…” (94). In this context, Karan Singh comments:

These sasus become the explicit and willing instrument in the hands of the male patriarchy. The sasus acquire higher position viz-a-viz daughters-in-law due to their motherhood as well as due to their status as the elder member of the family who is supposed to condition the new entrant into acquired male notions….Baby Kamble renders this prosecution of daughters-in-law by mothers-in-law graphically and presents how these elder women co-opted patriarchy to harass and subordinate the younger generation. (174)

Thus, mothers-in-law acted as agents of exploitative system against daughters-in-law. They tortured their daughters-in-law to take revenge of the torture they suffered at the
hands of their mothers-in-law. It gave them satisfaction that they could at least dominate someone else: “...I pamper you a little and you take advantage of that! Look what a nice sasu I am! My own sasu was a spitfire. A burning coal! Holding a burning coal in one’s palm was easier than living with her!” (PWB 94-95). Hence, the tradition of torture continued in a vicious motion from one generation of women to the next generation of women.

When a daughter-in-law got “her menstrual period for the first time, the sasu would become terribly agitated and keep a close watch on her daughter-in-law and her son. She would watch them with the eyes of hawk...” (95). She ensured not to let husband and wife come closer fearing that daughter-in-law might snatch her son away from his parents:

This anxiety of the mother-in-law is apparently caused by the fact that by coming close to her husband, the daughter-in-law might compete with her as an object of love and affection for her son. Further, by becoming mother, she will remove her from the privileged position in the family. Since motherhood imparts certain rights and bestows a place of pride in the patriarchal system, the mother-in-law is afraid of losing her own elevated position and sharing it with new-come. (Karan Singh 175)

As such, the mother-in-law saw the daughter-in-law as her rival and did not hesitate to use any mean trick to lower the prestige of daughter-in-law in the eyes of her son to keep her (mother-in-law’s) position in the family intact. Therefore, the daughter-in-law became a helpless victim. Her husband would “beat her to a pulp with a stick” (PWB 97). This was the usual fate of Mahar women within the family: “These victims of male violence are reduced to non-human existence. It is supposed to be the birth-right of male to hit and correct female and most often it is the assertion of male ego and the notion of superiority which causes the bursts of male beatings on surmised faithlessness” (Karan Singh 176).

Some young women chose to rebel against the violence and the never ending household work by trying to escape in the darkness of the night to their natal home in the hope that their parents would empathize with them. But even there, they had to face the barbarity “into which fate had cast them away” (177). The men of the family stood together against such women and sent them back to their in-laws. Once they returned to
their in-laws’ house, an “even worse fate awaited” \( (PWB 99) \) them. The woman on whose character aspersions were cast or who ran away to her natal home faced the danger of losing nose at the hands of her husband. The in-laws often instigated the son:

‘Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair. You are her husband, but obviously the bitch prefers someone else. I suspect that this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us. No, no! I don’t want such a slut in my house. She wants to ruin your life. Don’t let her off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip of her nose: only then will my mother’s heart breathe easy!...We don’t want such a string of problems in our house.’ \( (99-100) \)

Thus, provoked the husband violent with “hurt male ego,” \( (Karan Singh 177) \) succumbed to family/community demand:

At night, he would sit on her chest and taking his own time, cut off her nose. Then they would drive the poor girl out of the house, with blood pouring from the mutilation. None of her relatives would give her shelter. She was called muddy and was refused entry in the so-called ‘good’ homes. \( (PWB 101) \)

The woman with the chopped nose became not only an object of laughter but also faced taunts as woman of loose character. Besides physical harm, her reputation also got damaged. As in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s \textit{The Scarlet Letter: A Romance} \( (1850) \) the character Hester Prynne was required to wear a scarlet ‘A’ \( (‘A’ \text{ standing for adulteress}) \) on her dress to shame her: “‘This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die…”…On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A” \( (Hawthorne 64-65) \), likewise, the Mahar woman with her chopped nose “not only becomes a victim of physical violence but also faces social stigma” \( (Karan Singh 177) \). The mutilation of Dalit women’s body is an attempt to disgrace them and to push them into oblivion. The practice of nose-cutting suggests “its connection with patriarchal values of authority and honor…this is nevertheless a gendered punishment of the powerless by the powerful….The nineteenth-century British missionary to India, T.L. Pennell, cited the nose-cutting of women as sign of Indian “barbarism”” \( (Skinner) \). The mutilation of Dalit women’s body is a sign of Dalit patriarchal barbarism.
In another form of violence, a huge square piece of wood weighing around five kilos with a hole, big enough for a foot to go through, with an iron bar on the side so as to make it impossible for the foot to come out, was put around the wife’s leg:

The wood itself would be as huge and heavy as a large iron tub. She would have to drag this heavy burden each time she tried to move. She was forced to work with this device around her leg. Her leg would get wounded and blood would ooze out every time she tried to move her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just another piece of wood. (*PWB 99*)

The wooden stock around her limb symbolized the caged lives of Mahar women. Maya Angelou in her poem “Caged Bird” compares the life of a slave with a caged bird:

```
But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing. (39)
```

Maya Angelou uses the image of a caged bird to depict slavery. The caged bird stands as a metaphor for the repressed, underprivileged, downtrodden, subjugated, subordinate and oppressed people. Mahar women like the caged bird think of freedom, dream of independence, of a world of equality, of things that can change their stature so that they can voice their feelings and aspirations. However, the wooden stock represents the power of the oppressor which makes their flight / freedom impossible.

Baby Kamble too was a victim of domestic violence. In her interview to Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble confessed her husband used to beat her:

```
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 profusely….All my life I had to face this violence….He would beat me up for some flimsy reason. Actually he used to be very suspicious. I tried very hard to prove my innocence. I used to cry, explain, plead with him. Then for a few days everything would be normal. Then again after a week or so, something would happen and suspicion would raise its head once again. (*Kamble, An Interview 154-55*)
```
Her husband doubted her faithfulness. All through her married life, she remained victim of suspicion of infidelity towards her husband. This left her dejected: “The physical torture not only involved physical injuries but also inflicted deep psychological pain, leaving a scar of humiliation in the minds of dalit women” (Guru, Afterword 166).

Dalits were denied the opportunity to learn, read or write in order to ensure that they did not get enlightened. The motive behind keeping marginals oppressed and deprived of education has been described by Fredrick Douglass in the article “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.” Frederick Douglass was provided with a tutor by his liberal white mistress. However, when he was learning a lesson with the tutor, he heard the white master saying to his wife: “If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him to slave. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master” (274-75). The same is true with regard to Dalits as upper castes did not want them to be their equals: “The upper castes knew quite well that they would be able to control the Mahars only if they were kept a tight leash” (PWB 18). Depriving them of education, restricting their movement and inflicting violence were some potent strategies used by the upper castes to subdue Dalits.

Baby Kamble underscores Mahars’ preoccupation with superstition and blind faith in the Hindu rituals and customs which reduced them to the status of beasts, and the worst sufferers were Mahar women. The entire Maharwada was plunged into superstitions due to lack of education: “Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits…” (18). Baby Kamble makes a link between helplessness of Mahar women and superstitions. The Mahar women were just puppets in the hands of their men. Baby Kamble recalls the memories of Buffalo fair. During the Buffalo fair a Mahar woman was made suwasini. She was assigned the duty to walk in the buffalo’s procession after the Patil:

…suwasini swayed in her green sari and green blouse, a garland of kanher flowers around her neck, her untied hair falling loose down her back….The buffalo fair, as this procession was called, marched silently in the hot sun. By now the…suwasini would be possessed by the goddess.
She would sway from side to side, moaning and twisting her body as if in a trance. It required at least four men to control her. (32)

Next morning, the people gathered at the *chawdi* before the *potrajas* who would be dressed in their ritual dresses, arrived with their instruments to start their dance. The women and girls also danced with their hair flying wild. Some among them got possessed by the spirit of the goddess to predict future:

Dancing non-stop, they would signal them to continue to play the music….While dancing, they would be possessed by the spirit of the goddess. Then each dancing goddess would predict what the future had in store for the village. ‘I have crossed the waters, the spaces, the seven nether worlds to meet my children,’ they would declare….Their speech would be punctuated with those terrible humming sounds, ‘unhn, unhun, unhun’. Then they would continue, ‘My children, there is a monster…no rain this year….no crops will grow…all animals die…no mother will know her child, nor any child its mother…yet my children, I’ll help you. But give me my due in time…don’t keep my followers, the ghosts, hungry and dissatisfied…take this charm of good luck and tie it to your ceiling. Be careful, protect sacred things from any kind of pollution.’….While one possessed woman demonstrated her holiness so, another would let out a piercing shriek and pick up a quarrel with potraja himself. Grinding her teeth fiercely, she would accuse him of ignoring her and shout at him, declaring that she felt upset and would not dance. Then she would flounce away and start wailing aloud. (35-36)

This whole dance was an attempt by the women for recognition as the “taking over of these spirits elevates their statures temporarily to that of a Goddess and they became identified with primal energy” (Karan Singh 173). This ritual gave Mahar women some attention in their otherwise neglected lives: “These rituals were, in a sense, an outlet for their oppressed souls… to find some solace in their terrible lives….They consoled themselves with the hope that their time too would come one day” (*PWB* 18).

Within the community, all those women who were possessed by various spirits were addressed as ‘mothers’ and all men, irrespective of their relations with these women, bowed before them. Even the husband fell at his wife’s feet and addressed her as mother. Ajita Kamal in this context emphasizes that women in India are forced to:

…embrace these superstitious notions and derive strength from myths, in order to counter the real prejudice that they face everyday…these superstitious beliefs about goddesses and fairies prevent us from gaining a
better understanding of the problem and finding stable long-term solutions based on reason….In the case of gender inequality it works by soothing the conscience of the perpetrators of injustice. (Kamal)

Dalit patriarchy forced superstitions on Dalit women and by elevating them to the status of ‘mothers’, it induced in Dalit women that like mothers (synonym for sacrifice/care) they should repress their desires and aspirations and by neglecting and destroying their ‘self’, they should work for the progress of their male counterparts, consequently, negating the human existence of Dalit women.

Mahar women’s lives were mired in abject poverty and difficult routine but they longed and hoped for a better future for their children. Baby Kamble recalls the songs sung by them expressing their love, hopes, dreams and optimism which the centuries’ old oppression was not able to snuff out:

Baby, my daughter’s child / Is lovely like a flower /
Avert your evil eyes / Oh you wicked neighbour //
It’s your evil eye / That’s cast its spell on her /
My tiny Baby has got / Oh such a burning fever //
With salt and mustard seeds / I’ll drive the spell away /
Sleep soundly on my lap / O my sweet Bebabai //. (PWB 50)

These lines mirror optimism and hope for better future for the next progeny and add a melodious touch to the otherwise straight narration. The song is articulation of Mahar women’s banished dreams which they desire to see fulfilled through the better lives of their children.

Baby Kamble weaves into her life narrative a gamut of issues concerning Dalit women. She refers to Devdasi system: an indirect way of forcing women into the flesh trade: “Devdasi system is conventionally followed in Indian Temples …to sexually exploit and force prostitution of girl child who belongs to the Dalit community” (Sundaram, Sivakumar and Xavier 150). She dwells on the tradition of offering the first girl at the temple of god Khandreya: “In this system Dalit girls are married to a village god by their parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper-caste landlords and rich men of the village” (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 68). These superstitious practices remain embedded in the life of Mahars:
Listen, a murali woman is the first fruit obtained by a couple in their marriage. She has to be offered at the feet of our god Khanderya. We have been doing so for ages; that’s why we have his blessings and our children are protected. And the jogtin? She is also a woman offered to our goddess. And you don’t want to do any of this? You are all set to burn and destroy a living tree…god Khaderyais the deity of all Mahars. He blesses us with so many fruits; what’s the harm in offering him one of ours? Why should we hesitate to do so? The custom of murali is actually an honour given to our house. She is supposed to be the god’s wife. A murali is married to god. This god has a fiery temper. If we don’t do so, he will lose his temper and punish us. He can wreck such havoc that we will be left whimpering like dogs. You also ask us not to offer our girls to goddess Ambabai as jogtin. But that too is wrong. Why if we offer one fruit to her, she will bless us with many more in return. The goddess Ambabai specially favours the house that offers her a girl as jogtin. That house becomes her favourite. (PWB 67-68)

In this context Gopal Guru also remarks:

…young dalits are married either to a god or goddess. This is done for the well-being and survival of a male child. The conservative mahars are shown opposing the efforts to demobilize common dalit masses from this system. The argument advanced by the conservative Mahars in support of the system is quite interesting for they sought to defend the system by elevating it spiritually. They would argue that marriage of a dalit woman with God Khandoba is a rare privilege, while the reformist would argue that this elevation is a reduction of a human being to the worst form of exploitation. This reduction and elevation is an on-going tension between those who support the system and those who oppose it (Afterword 167),

thus highlighting the tension between the people who still wanted to continue with these superstitious practices and the young educated Mahars who wanted to end these illogical rituals of ‘spiritual’ mystification of women for sexual exploitation. These people turned a blind eye to the exploitation of their daughters in the name of holy rituals. Andrea Parrot and Nina Cummings’ observation, “In almost all cases, Devdasi girls come from the Dalit caste. It is the economic deprivation of the caste that motivates poor families to agree to sexual slavery of their daughters; they are in desperate need of the money paid for the girls” (122) substantiates the Dalit girls physical abuse as ‘rare privilege’.

Further, Andrea Parrot and Nina Cummings through the testimony of Ashana, who at the age of seven was married to gods:
Since the day of the initiation, I have not lived with dignity. I became available for all men who inhabited Karni. They would ask me for sexual favours and I, as a jogini, was expected to please them. My trauma began even when I had not attained puberty. (122)

underscore, the prevalence of prostitution under the garb of religion in the Devdasi system showing signs of a sinking, decadent temple culture.

Baby Kamble through the collective experiences of Mahar women highlights their acceptance of sufferings as a part and parcel of their lives until the message of love, brotherhood and equality given by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar reached them. Baby Kamble recalls the speech of B. R. Ambedkar in Jejuri:

‘Our women have had a major role in being superstitious, but I’m sure they will now give up these superstitions and take a lead in educating their children. They will have the honour of being the first to take this step forward. I have full faith in you, my sisters. Go ahead, educate your children. Let all our women take this step. Discard all such customs that strengthen our ignorance’ (PWB 65),

which gave tremendous courage and hope to Mahar women, who made a firm resolve to educate their children so that the next generation would not face what their parents and grandparents faced: “…there were so many women around us. They were determined to get their children educated because their Baba had told them to do so” (Kamble, An Interview 136). Mahar women, thus realized the importance of self and their individual potential to “emerge[d] as the agents of transformation in their community” (Pandit, Introduction, The Prisons We Broke xv).

With the passage of time, Dalit women showed “an extraordinary courage to challenge the upper castes attempts that involved in assigning conceptually inferior meaning to public spaces” (Guru, Afterword 166). Dalit women struggled for equal recognition:

Women leaders like Thakubai Kakade, Mathubai More, Fattabai Kakade and Vithabai Kakade used to take women from all the houses to these meetings….This must have been my second meeting….All the Brahmin and Maratha women had occupied the chairs. They would not allow the Mahar women to sit on the chairs. Helpless, our women stood on one side. At the same time, the rani sahib started to move towards the stage, accompanied by her other followers….Our Thakubai rushed forward. She
took 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.’ (PWB 133)

The assertion of Thakubai in the public meeting is an illustration of the efforts of Mahar women for claiming a space, “democratized the spatiality” for themselves in the public sphere. By writing about these women’s struggle Baby Kamble brings them into the public space, so that the Dalit women of future generations know about the struggles and sacrifices of the older Dalit women to gain recognition for Dalits, especially women.

Gopal Guru, in this context, comments, “The upper caste could no more confine dalit women either to their dalitwadas or push the latter to the polluting margin of the public spaces…” (Afterword 166).

Baby Kamble attributes her own awakening/writing her life narrative to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the movement he created and led:

It is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts. It is because of him that I have understood the truth; that I can now see how morality is being trampled upon. It is because of him that I got the inspiration to join the struggle against oppression and contribute my small might to it. (PWB 102)

Baby Kamble resolved to lead her life according to the path shown by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: “I made a firm resolve, at a young age, to lead my life according the path sketched by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the light of my life. His principles have exercised a strong influence on me” (115). She calls herself “a product of Ambedkar movement” (125). With affection and confidence in her saviour, Baby Kamble has dedicated her life narrative to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: “I am a wild flower budding in the wasteland. I offer this flower in homage in the form of a book with all my love at the feet of Bhim” (qtd. in Poitevin).

Besides, Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* also acknowledges her inspiration from Saint Tukaram and the character of Savitri from the movie *Sati Savitri*:

Events in Savitri’s life left a deep impact on my mind—such as Savitri pulling her husband’s cart, braving the storms, stopping the sun from shining, the sheer grit with which she challenged her destiny, and above
all, her ability to face life adversities. I wanted to be strong as Savitri. Let people say what they want, this movie was one of the main factors that changed my life. (PWB 116)

The undying spirit of Savitri inspired Baby Kamble to be courageous and strong. In Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri (1950), exhibiting courage and patience, Savitri brought back her husband Satyavan’s soul from Yamraja: “Was death purposely moving through such regions in order to tire the patience and the courage of Savitri?...If Love is to triumph, then Savitri must go through the darkness of total negation” (Mehta 287). Like Savitri, Baby Kamble along with other Mahar women challenged the caste and patriarchy and with courage and patience walked through the world of negation to create space, bring recognition and dignity in their lives.

Alexander de Heering asserts, “…individual’s need to speak out and a sense of duty towards the collective are two major reasons for breaking the silences” (43). Baby Kamble also authenticates these words when she states the reasons behind writing her story were the “humiliations of our former conditions [were] causing me burns….So much had we suffered that I could not drive these memories away….It is the grief that…pushed me to narrate them” (qtd. in Poitevin). By drawing upon the source of memory and experiences as Mahar woman, Baby Kamble has linked the past of Mahar community to their present and future: “Memory serves not only as a vibrant narrative strategy but facilitates the juxtaposition of the past and the present, and the encounter with the past liberates a new subjectivity” (Guttal 102). Mahar women who remained ‘others’ and pushed to the periphery for centuries, however, in Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke are not only at the centre but also are the subjects.

The day to day life of Mahar women was shaped by the fire of calamities. This “made their bodies strong, but their minds cried out against this oppression” (PWB 102). Despite being victims of caste and gender disabilities, Mahar women displayed an extraordinary courage to overcome the difficulties of life. Baby Kamble remarks, “There is saying that a black cow can survive even on thorns. Our women were like that proverbial black cow… they had to fill their stomachs with thorns to stay alive” (57). Baby Kamble relates strength of Mahar women with the stamina of black cow who in scarcity survived even on thorns. ‘Thorns’ is a metaphor used for the poverty in Mahar
women’s lives. In spite of social exclusion, Dalit women possess an internal power/a hidden strength that makes them proficient to function even in adverse conditions.

Baby Kamble is straightforward in her criticism of her own community, especially the financially well off Dalits who are preoccupied with their own family and show no concern for others. Decrying the lack of community spirit and unity among the educated in the community, she underlines the need for intellectuals who will bring in winds of change and tackle poverty. Baby Kamble feels pained that the literate progeny could not live up to the promise of the rebellious spirit of 1930s and 40s. Baby Kamble through her narrative appeals to the community not to forget the glorious history of struggle and the path shown by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. She observes that the present generation of Dalits has gone astray from the true path and they fail to recognize the value of Dalit humanitarianism:

Now the educated Dalits are behaving exactly as the upper caste villagers used to behave then. Educated Dalits occupy top positions in the government. Their children enjoy the good life. They are not bothered about what’s happening to poor people. Whatever, they do, they do only for themselves. The poor Dalits are left where they were. At least that’s what I feel. (Kamble, An Interview 150)

In *The Prisons We Broke* the narration deals with Baby Kamble’s memories of her family, *Maharwada*, Mahar customs, superstition, illiteracy, poverty, hunger, experiences of discrimination, exploitation, marginalization and violence. Baby Kamble employs her memories to portray the sufferings and experiences of Dalit women to prepare the background for the narration of her life narrative. According to Baby Kamble, a woman needs to have “the urge to define the self.” Baby Kamble’s life narrative is a step forward to establish a new identity for Dalit women to enable the reader/world to see them in a new light. Maya Pandit in the Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke* comments that Baby Kamble’s life narrative becomes the testimony of the “dignity and resilience of the Mahar women.” *The Prisons We Broke* brings to light not only “experiential worlds” but also “brings to the fore the tremendous transformative potential of oppressed people to change the world” (Pandit, Introduction, *The Prisons We Broke* xv).
Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* is an appeal to Dalit women to work towards the demolition of the ‘prisons’ of sufferings and distress through education and awareness. She exhorts Dalit women for self-interrogation as well as interrogation of the system that will lead to awareness about their marginalization and victimization which in turn leads to efforts on the part of Dalit women to re-construct an identity of their own, thus emerging from the shadows.