



RITUAL, MEMORY, AND SOCIAL ORDER: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF TRADITION IN BABY KAMBLE'S *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*

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Abstract

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, translated from Marathi by Maya Pandit, offers a collective account of Mahar life under the Hindu caste system and the influence of Dr Ambedkar. One of the significant features of Kamble's narrative is her representation of caste performance through the description of rituals, customs, festivals, and bodily practices. This paper examines how these practices reflect and shape cultural values within the Mahar community and the caste system. Drawing on concepts such as habitus, social memory, ritual reversal, and Dalit scholarship, the paper argues that ritual in Kamble's memoir serves several contradictory functions. It creates communal belonging and preserves collective memory while also reinforcing caste hierarchy and gender inequality. Through close readings of Kamble's description of caste-coded traditions, bodily practices, social customs and rituals, the paper demonstrates how social structures become embodied through repetition. The paper then examines the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness and the transformation of traditional ritual practices within the narrative. The paper ultimately argues that *The Prisons We Broke* presents ritual as a dynamic cultural process through which communities can preserve memory, negotiate hierarchy, and construct identity and solidarity.

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Mahar Community, Ritual, Caste, Cultural Memory, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Ritual is one of the primary means through which the cultural values of a community become visible. Festivals, ceremonies, bodily practices, dress codes, and inherited customs are more than just symbolic gestures belonging to a community. Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, defines the enactment of rituals "as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects" (Bell, 8). According to her, rituals establish patterns of behaviour through which individuals in a community understand themselves and behave in society. As rituals are repeated over time, they create social values and hierarchy that appear natural and permanent.

This relationship between ritual and social organisation becomes especially significant within the caste system. Caste does not operate only through formal categories or explicitly stated beliefs. It is reproduced through everyday practices involving food, occupation, clothing, bodily movement, speech, spatial access, and religious participation. Therefore, the body becomes one of the principal sites on which caste is performed. Practices that may appear ordinary, like how one dresses, where one walks, whom one addresses first, or how one enters a religious space, can become mechanisms for communicating and maintaining social hierarchy.



Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* provides a powerful literary representation of such rituals. The memoir documents the lives of the Mahars of Maharashtra while tracing the community's movement from an inherited Hindu social order toward Ambedkarite consciousness. Kamble's narrative does not present tradition in simple binaries of acceptance or rejection. She exposes the superstition and hierarchy embedded within the ritual practices while also crediting their emotional importance to the community. On the one hand, Kamble states that the Mahars “desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on”. On the other hand, she recognises that the same cultural system participates in their oppression. Therefore, rituals occupy an unstable position in the narrative. They provide a sense of cultural belonging while also reminding the community of its exclusion.

Catherine Bell observes that ritual practices are not “of a fixed nature and significance”; instead, they continually “renegotiate tradition, authority, and the hegemonic order” (Bell, 140). Therefore, ritual exists as a dynamic cultural process through which communities reproduce inherited values while also modifying or reinterpreting them. Using this theorisation, the paper argues that ritual in *The Prisons We Broke* is a dynamic cultural practice rather than a fixed inheritance. With the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness, inherited practices are questioned and transformed within the narrative.

Rather than treating rituals merely as anthropological evidence, the paper examines Kamble's language itself as significant. Particular word choices reveal the narrator's interpretation of ritual and bodily practice. Therefore, close reading allows the rituals to be understood not only as social practices but as literary representations of cultural continuity, oppression, and transformation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

The present study builds upon Dalit scholarship by various critics, including Raj Kumar, Sharmila Rege, Charu Gupta, and Thomas Crowley. Works by Raj Kumar are relevant as they argue that autobiographical narratives by Dalit writers cannot be treated simply as private accounts of individual experience but as representations of their communal suffering. Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* is also particularly important for reading Kamble because it places Dalit women's autobiographical writing within the interconnected structures of caste and patriarchy.

Moreover, the paper focuses on ritual as the point at which caste, gender, identity, and cultural transformation intersect. In this context, the following theoretical perspectives are particularly useful.

Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* moves ritual studies away from treating ritual simply as a collection of fixed religious acts and instead examines ritualisation as a form of practice through which meaning and power are organised. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of “habitus” is useful for understanding how social structures become incorporated into habitual bodily behaviour. Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember* provides a framework for understanding ritual as embodied cultural memory. Connerton argues that commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices preserve versions of the past through repeated performance and that memory can become “sedimented” in the body. Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* helps explain moments in which ritual temporarily reverses ordinary relations of authority. His concepts of liminality, communitas, and status reversal are useful for examining Kamble's descriptions of possession rituals.

These theoretical perspectives provide vocabulary through which the literary significance of her descriptions can be articulated. This framework helps explain why Kamble's descriptions of



dress, bodily movement, temple purification, and ceremonial practices matter to the reproduction of caste.

Ritual as Communal Belonging and Emotional Refuge:

One of the first functions of ritual in *The Prisons We Broke* is to foster a sense of belonging among people excluded from the dominant cultural order. It describes the Mahar community's attachment to Hindu rituals despite their exclusion from Hindu social privileges: "We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on" (Kamble). The verb "preserve" is significant because it suggests that culture is perceived as something vulnerable to disappearance. The phrase "whatever bits" further emphasises scarcity. The community does not possess unrestricted access to the cultural world it desires; it possesses only fragments of it. Kamble, therefore, represents the simultaneous possession and deprivation of culture by certain members of the Hindu community.

This contradiction is visible in Kamble's description of Ashadh. She writes: "Of all the months in the year, Ashadh was their favourite month. The Mahars considered this their own month". The possessive expression "their own month" is especially important. The community may not control the larger religious order, but it can claim a particular period as its own through ritual practice. Ashadh, therefore, becomes a symbolic cultural territory. The month involves laborious tasks such as ritual baths, housecleaning, and polishing floors with dung, yet Kamble describes Ashadh as "a month of comfort, of sweet food!" The contrast between labour and comfort reveals how ritual transforms ordinary domestic work into communal celebration. Ritual consequently creates belonging not because it removes social exclusion but because it creates a temporary cultural space in which the community can experience itself as a collective. This is supported by the paper entitled "The Role of Ritual in Building Community Resilience", in which Abenaitwe Jackline writes, "Shared practices that are performed together foster a sense of togetherness, stimulate social networks, and provide a sense of belonging" (Jackline, 15).

Kamble's understanding of ritual becomes more complex as she explicitly identifies its psychological importance. She writes, "These rituals were, in a sense, an outlet for their oppressed souls". The metaphor of an "outlet" is central to the passage as it suggests that the community has been suffering for a long time and that ritual provides a temporary channel for releasing that suffering. The adjective "oppressed" brings to attention the existence of the "oppressor", who is the cause of their suffering. The ritual is meaningful precisely because the people performing it live under oppression. It becomes an exclusive safe space for the "oppressed souls" who are themselves excluded from mainstream culture. Similarly, Jackline also argues that "in matters of mental health, the emotionally charged nature of rituals not only provides a framework where shared trauma can be acknowledged, but also a container where anxiety and uncertainty can be managed" (Jackline, 18). Therefore, Kamble constructs a relationship between communal suffering and their ritual practices.

The following sentence deepens this relationship: "This was how they tried to find some solace in their terrible lives" (Kamble). The word "solace" suggests comfort rather than transformation. She further writes, "They consoled themselves with the hope that their time too would come one day" (Kamble). The word "hope" shifts the ritual from their present suffering toward a better future. Ritual allows the community to imagine a different future, even when it lacks the material means to create it. Therefore, the Ashadh festivities provide relief but do not alter the existing social structures. This distinction is important because Kamble's narrative does not romanticise traditional practices. She recognises their emotional necessity while remaining critical of their ideological limitations.



Ritual, Social Order and the Embodied Performance of Caste:

Kamble's representation of ritual becomes more powerful when she describes how caste hierarchy exists in everyday bodily behaviour. She describes the encounter between Mahar women and upper-caste men: "The humble Mahar women fall at your feet, master...This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times" (Kamble). The word "chant" transforms a simple greeting into a ritualised performance. Repetition is what gives the practice its coercion. The women are not expressing respect but are rather "performing" their subordinate position repeatedly. The phrase "fall at your feet" is equally significant. It establishes a physical hierarchy in which the oppressed body literally lowers itself before another. Caste is therefore communicated spatially through the body.

Kamble also reveals how the community punishes a newly married woman who fails to bow down and perform the expected greeting. She is given an earful of "We eat their food, don't we? Should we pass by them without bowing?" (Kamble). This demonstrates that caste hierarchy is reproduced not only through external coercion but through communal enforcement. The community itself becomes responsible for teaching its members how to perform caste correctly. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu explains how social structures become incorporated into individuals through repeated practices. These internalised dispositions, called "habitus", guide behaviour without requiring constant external force. Kamble reinforces this idea when she describes the women walking with "utmost humility" and attempting "to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible". The Mahar woman must not merely occupy less social space; she must attempt to become less visible within that space. The young woman learns how to move, speak, bow, and position herself because caste has become embodied.

Kamble extends this analysis to clothing. She writes, "There were caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats". The adverb "even" emphasises the unexpected extent of caste regulation. Caste does not govern only major questions such as occupation, marriage, or religious access. It enters something as ordinary as the arrangement of a sari. Kamble continues, "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". The rule concerned the symbolic meanings attached to dress. Charu Gupta's study titled "Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India" demonstrates that dress operated as a visible marker of caste status. Restrictions on clothing helped maintain distinctions between dominant and subordinated communities. Consequently, a lower-caste woman's adoption of garments associated with dignity or respectability could challenge the established caste order. Therefore, the sari becomes a form of ritualised caste discipline, not simply a piece of clothing but a social text. Its arrangement communicates the wearer's position before she speaks.

The temple-entry episode provides the most explicit representation of ritual purity and pollution. When Mahar activists enter the Viththal temple, the Brahmin priests announce: "The Mahars had polluted the temple" (Kamble). The Mahar body is represented as a contaminating presence rather than simply as a socially excluded body. The priests then organise: "chanting of scriptures and purificatory rituals to wash away the pollution with milk and gomutra" (Kamble). This demonstrates how ritual can stabilise social hierarchy by granting it a sacred legitimacy. The length of the purification is also significant. Kamble describes "one and a half months of incessant chanting" and "ceaseless worship" before the priests declare that the gods have been cleansed. The exaggerated duration exposes the absurdity of the ideology while simultaneously revealing its institutional power. Therefore, ritual is not a harmless ceremony here but an institutional mechanism through which caste hierarchy is reproduced.

Ritual, Gender, and Temporary Reversal:



Sharmila Rege insists that caste and gender must be understood as mutually constitutive structures and critiques approaches that produce either “genderless caste” or “casteless gender” (Rege, 3). Kamble’s narrative also shows that Mahar women experience oppression both as members of a marginalised caste and as women within their own community. The description of ritual possession in *The Prisons We Broke* helps to understand the intersection of caste, gender and ritual power. During possession rituals, women can temporarily become embodiments of goddesses and acquire authority over men. She describes the ritual as “At other times, these men commanded great respect as the father-in-law or brother-in-law of the woman who was now possessed. But now, she was the mother goddess, and they her children!” (Kamble). This phenomenon can be read through Victor Turner’s concept of ritual reversal. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, he argues that rituals of status reversal, “mask the weak in strength and demand of the strong that they be passive” (Turner, 175-176). Hence, such rituals temporarily suspend ordinary relations of status and create a symbolic inversion of hierarchy.

However, he also states, “By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle” (Turner, 176). This is evident in the following lines: “After this, the spirit of the goddess left and the woman ... pulled the pallav on her head, becoming, once again, a docile and virtuous wife” (Kamble). Therefore, Kamble’s representation does not suggest that possession permanently liberates women. The authority of the woman is conditional upon her temporary transformation. She becomes powerful because she is understood as a goddess. Therefore, rituals can provide temporary access to authority while leaving the ordinary social hierarchy intact. This is another example of the ambiguity that defines Kamble’s treatment of ritual.

Ambedkarite Consciousness and the Transformation of Ritual:

The emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness marks a major shift in the community’s relationship with tradition. Thomas Crowley’s paper titled “Leisure, Festival, Revolution: Ambedkarite Productions of Space” demonstrates how festivals and commemorative practices can produce spaces radically opposed to Brahmanical social organisation. Kamble describes the 1938 celebration of Ambedkar’s birth anniversary as the beginning of a new cultural tradition. The activists declared: “They would not celebrate GudhiPadva, the traditional Hindu new year, but instead they resolved to celebrate 14th April as the day of their new year” (Kamble). The sentence is important because it establishes a clear act of cultural renunciation.

However, the transformation is more complicated than simple rejection. Kamble explains that on April 14, the community would: “raise gudhis, buy new clothes, clean their houses, decorate their courtyards with rangoli, cook puran poli and invite people from all the eighty-four villages for a festive lunch”. This is the key to understanding ritual evolution in the memoir. The community retains some of the ritual practices, but its symbolic centre becomes Ambedkar and “the spirit of Bhim.” The ritual form, therefore, remains recognisable while its ideological meaning changes.

One of the most revealing patterns in the memoir is the replacement of traditional ritual symbols with Ambedkarite ones. Traditional ritual objects include: haldi and kumkum, ritual clothing, and religious images. These objects connect the community to inherited cultural practices. However, the Ambedkarite celebration introduces another symbolic system. Kamble describes “They put Dr Ambedkar’s photograph on a chair, draped a garland around it and sang their radical songs”.

Following Catherine Bell’s understanding of ritualisation as the differentiation of particular actions from ordinary social activity, Kamble’s description of Ambedkar’s photograph being ceremonially displayed and garlanded can be understood as a process of ritualisation. The



photograph is transformed from an image into a focal object around which collective attention, emotion, memory, and political identity are organised. Therefore, the photograph functions as more than a representation of an individual but the centre of collective ritual.

Ritual as a Dynamic Cultural Process and Counter-Memory:

Paul Connerton, in *How Societies Remember*, emphasises that societies remember not only through written historical records but through commemorative ceremonies and embodied practices. According to him, memory is socially transmitted through bodily gestures, rituals, ceremonies, habits, and forms of social behaviour. The transformation of ritual also changes what the community remembers. Traditional rituals preserve memories of Hindu gods, inherited customs, family traditions, caste occupations, and religious practices. Ambedkarite rituals create a different commemorative structure centred on Ambedkar, equality, education, dignity, collective resistance, and human rights.

The memoir itself becomes part of this process of memory reconstruction. Kamble's narrative does not simply preserve the past as it was. It remembers the past from the standpoint of a community that has undergone political and intellectual transformation. Raj Kumar's *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* is useful here because it argues that Dalit life-writing is a form of resistance through which writers negotiate the struggle between the “loss of identity” and the “asserting of self.” For Kumar, the emergence of Dalit autobiography therefore constitutes an act of resistance and a means of asserting identity.

Traditions are preserved through repetition, but repetition also creates the possibility of recognition and critique. Once a community becomes conscious of what a ritual means, it can choose to reject, modify, or re-signify it. Within the narrative of *The Prisons We Broke*, Ambedkarite consciousness questions these inherited beliefs. The community moves from unquestioned ritual to conscious cultural practice. Ambedkar Jayanti transforms familiar ritual forms into a new commemorative system. This progression demonstrates that culture is not static.

Conclusion:

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* presents ritual as one of the principal sites through which cultural values are embodied, remembered, reproduced, and transformed. The rituals of the Mahar community cannot be understood simply as religious practices. They structure emotional life, establish communal belonging, communicate status, preserve intergenerational memory, regulate the body, and reproduce social hierarchy.

Kamble's description of Ashadh demonstrates the emotional and communal value of ritual. At the same time, Kamble exposes the oppressive dimensions of ritualised behaviour by showcasing how caste-based rituals can lead to social exclusion for some members of society. However, with the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness, this relationship is transformed. The decision to replace GudhiPadva with Ambedkar Jayanti transforms ritual into a celebration of collective self-recognition. It is a movement from inherited ritual to consciously re-signified ritual. The community retains its need for symbols, ceremonies, and collective gatherings, but changes the values they represent.

Kamble thus presents culture as a dynamic process rather than a fixed inheritance. Ritual can reproduce oppression, but it can also become an instrument through which oppressed communities reconstruct their identity. The significance of Ambedkarite ritual lies precisely in this possibility of transformation: the community does not become culturally empty by rejecting oppressive traditions; it creates new cultural forms through which it can remember itself differently.



Ultimately, *The Prisons We Broke* suggests that cultural liberation involves not simply abandoning the past but reinterpreting the practices by which it has been remembered. Ritual becomes the site where that reinterpretation occurs. Through the transformation of its rituals, the Mahar community moves from being an object of caste hierarchy to becoming a conscious cultural and political subject.

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