



Mainstream Weekly

BOOK REVIEW

## Sustained from Below: Dalit Women and the Ambedkarite Movement's Limits of Liberation | Theertha Praveen Panachoor

*Thursday 25 June 2026*

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

The history of the Ambedkarite movement in India has largely been written as a history of its leadership. Its constitutional achievements, its formal organisations and its founding figure are well documented. What has received far less attention is the question of who sustained that movement from below. Those who ground the grain, showed up to the satyagrahas and absorbed domestic violence and returned to meetings the following morning. Dalit women did this work for decades and the historical record, both external and internal to the movement, did not think it worth preserving. The two books I am reviewing are attempts to address that omission. Baby Kamble's 'The Prisons We Broke', first written in Marathi in 1984 and published in English translation in 2008, is an autobiography that recovers the phenomenology of caste oppression as it was lived and felt by a Mahar woman across the movement's most active decades. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's 'We Also Made History', published in Marathi in 1989 and translated in 2008, reconstructs the collective history of Dalit women in the movement through forty-four biographical accounts and research in Dalit-run periodicals that mainstream historians had not drawn on. Read together, they put forward an argument more unsettling than either makes alone. The movement's relationship to the women who sustained it more ambiguous transaction than liberation, one that demanded everything and institutionalised nothing. This review takes both books seriously as scholarly and political interventions and asks what they reveal and what they stop short of saying about the nature of that transaction.

Both titles announce their political stakes before a single argument is made. 'We Also Made History' performs what it claims. The word "also" inserts itself into a sentence that had already been written and closed without these women in it. It does not petition for inclusion; rather, it asserts presence, retroactively, with a sense of impatience. The sentence it completes is the official Ambedkarite historical record and the assertion is simple: that record was written without us and it was wrong. The forty-four accounts that follow are the proof of that one word. 'The Prisons We Broke' is put differently. The prison here is not a building. It is the entire architecture of caste consciousness, the internalised condition that made Dalit women experience their own subjugation as natural order. To break it required not a key but the refusal of a self-perception the system had spent generations constructing. The titles therefore orient the project in two distinct directions, even as both are concerned with the same problem. One addresses the absence of Dalit women from the historical

record by reconstructing what was not preserved. The other turns to the interior, to the lived experience of caste as it is felt and internalised

The argument Kamble makes is phenomenological. Caste does not only impose material conditions on Dalit women. It shapes how they experience themselves within those conditions, making degradation feel like nature rather than imposition. She describes this through the image of a bullock whose nose has been pierced and a string threaded through it. The animal does not resist because it has forgotten that resistance was ever possible and that is what caste does to consciousness. The choice of image is interesting here. At Mahad, Ambedkar himself used the bullock to describe the Dalit condition, an animal that at least has economic value, that can be touched and that can drink from the same water. Kamble uses the same image. What caste did, according to her, was install the string. The bullock's nose was once unpierced. The capacity for resistance existed before it was conditioned away. That is a more precise and more damning argument than pure abjection, because it insists that what was destroyed had first to exist. Liberation thus begins not with legislation or collective protest but with a prior and harder act: the refusal of a self-perception the system has spent generations constructing.

The text makes its most powerful arguments through scenes, one of which I found particularly interesting. Mahar women go into the forest, cut firewood and carry it back on their heads to Brahmin households. Thorns cut their hands along the way. Their blood and sweat soak into the wood. The Brahmin woman who buys it then picks through the sticks carefully, removing strands of Mahar hair and cloth clinging to them. These are treated as polluting and must be removed. Kamble's point is important. The body declared impure is the one that cut, carried and bled on that wood. The Brahmin household's warmth, its food, its comfort all depend on Mahar labour. The purity being protected is produced by the very people who are then kept at a distance. The system marks as untouchable the source of what it depends on. It made me wonder that it is not only that Mahar women are exploited but that the system has, over time, shaped how they see themselves. The woman carrying the firewood has been taught to understand her own body as the problem. She cannot easily recognise what is being done to her because her sense of what is normal has already been formed by the system. This is what the image of the string through the bullock's nose captures. The animal does not need to be forced. It has already been trained not to resist.

What Kamble does that no previous account had done is treat autobiography as a form of historical and political argument rather than personal testimony. The personal is the political. That claim, shown through sensation rather than abstraction, is the book's genuine contribution. The interior experience of caste, the feeling of being a bullock before you know you are not one, is historical evidence of the highest order. I think it's essential to focus on the qualifications of the book. To begin with, it's the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in any Indian language, which is itself a political fact, but it is also a book whose precision arrives in English mediated through Maya Pandit's translation of Kamble's dialectal Marathi, which is a register that Pandit herself acknowledges is largely irrecoverable in translation. The analytical claims the review makes about Kamble's precision of sensation rest, in part, on Pandit's construction of it. A second limitation appears when individual experience is asked to stand for all Mahar women. The fluidity with which "I" becomes "we" throughout the text is an assertion of representativeness rather than a demonstration of it. This is a constraint the autobiographical form makes inevitable and Kamble does not pretend otherwise.

A further point emerges in passing. Kamble recalls how, as schoolgirls, she and her friends mocked upper-caste figures like Gandhi by calling him by a vulgar nickname and sang songs about Ambedkar's political victories. . What this suggests is that political consciousness did not emerge only through formal mobilisation but also through smaller, embodied acts like laughter and irreverence.

That is a different theory of radicalisation than the one the movement's formal record preserves, and it is one only autobiography can carry. It is an insight that sits lightly in the text but it complicates how I understood political awakening.

Pawar and Moon's argument is structured differently. Their central claim is that the erasure of Dalit women from the Ambedkarite historical record was structural, produced by what counted as historical evidence in the first place. Mainstream newspapers virtually boycotted the movement. The movement's own internal records documented its male leadership and treated women as beneficiaries of Ambedkar's vision rather than producers of its political consciousness. Pawar and Moon bypassed that archive entirely and built a new one from Dalit-run periodicals, direct oral interviews, and accounts reconstructed through family memory after the women had died. They call what they found an Aladdin's cave, and then almost immediately a snowflake on the vast surface of the ocean. Triumphant and mournful at once. This double exclusion matters. These women were erased first from the mainstream nationalist record, which found the movement unworthy of coverage and then from the movement's own internal archive, which found women's contributions unworthy of documentation. The recovery project Pawar and Moon undertake is therefore working against two silences at once.

The problem was never that this history did not exist, but what counted as proof. By treating oral testimony and Dalit periodicals as primary sources, the book recasts the archive as a political construction. The passage that makes this most clear is from 1924, three years before the Mahad Satyagraha. At a convention in Mohaya, Venutai Bhatkar and Rangubai Shambharkar challenged a Brahmin speaker who suggested Mahars should continue eating carcasses, and a resolution was passed: the untouchables should not rely on caste Hindus for reforms but strive for their own liberation. This resolution predates Mahad. It predates the formal consolidation of the Ambedkarite movement's political distinctiveness. These women arrived at its central position before the movement had formalised it. This would later define the Ambedkarite movement's political distinctiveness. These women articulated it first. The standard narrative, which locates that position in Ambedkar's writings and speeches cannot easily account for them. That the resolution survives at all is because it was recorded in a Dalit-run periodical that mainstream histories did not draw on. How many others did not survive is a question the book raises but cannot answer.

The forty-four accounts that follow this methodological opening carry the argument in ways no single narrative could. Shantabai Sarode would deliberately walk to the section of the river reserved for upper-caste women, wash her clothes there and wait for the confrontation. She served eighteen prison terms. Before reading this, political action in this period reads almost entirely as constitutional, drafting, debating, formal machinery. What Shantabai breaks open is that resistance was spatial and bodily too. The river itself was a political argument. The act of touching the water was a form of speech. Radhabai Kamble led mill strikes and advised women to carry chilly powder in their saris in case they were attacked walking home. She was telling women how to survive the walk home and that was also politics. Jaibai Chaudhari survived years of domestic abuse and founded one of the first schools for Dalit girls. She "snatched the quill from the hand of the witch who writes the fates of men". Literacy was the one thing a hierarchical society cannot safely give to the people it needs to remain subordinate. A classroom, in this context, reads as a threat.

One of the book's more unexpected arguments concerns dress. Ambedkar directed women to change how they draped their saris and to abandon the ornaments that marked their caste position. Pawar and Moon reject the conventional reading that this was assimilationist and an instruction to imitate upper-caste respectability. When a woman changed her sari drape, they argue, she was refusing to keep performing her own subordination. The aesthetic choice and the political statement

were the same gesture. But the book is honest enough to record what sat alongside that gesture. Vithabai Pawar's mother quarrelled with Samata Sainik Dal members for teaching her daughter drill and stick-wielding, fearing it would destroy her marriage prospects. The movement needed militant women. The community needed marriageable daughters. Nobody resolved that conflict. The movement asked women to remake themselves through their dress, their bearing, their public behaviour, while offering no protection from the private costs of doing so. That pattern runs through the book. The demands were structural but the support was not.

Where the book strains is where it is most ambitious. The structural argument, that women were constitutive agents, rests on forty-four testimonies drawn from a geographically concentrated population. The majority of accounts come from Nagpur, Mumbai and Vidarbha. This concentration reflects the conditions of the research. There was no funding or any administrative infrastructure. It was two women travelling across Maharashtra on their own initiative. This is more a limit than a flaw that future work could address. Whether the forms of consciousness and resistance the book documents were particular to an urban, textile-mill economy or whether comparable patterns existed in regions organised around different kinds of labour, remains an open question. No comparable study has been undertaken since. This is a pioneering work.

Both books recover the same movement but offer incompatible accounts of women's participation. For Kamble, the movement produces agency through an interior transformation. For Pawar and Moon, it draws on an agency that already exists. The women at Mohaya in 1924 were making political judgements before the movement formalised them. In one account, agency is an effect and in the other it is a precondition. That leaves us with the question: if women's political consciousness preceded the movement, what did the movement give them in return for what it took?

The post-1956 evidence is difficult to set aside. More than half the women Pawar and Moon interviewed left activism after Ambedkar's death, blaming factionalism, disunity and the weight of domestic responsibilities. Before jumping to the conclusion and treating this as evidence of structural failure, it's essential to go over what it actually describes and the terms in which it is described. These women were bereft. The movement to which they had given years of their lives had lost its centre and what followed was a fragmentation that was as material as it was emotional. The conditions of the time did little to counter this. In the 1950s there was still no substantial Dalit middle class, reservations were only beginning to expand and the organisational forms that might have sustained continuity were either fragile or absent. The disarray that followed Ambedkar's death was not unique in itself, but it fell with particular force on those whose participation had always been less formal, more dependent on personal ties and least protected by any durable structure. What this withdrawal revealed is not only that the movement failed women, though it did, but that their participation had been held in place by the force of a single figure's presence and that when that presence was gone there was nothing sufficiently institutional to take its place. The book mourns this, and that may be the right response. Some losses ask to be witnessed before they are explained.

Both books characterise Ambedkar in ways that cannot be reconciled and to me this is where the deepest evasion lies. Kamble describes him as a god of gods, an authority so total it borders on the theological. In Pawar and Moon's accounts, he appears as a strategic resource, his teachings invoked to claim space and enforce reform. These portraits coexist within the same movement. What they point to is a question neither book pursues: what did Ambedkar's vision of women's liberation require and on whose terms? The exclusion of women from jalsas is noted as a constraint. Its basis, and whether women were consulted, remains unexamined.

The scissors metaphor captures this tension. Kamble describes the Dalit woman caught between two blades, the external caste system and the husband at home. The image promises equal weight to both oppressions but the book doesn't deliver this. The husband's violence is explained through caste, as a response to humiliation elsewhere. This shifts its origin outward and softens its force within the home. Kamble herself does not resist it, framing endurance as necessary for collective struggle. The metaphor implies resistance to both blades but the narrative settles for one. What remains unasked is why no structure emerged that made resistance to both possible.

This is the question that reading both books together forces into the open. Chandrika Ramteke's husband bolted the door and beat her when she returned from political meetings. Laxmibai Kaakde describes the same pattern and kept going back anyway. What these accounts demand is a reckoning with the emotional labour that political participation required. It was the psychological cost of coming home afterwards, facing that and deciding to go back the next day. The front line was the threshold of their own homes as much as the river ghat or the public square. The movement, which sent women to that front line, built nothing to protect them on the other side of it.

The books themselves are the proof of this. They were written decades after the events they describe, by women who had to construct their own archive from family memory and periodicals nobody had thought to preserve because the movement's official record had not kept these names. Bhatkar and Shambharkar passed a resolution in 1924 that stated, before Ambedkar had formalised it, that untouchables must seek their own liberation. Nobody recorded it, somewhere it survived and two women found it sixty years later in a periodical and had to argue that it counted as evidence. The violence of omission did not come only from the mainstream press that boycotted the movement; it came from within.

This is what makes both books hard to assess cleanly. They were written by women who loved the movement and that love is present on every page. It isn't expressed as sentimentality but as the condition under which honesty becomes complicated. The contradictions they contain are not failures of analysis, but points where loyalty and clear sight nudge each other without a clear resolution. A fully resolved account would be less truthful than what both books managed to produce because the tension they hold was never resolved in history either.

What remains, after both books, is a question neither quite brings itself to ask directly. Not what the movement gave to Dalit women, but what it owed them. Whether having taken what it needed, their bodies at satyagrahas, their labour sustaining the household, their willingness to absorb the private cost of public commitment and return the following morning, it ever recognised this massive debt, let alone addressed it. Both books exist because it did not. And yet they also exist because something else was true. These women kept records in the only archive available to them, which was memory and that memory, it turns out, is more durable than the official silences meant to replace it. That Kamble wrote at all and that Pawar and Moon travelled across Maharashtra tracking down women whose names the movement had not thought worth preserving, that these books exist and are read and argued over, is itself a form of answer to the question they raise. The debt was not paid. But it was named. And the naming, however late, is where history sometimes has to begin.

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