



# The Embers Remain

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We've been wearing masks since December. As the Black Summer bushfires were raging with no end in sight, smoke and ash swept through the city and heralded the New Year with a phenomenon I never thought I would see in my lifetime: Delhi air transposed onto a Sydney skyline.

The only silver lining in the dense plumes was a taste of unprecedented disaster. Before the rest of the world, we were being primed with the language of crises and as the blazes dwindled, the changing season brought new versions of 'hotspots' and daily toll counts with COVID-19.

There was, however, no preparing for the micro assailant that was to dismantle, disrupt and defy every structure of our creation. In March, case numbers followed a dreaded trajectory and a temporary lockdown ensued. I packed my materials, transported my canvases and before I knew it, my artist studio and living space were one.

In the immense stillness of lockdown, all that had been sidelined by maintaining a constant busyness, could be avoided no longer. Impending exhibitions and projects fell away and my books ushered me into their parallel worlds.

I was well acquainted with the first text on my reading list. I had been carrying *The Prisons We Broke* like a talisman for months, skirting the pages, keeping a safe distance by holding it close. My hesitation was not for its incomprehensibility, but quite the opposite – I was never ready for its searing clarity.

Until April.

Through Babytai Kamble's words I was transported to Veergaon, into the world of the Mahars of Maharashtra. Kamble's historical account is the first Dalit feminist autobiography written in Marathi. Although it is a short read, it carries the weight of a tome and the monumentality of an epic. Her scope is vast as she follows the transformation of a society at the dawn of the Ambedkarite era, and yet attends to each detail in her immediate reality.

Nothing is amiss. Kamble recounts that which only a woman could – the passing of each day in domestic spaces, the festivals, local deities and rituals, the physical toll of violent spiritual possessions and superstitious beliefs.

Kamble's descriptions are vivid and visceral. Through her eyes, we see the lice-infested rags stitched together to cover the women's bodies, we sense the layers of dust and dirt upon our own skin, taste the stew of decaying food and smell the acrid stench of animal carcasses in the waste pits.

Woven in are the most graphic accounts of the lives of the Mahar women. The child brides are battered by floggings, torture and dismemberment at the hands of their in-laws. Kamble details childbirth in abject poverty – the repeated prodding of unlearned midwives, the gnawing hunger in the empty belly of the new mother and the dirty rags used to stop the incessant bleeding. Whilst some women plan a treacherous escape from their marital homes, others are forced into heavy iron stocks that lacerate their feet. Miraculously, the women are not broken by the rage of caste and patriarchy; every morning they sing sweet songs to their children as they grind stones.

Kamble describes these harrowing instances of deprivation without a grain of self-pity or glorification. The emotion she withholds makes the rawness of her writing more palpable and confronting. She speaks as one with her community, in a voice that does not censor the carnage of caste.

The pages that trace Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's arrival in Jejuri radiate with light. A small gathering is planned on an auspicious day for the family deity Kandhoba. As crowds of Mahars gather, there is talk of a man who speaks in the sahib's tongue and has studied beyond the seven seas.

Babasaheb arrives in a vehicle and captivates all. He asks the crowd what Kandhoba has ever done for them and urges them to stop worshipping idols and their own ignorance. In an epoch of neglect and disillusionment, he inspires knowledge and education. He is the light that shines through a millennium of darkness. Kamble describes Babasaheb as the essence of truth grown from the soil upon which many lives have been sacrificed. This truth is met with resistance as some Mahars continue to eat the decaying flesh of dead animals. Yet it is the women who safeguard his vision.

For every Dalit, *The Prisons We Broke* stirs that which cannot be described. It unstitches a century-old wound and awakens remnants of memories that are our birthright. There is an unborn and imperishable cord that connects us to each Dalit life and generation. The impressions and sensations held within us are pre-language, yet are evoked powerfully through Babytai Kamble's words.

For myself, the only way I am able to stand firmly upon this sacred ground is through my art. Everything else seems abstract— to ponder, to write, to intellectualise it. Within the studio I can receive each line and not be swept away by the torrents of this moving text. I am at a knife's edge— held by the ancient history in my cells and abandoned to the spontaneity and newness of creation. Whilst making art, I feel simultaneously closest to the imprint of this historical wound, as well as complete freedom from it.

As I received each word, Babytai Kamble's visual language guided my material expression. I sought to create a work that was as monumental as her writing.

When I closed my eyes, in the darkness I saw centuries of accrual compressed like geological strata. Familiar materials presented themselves: cow dung—used by the Mahars to polish the walls and floors, thick tar in all its tonal ranges, wax as smooth and impressionable as skin, the roughened edges of coir rope, laaldhaga from my travels that had now been worn down to a lifeless red, Indian cotton soaked in black charcoal and oil, vats of human hair, coconut husk, broom sticks from a jhadu and radiant gold leaf.

I set about forming the landscape I saw in *The Prisons*. I was led by intuition through a process that was much like drawing from images in my peripheral vision. Upon



large wooden panels, I assembled my materials layer by layer and melted wax with charcoal, coating the surface with a thick black pitch. Punctuating each line of material was pure gold leaf. I imagine gold to be a metaphor for the Dalit body. As ancient as the Earth itself, its qualities have been managed by an arbitrary value system, yet gold is so luminous, it remains untainted by it.

The lockdown stretched from weeks to months as the piece was composed. Each layer and panel responded to the previous one. My materials are my words and they are not dictated, they come from the same embryonic silence from which the art is born. They are potent and charged with the politics of my body. In the cacophony of these heightened times, it is this silence that I return to, that I know to be true.

I shared my time with Urmila Pawar and her extraordinary writings in *The Weave of My Life*. I was moved by the words of young Muktabai in her essay *The Grief of the Mahars and the Mangs*. I returned to Dr Ambedkar's early anthropological and political writings. As I traced the development of his ideas, I could read the real life implications through the social and domestic lens of Kamble and Pawar. Hindu ritual, wedding songs, and practices were abandoned as there were mass conversions to a new Dalit consciousness.

I continue to survey my history to understand myself as the continuation of this thread. As a beneficiary of Reservation, a first generation migrant and the daughter of this revolution, my freedom is not mine until it can be shared by all.

As I watch the heroes march – my fellow migrants walk hundreds of kilometres, I see the waves of progress ebb away further than ever. As I watch stones being laid for new temples, I see time contract and the structures of ignorance fortified. The light has more layers to penetrate, it will now have to be stronger and brighter than ever.



A critical epoch has come to the fore again. Our work is cut out for us. Yet we are the children who would rest our heads in our mother's laps and hear their sweet songs. We are the children of a father who guided us not to lamps in shrines, but the flame within us.

We create with this light.

*Stone Idols* will be exhibited in Sydney in January 2021.

