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ECOLOGIES OF HUNGER IN DALIT LIVES: A BRONFENBRENNERIAN STUDY OF THE PRISON WE BROKE

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the multifaceted nature of hunger in Dalit lives as portrayed in Baby Kamble's The Prison We Broke. Utilizing Urie Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model, the research maps how hunger is reproduced and experienced across interconnected ecological layers. While hunger is commonly understood as physical deprivation, this study foregrounds its broader social, emotional, and identity-based dimensions, revealing the ways in which hunger shapes and is shaped by experiences at the individual, familial, communal, and structural levels. The paper addresses a significant gap in the scholarship, where the ecology of hunger, particularly within Dalit autobiographical narratives, remains underexplored. Through qualitative textual analysis framed by ecological theory, the research shows how individual bodily starvation is embedded within family survival practices, sustained by communal networks, and perpetuated by macro-level caste discrimination and state neglect. These factors systematically sustain hunger and marginalization of Dalit communities. Importantly, the study also highlights forms of Dalit resistance that transcend mere physical nourishment. It emphasizes the struggle for dignity, selfhood, and collective identity, portraying hunger as not only a material condition but also a contested space where Dalits affirm their humanity and fight structural inequalities. The findings contribute to a nuanced, dynamic understanding of hunger as a layered phenomenon deeply entwined with caste-based oppression by revealing how hunger itself functions as a form of structural violence.

Keywords: Dalit, Autobiographical Narrative, Hunger, Bronfenbrenner Socio-Ecological Model, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* is a landmark autobiographical work that occupies a crucial space in Dalit literature which marks a vital testimony from the perspective of a Mahar Dalit woman in Maharashtra. The text chronicles the lived realities of caste oppression, severe poverty, and the indomitable spirit of survival against the entrenched oppression that Dalits endure in Indian society. According Limbale, "the caste of a Hindu Indian determines everything about his life-dress, marriage and even food". Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature (2003) At the heart of Kamble's narrative lies the motif of hunger as an experience that transcends mere physical need to encapsulate deeper layers of systemic violence. Kamble illustrates hunger not only as starvation but as a persistent reminder of the social and economic exclusion imposed by caste hierarchies that dictate who is entitled to food, resources, and dignity. Pathak in his article "Ecological Exploitation of Dalitsin Mahasweta Devi's Play Water: Crumbling Ecology and Postcolonial Dalit Identity" highlights Dalit starvation from resource denial: "Keep them hungry, keep them thirsty, keep them frightened - seems to be the motto of the ruling class to make sure the Dalits live in continuous trauma." The expanded meaning of

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hunger, thus, describes the deprivation and marginalization ingrained in Dalit existence. It is a powerful symbol of the caste system's violence, silently perpetuating inequality by design, which Kamble portrays vividly through episodes of familial suffering and communal exclusion.

While Kamble's autobiography foregrounds hunger's physicality, hunger in its fullest dimensions, extends into the psychological and existential realms. Manjula P. Kanavi surveys food scarcity and poverty in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Bama's *Karukku* where hunger distracts from life goals and symbolizes Dalit women's economic subjugation. Detailed depictions of meager diets like bhakri and leftovers highlight caste-based food denial. The hunger shapes self-perception and intercommunity relations, being intertwined with notions of honor, identity, and social worth. Despite this, scholarly discourse on Dalit hunger often remains tethered to biological concerns or socio-economic analyses, sidelining the layered social, emotional, and cultural textures that hunger entails for Dalits. Most existing research narrowly registers hunger as a material phenomenon, overlooking how it is an ecological and relational experience reproduced through social structures. The hunger motif thus calls for a theoretical approach capable of mapping these multifaceted threads - ranging from individual bodily experiences to collective responses within families and communities, and further to the deeply embedded caste and state institutions that structurally enforce deprivation. As Gopal Guru, in his article "Food as a Metaphor for Cultural Hierarchies," asserts that the right to food is fundamentally a human right, and its denial constitutes a violation of human dignity and justice.

Addressing this gap, the paper draws on Urie Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model as a critical framework to analyze how hunger is shaped across interconnected ecological systems. Bronfenbrenner's model articulates human experience as nested within systems: the microsystem (immediate relationships and environments such as family), mesosystem (interactions among microsystems), exosystem (indirect environments like institutions), macrosystem (broad cultural values and ideologies), and chronosystem (historical and temporal dimensions). Applying this to Dalit hunger reveals its reproduction not only within the individual body but also in collective survival strategies, communal relations, and socio-political structures. It shows hunger as a dynamic phenomenon situated within overlapping relational and structural contexts, providing insights into how deprivation is normalized and perpetuated across environments and generations. Bronfenbrenner states, "development takes place through the process of progressively more complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" Bronfenbrenner (1995). This highlights that deprivation is not an isolated event but formed via ongoing, repeated interactions with people and environments, shaping the individual's health, cognition, and social roles.

When applied to the issue of hunger in Dalit communities, particularly as narrated in Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*, the framework reveals how bodily experiences of starvation are firmly embedded in and shaped by - complex, intersecting ecological forces. As Bronfenbrenner notes that, "The microsystem is defined as, "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in each setting with particular physical and material characteristics" Bronfenbrenner (1979). These patterns determine access to food and resources, shaping both individual and collective survival strategies. Hunger is more than biological scarcity; it is deeply rooted in relational and structural contexts that normalize and perpetuate deprivation across generations and environments.

Along with unveiling hunger as a part and parcel of Dalit ecosystem, Kamble's narrative emphasizes how Dalits resist hunger's debilitating effects, pushing beyond the fulfillment of mere physical needs to reclaim dignity, identity, and collective strength. Hunger becomes a focal point for broader socio-political contestations: a fight from belly to soul that champions the reclaiming of selfhood amid systemic violence and erasure. This resistance, embedded in everyday acts of survival, cultural reclamation, and communal solidarity, is an essential dimension often silenced in mainstream discourses. The socio-ecological model allows for recognizing these multiple forms of resistance as embedded relational processes that span layers of experience and power structures, underscoring fuller human agency under oppression. The following sections systematically dissect Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems - both individually and interdependently - to demonstrate hunger's pervasive infiltration into Dalit lives as depicted in Kamble's autobiography.

MICROSYSTEM: FAMILIAL HUNGER AND INTIMATE SURVIVAL

At the innermost layer, the microsystem, Kamble's narrative painstakingly details the immediate environments in which hunger manifests and is mediated: the family and household. Here, hunger is not just a physical affliction but a daily lived reality intertwined with familial bonds and survival strategies. Families endure economic hardships that translate directly into food scarcity, shaping patterns of consumption, sharing, and rationing. These same intimate settings are also sites of nurturing and resistance, as members care for and protect each other physically and emotionally amidst deprivation. The microsystem thus captures how hunger is experienced on a profoundly personal level, influencing bodily health and psychological well-being. She describes:

> The children fetched water in tin pots and the women would pour it down . . . Having had no breakfast in the morning, and with no food in the house, hunger gnawed at their empty stomachs like wild fire. . . looking for some crumbs in their friend's houses. Kamble (2018).

The text vividly depicts the daily lived experience of hunger within the intimate setting of the household and neighborhood relations. It portrays how children and women cope with scarce resources, how food scarcity directly affects family members at the bodily level, and their immediate responses to deprivation. The acts of fetching water, searching the home for food, and seeking crumbs from friends' houses illustrate survival behavior rooted in familial and immediate social contexts. These interactions occur in the day-to-day, face-to-face settings that the microsystem comprises, emphasizing the personal and relational dimensions of hunger. It highlights how food scarcity intersects with hierarchical family power, particularly gender and generational oppression. It reveals hunger entangled with powerlessness and humiliation within the household microsystem. Food is rationed according to caste and gender norms, enforcing hierarchy even in intimate settings. The daughters-in-law's helpless waiting and scorn from the mother-in-law reveal how deprivation is socially enforced and normalized through domestic control and emotional domination. Kamble narrates: ". . . with their eyes glued to the food, the poor hungry daughters-in-law would helplessly wait for their turn to eat. If a mother-in-law noticed her, she would scornfully throw a bit at her, cursing . . ." (p. 30).

Furthermore, Kamble narration powerfully conveys the immediate and visceral reality of hunger within the family microsystem, where physical starvation shapes everyday actions and emotional states. The choice to consume hazardous food like cactus pods reflects acute desperation, prioritizing short-term relief over health. Hunger here is embodied not only as bodily weakness but also as psychological anguish - shame, fear, and protective struggles for loved ones. This interconnected physical and emotional experience illustrates how hunger is deeply embedded in relational and systemic neglect while sustaining life and hope within the family. Depicting the utter poverty Kamble writes:

> When children were unable to endure the hunger pangs any longer, the women would beg her husband, 'Listen, the kids are starving. They haven't eaten anything for three days. They look like living corpse. For how long can they survive without water? Let's go and collect some cactus pods. At least we can eat that' . . . 'We aren't eating them for fun! We have to stay alive.' (p. 82)

MESOSYSTEM: COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL STIGMA

Kamble's autobiography delineates the mesosystem as a sphere wherein hunger is socially navigated through intricate community networks characterized by reciprocal aid alongside pervasive social stigma and exclusion. Dalit communities collectively endure hunger, creating shared histories of deprivation and interdependence. Kamble recalls how neighboring families pooled food during extreme famine years, illustrating communal solidarity. Yet, this spirit of mutual aid coexists with entrenched social stratification and caste stigma. Kamble narrates instances where Dalits were relegated to begging from upper-caste households or denied access to public wells, reinforcing their social otherness and food insecurity. Such social exclusion intensifies hunger's impact, as community networks themselves bear the scars of caste hierarchies. The new mothers have no different fate. Kamble tells:

> In those days, there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother. . . Mahar women would go out begging in the neighbourhood and try to collect at least a handful of grains . . . crush the grains on the grinding stone and cook the coarse flour in water. . . Otherwise the mother would eat it plain, to quench the raging hunger in her stomach. (p. 57)

Here, the young mother's physical suffering inside the home (microsystem) is intricately linked with her neighbors' acts of support - other Mahar women begging in the neighborhood to gather grains or procuring food to bring back to assist the mother. This illustrates how interconnected social relationships beyond the immediate family act as vital ecological supports in the form of communal care and resource sharing. The grinding and preparation of the food by women in the household further emphasize cooperative labor embedded in the mesosystem. The collective effort to alleviate hunger through reciprocal social aid exemplifies how survival transcends individual or familial efforts, relying on the networked support and solidarity within the community. Besides, Kamble also narrates communal rituals tied to food, such as collective fasting or festive food distribution, which serve both as cultural affirmation and acts of subtle resistance. As Kamble describes:

> The meat was distributed among the twenty-five odd houses in the maharwada . . . Memories of the buffalo fair would help them survive their miserable and wretched lives. They would live in their dirt pits on the periphery of the village, like discarded rags, ignored by society, and wait for the buffalo fair to come again the following year. (p. 35)

The above passage goes beyond simple description to reveal the deep psychological and social survival strategies of Dalit communities under caste oppression. The distribution of buffalo meat during the buffalo fair was not just a ritual or a feast; it was a rare, collective moment of nourishment, solidarity, and temporary relief from the unrelenting cycle of hunger and degradation. These collective practices forge a communal ecology of survival where hunger's isolation is challenged. The mesosystem thus reveals hunger's dual social nature: a force that binds communities in solidarity and fractures them through outside denigration, illuminating the ambivalence of social relations in the ecology of hunger.

Simultaneously, caste-based stigma complicates communal relations. Dalits face exclusion from public resources, ostracization, and marginalization even within their own villages. As Kamble narrates,

> Then, along with a couple of my friends, I would go to fetch water. We would carry earthen pitchers on our heads . . . We would walk by the banks of the stream up to the jutting rock from where it originated . . . In the cave, we would dig into the

> bed of the stream with broken coconut shells . . . collect the water . . . through the sand till our pitchers got filled. To get inside the cave, we had to climb the steep rocks one by one and collect water by turns. (p. 50-51)

Kamble's water-fetching ritual with friends reveals the mesosystem's dual nature: a vital space of community solidarity where Dalit girls share grueling labor - digging with coconut shells, climbing rocks by turns - forging trust and resilience amid caste exclusion. Yet, this solidarity is born from social stigma, barred from village wells, they navigate dangerous caves, embodying how interconnected microsystems (family, peers) intersect with oppressive community norms to perpetuate marginalization. The mesosystem acts as neither neutral nor benevolent - it's a crucible where mutual aid counters the "Othering" enforced by dominant castes, turning survival chores into quiet acts of dignity. Through collective routines, the girls mediate hardship, transforming stigma into shared strength while highlighting structural violence that forces such ingenuity. This interplay shapes not just physical endurance but emotional identity, where exclusion breeds both humiliation and unbreakable bonds.

EXOSYSTEM: CASTE-BASED INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Beyond direct social interactions lies the exosystem, which includes institutions and infrastructures that affect Dalit lives indirectly but significantly. Kamble's portrayal highlights caste-based institutional discrimination in access to land, credit, labor markets, and education, all of which profoundly limit the material and social resources necessary to mitigate hunger. These institutional structures form systemic constraints that the individual and community cannot easily control but must navigate, often facing sustained neglect or outright exclusion. The exosystem's role makes visible the social machinery underpinning hunger as a structural condition rather than an individual failing. Kamble documents the denial of land ownership rights to Dalits, forced labor under exploitative conditions, and their systematic deprivation from education and meaningful economic participation. Maya Pandit writes: Dalits were concentrated in rural Maharashtra and were largely landless labourers . . . Since most of them were landless agricultural labourers, they became the chief target of exploitation . . . depriving them even of basic resources like water and food. (Translator's Introduction, p. xi-xii) The exosystem factors constrain access to food security through institutional mechanisms. Institutionalized landlessness denies Dalits a fundamental resource for sustenance and autonomy, reproducing hunger and dependency. Thus, the exosystem delineates structural injustices that covertly perpetuate hunger by shaping economic, educational, and political marginalization.

Additionally, Kamble describes the grueling toil of Dalit women in upper-caste households in exchange for meager meals, a system that entrenches dependence and hunger simultaneously. The institutionalized caste labor underpins chronic hunger, rendering voluntary escape nearly impossible. Moreover, the lack of government support and public welfare compounds hunger, especially where caste discrimination intersects with state apathy. Kamble highlights how food distribution programs either bypass Dalit communities or provide insufficient relief: "In those days, there were no concessions for the backward castes; schools did not receive any grants from the government." Kamble (2018) Bureaucratic caste biases prevent Dalits from accessing vital welfare resources, underscoring systemic institutional neglect.

> Soon there was an outbreak of an epidemic . . . It killed many . . . people started migrating . . . my father too joined the crowd and somehow reached Pune. Terrible hunger awaited them there. The government had started some construction work in order to help the migrants. But the migrant labourers had no shelter, nor any help. (p. 3-4)

The exosystem comprises environmental settings that indirectly affect individuals, including institutions, government policies, and infrastructural mechanisms that influence people's lives even though they may not be in direct interaction with them. The migration prompted by the epidemic and the ensuing hunger faced by Kamble's father and other migrants reflect macro-level conditions shaped by state and societal responses. The government's initiation of construction work is an institutional response existing at the exosystem level - providing employment opportunities to migrants as a form of relief. While this intervention is indirect, it significantly impacts migrants' survival, linking structural policy actions to individual and familial survival. The epidemic and the resulting migration further illustrate how larger social and health crises orchestrate movement and hardship beyond direct control of individuals, revealing the interplay between institutional frameworks and personal experiences of hunger and displacement. Thus, the narrative encapsulates how institutional and policy environments (exosystem) intersect with the lived realities of Dalit migrants facing hunger during crises, mediating survival chances within broader socio-political contexts. Thus, the exosystem highlights how institutional casteism and policy apathy intersect to sustain intergenerational hunger patterns, marking hunger as a systemic, socially reproduced condition.

MACROSYSTEM: CASTE IDEOLOGY AND STATE NEGLECT

In words of Bronfenbrenner: "The macrosystem is the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture or subculture, with particular reference to the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, and life styles… embedded in the larger societal context" Bronfenbrenner (1979). This explains how cultural and social ideologies like caste function at the macrosystem level to justify and sustain unequal access to necessities, embedding deprivation in societal norms. This macrosystem encompasses cultural values, ideologies, and overarching socio-political structures that legitimize and perpetuate caste-based inequalities and systemic deprivation. Within Kamble's work, the macrosystem is reflected in ingrained casteist beliefs

that normalize Dalit hunger as a fate, coding poverty and starvation as inherent to caste identity. These deeply embedded macro-level forces shape policy decisions, social attitudes, and cultural narratives that maintain marginalization across generations. The macrosystem thus sustains hunger as cultural violence, not only material deprivation. As Galtung describes, "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong - as seen in examples ranging from religious justification of famine and poverty to caste systems and ethnocentrism." Galtung (1990)

The macrosystem captures the broad social and cultural ideologies underpinning caste-based violence and hunger normalization. Kamble's work confronts how caste ideology naturalizes Dalit hunger as an inherited fate, a "destiny" sanctioned by social and religious doctrines. This ideological framework sustains humiliation and invisibility, embedding hunger within cultural narratives that justify exclusion. Caste ideology conditions Dalits into accepting deprivation as destiny, perpetuating cycles of fatalism and obedience. Kamble asserts:

> Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, . . . We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts. For our poor helpless women, the haldi - kumkum in their tiny boxes was more important . . . tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture . . . And yet no one tried to understand us. Kamble (2018)

The narrative epitomizes how caste-based rituals and social norms systematically subordinate Dalits, exemplified through Ghurya, a Mahar laborer. The enforced humility, mandated cleaning before receiving leftovers, and relegation to garbage areas symbolize institutionalized cultural and structural violence. Such practices normalize Dalit hunger as an outcome of caste privilege, reinforcing social exclusion within the macrosystem. This deeply rooted caste ideology sanctions neglect, shaping lived realities marked by material deprivation and symbolic violence. Kamble's reflections reveal the pervasive cultural acceptance of Dalit hunger, observing how upper-caste neighbors view Dalit scarcity with disdain or pity, reinforcing boundaries of caste purity and pollution. The macrosystem's casteist discourse thus sanctions structural violence, framing hunger as a caste-determined condition rather than a social injustice to be redressed. Kamble exclaims:

> By the time all the guests finished eating, . . . owner would summon the Mahar waiting near the garbage pits. After having worked for hours on end, . . . feeling terribly hungry, . . . With utmost humility, he would bend before the master, saying 'Jee dhani, jee dhani'. The master would then command him, 'Look here Ghurya, the feast is over. First sweep the pandal clean. Then you can take away those two baskets of leftover food. (p. 76).

Further, Kamble's reflections illustrate how upper-caste disparagement and cultural pollution discourses deepen Dalit marginalization. Social stigma becomes embodied through ritual acts, reinforcing self-hatred and shame for Dalits, making systemic discrimination feel natural and permanent. As Kamble writes, "Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, 'Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted'". (p. 14) The notion of caste purity excludes Dalits from sharing in food and social resources, reinforcing hierarchies that deny Dalits full humanity and sustenance. Sharankumar Limbale narrates casteism prevalent in Dalit communities in *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* that his grandmother had shouted when he played with his friend from Mang community ". . . why do you play with that boy? Is there no one else in the whole village to play with? Don't give him water in that vessel. If he touches it, he'll defile it. Go away" Limbale (2003). Such cultural violence is reflected in state apparatuses that normalize neglect and deny redress, weaving hunger into the fabric of caste society. The macrosystem thus functions as a cultural and political framework sustaining structural violence, a system where hunger is simultaneous physical deprivation and symbolic erasure, entrenching Dalit subjugation across social dimensions.

Kamble portrays Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as a transformative icon who dismantled caste oppression, urging Dalits to transmit his emancipatory legacy intergenerationally as, "They should tell them, 'Remember, what you are today is solely because of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. . . But for him . . . You would have been begging around for food, biting carcasses to fight the pangs of hunger". Kamble (2018). It reflects how Ambedkar's legacy has become embedded in the cultural consciousness of Dalit communities, informing identity, social norms, and collective memory. The detailed contrast drawn between a past life of subjugation - marked by extreme hunger, servitude, and violence - and the present empowerment underscores deeply held cultural narratives that locate social change within the heroic acts of specific leaders. These narratives form part of the macrosystem's cultural framework that sustains communities understanding of history, identity, and resistance. Furthermore, invoking Ambedkar as a liberator reifies a shared ideology that provides meaning and cohesion across Dalit social systems, shaping communal aspirations and actions. This macro-level cultural affirmation influences the socialization of younger generations, embedding ideological resistance within everyday life and future hope.

CHRONOSYSTEM: INTERGENERATIONAL HUNGER AND UNWAVERING RESILIENCE

The chronosystem introduces the temporal dimension essential to understanding hunger as a long-term ecological process shaped by history. Kamble's narrative spans generations, situating hunger within colonial legacies of land confiscation, caste restrictions, and limited political representation. The temporal perspective reveals hunger's persistence as anchored in cumulative injustice rather than isolated incidents. It also captures moments of social reform, resistance, and caste mobilization that have sought

to disrupt ecological hunger. Kamble's engagement with Dalit movements embodies this, revealing how political and cultural activism constitute ecological counterforces that challenge intergenerational cycles of deprivation. Thus, the chronosystem situates hunger within a dynamic process of oppression and resilience over time. Temporal analysis through the chronosystem reveals hunger as both continuity and change - an enduring reality shaped by historical forces, yet contested by Dalits who seek transformation over time through political and cultural assertion. Kamble writes:

> People's health began to improve gradually. . . death was defeated. The news spread like wild fire. . . My father had obtained the contract only to save his people from hunger. . . he tried to protect people's lives . . . influenced by the message of education that was being spread by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. He resolved to educate both of us, my brother and me, . . . to enroll us in school. (p. 106)

The above passage reflects a significant temporal shift in the lives of Kamble and her community- a movement from extreme deprivation and hunger toward improved health and hope brought about by access to food, work, and education. The father's acquisition of work contracts symbolizes evolving opportunities and adaptive responses over time, illustrating social mobility incremental changes within historically marginalized Dalit lives. His commitment to education, inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's reformist ethos, marks a generational and ideological transformation, revealing how historical figures and movements shape aspirations and life courses. The mass migration of people seeking work and sustenance around the bungalow indicates a collective historical moment of survival and change. This temporal context situates personal and family development within broader socio-political dynamics of Dalit upliftment and struggle against caste oppression over time.

Across all ecological levels, Kamble's narrative powerfully illustrates that hunger is not accepted passively but contested actively through acts both practical and symbolic. Families find ways to stretch scant resources; communities develop shared rituals and mutual support; individuals and groups challenge caste barriers and envision dignity beyond mere survival. Kamble's telling insists that hunger is also hunger for recognition, identity, and spiritual integrity. Her autobiographical voice asserts resistance by reclaiming narratives of humiliation as ones of endurance and strength. This multifaceted resistance redefines hunger as a site of empowerment, where Dalits assert embodied agency and demand social transformation.

The ecological framework helps reveal the resistance as relational and systemic, embedded within and transcending the layers where hunger is lived and reproduced. Resistance manifests in survival strategies at home, communal solidarity, political advocacy, and cultural reclamation. Hunger becomes a symbol for the fight to reclaim dignity, autonomy, and identity against caste oppression. Kamble's voice refuses to reduce hunger to mere lack; it becomes a catalyst for awakening and collective action. This resistance complicates traditional understandings of victimhood, recasting Dalit agency as relational, ecological, and sustained across personal and social systems.

CONCLUSION

The paper undertakes a comprehensive application of Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model to Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* to reveal hunger as a complex social phenomenon embedded across multiple environmental layers. Hunger emerges not merely as food scarcity but as intertwined with caste oppression and systemic neglect, impacting family, community, and socio-political dynamics. Organized into five discrete sections corresponding to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, the paper rigorously dissects the pervasive, intersecting manifestations of hunger as an embodied Dalit reality in Kamble's autobiography. At the microsystem level, hunger manifests in intimate family struggles marked by emotional and physical distress, while the mesosystem reveals community solidarities and caste-based exclusions shaping access to resources. The exosystem highlights institutional discrimination and economic marginalization that entrench deprivation, and the macrosystem reflects cultural ideologies that legitimize caste-based hunger as fate. The chronosystem situates these experiences within historical legacies and ongoing Dalit resistance, underlining how hunger is both inherited and contested. This ecological perspective foregrounds hunger's symbolic and psychological dimensions, portraying Dalit resistance as collective and systemic rather than individual. Such analysis urges holistic approaches addressing interconnected family, community, institutional, cultural, and historical factors to dismantle systemic hunger and promote dignity, emphasizing the role of marginalized voices and embodied struggles in driving social transformation.

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