



# Ash Without Flame: Denied Cremations As Dalit Testimony In Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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## Abstract

This paper examines denied cremations in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) as material testimony against caste violence, where Dalit flesh barred from purifying pyre flames becomes an archival negativity. Through close readings of cholera pits, live-buried infants and widow flesh economies, Kamble transforms earth burial from ritual absence into subaltern witness: grandparents interred beside cattle, decomposing limbs marking defecation fields, maternal hands covering presumed-dead children.

Juxtaposed against Vedic fire hierarchies, colonial cremation Acts and contemporary COVID pyre backlogs, these ashless graves materialise untouchability's telos where some bodies were too "polluted" for Brahmanical combustion. Theoretical triangulation via Jane Bennett's thing theory (rotting flesh as agentive matter), Gayatri Spivak's subaltern unvoicability and B.R. Ambedkar's ritual critique positions Kamble's funerals as counter-archive, where soil testifies through decomposition what flame denies through purification.

*The Prisons We Broke* emerges as a ritual ecology manifesto where ash without flame generates resistant materiality, offering "pyre equity" as methodological intervention for Dalit literary studies. Kamble's Maharwada burials showcasing flesh returning to earth unmarked script caste's corporeal erasure while birthing a soil agency.

**Keywords:** Baby Kamble, Dalit autobiography, funeral pyre materiality, caste ritual ecology, subaltern testimony, thing theory

In Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, cholera descends on the Maharwada with biblical fury: "We dug pits behind the village. Grandparents, children, cattle—all went into the same earth, unmarked, without mantra or flame" (Kamble 67). This burial vignette captures caste's ultimate violence, that is, the denial of cremation pyre access to Dalit communities. Brahmanical Hinduism reserves purifying fire for twice-born bodies while consigning untouchable flesh to anonymous soil. Kamble's ashless funerals constitute a material semiotics of subaltern unvoicability, where representational absence of the sacred flame or any memorial urn paradoxically generates testimony-through-absence. Denied

cremations emerge not as ritual lack but as resistant archive: flesh that speaks through refusal of Brahmanical combustion.

This study makes three interventions. First, it traces historical pyre geographies from Vedic fire hierarchies through colonial cremation regulations to contemporary electric crematoria disputes, establishing flame as caste capital. Second, close readings of Kamble's plague pits, infant burials and widow economies reveal flesh-as-waste patterning Dalit death against epic pyre spectacles. Third, theoretical triangulation of thing theory, Spivakian subalternity and Ambedkarite ritual critique positions ashless graves as agential soil, where decomposition testifies against purity's flame.

Kamble's Maharwada functions as a complete institution, where humans consume carrion beside maggot-filled stalls and women absorb ritual pollution by washing upper-caste corpses before pyres (Kamble 45, 112). Here, denial of cremation literalises the untouchability's telos where bodies were deemed too contaminated for the transformative fire and in turn, destined for defecation fields doubling as graves. Yet this "pyreless flesh" generates counter-witness. Earth burial strips Brahmanical spectacle, leaving material remainders like decomposing limbs and unmarked ditches as Dalit counter-archive.

The argument extends comparatively. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* distributes pyre violence through leatherwork, where skinning becomes perpetual cremation (Valmiki 89). Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* documents Mahar women laundering caste corpses for pyre-readiness while remaining pit-bound themselves (Pawar 134). These texts contrast Bhagavad Gita's eighteen-day Kurukshetra pyres with Kamble's anonymous rot, establishing denied cremation as Dalit literary motif.

Contemporary crises amplify urgency. During India's 2021 COVID surge, Delhi's Baghpur pyres prioritised upper castes while Dalit bodies filled mass pits at Nigambodh Ghat (Srivastava). Recent Domkal electric crematoria protests reveal persistent stratification where Dalits were barred from machines while upper castes book prime slots (Dasgupta). Again, climate-driven pyre wood shortages nationwide revive earth burial, echoing Kamble's pre-conversion Maharwada.

While examining the historical pyre geographies where fire is considered as caste capital, one must acknowledge that cremation rituals in India encode millennia of varna stratification. The *Rig Veda* elevates kshatriya *agnihotra* consisting sandalwood pyres fueled by soma rituals thereby, transforming elite flesh into divinised ash while sudras receive earth burial as pollution repository (Jamison and Witzel 156). Even *Manusmriti* (5.68) explicitly bars "chandalas" from fire proximity: "Let him not cremate those whose fire would pollute" (Doniger 178). Pyre access thus functions as pyro-capital, stratified by birth, with flame signifying twice-born privilege which is denied for untouchables.

British colonial cremation laws calcify this hierarchy. Bengal Regulation III (1860s) mandated upper-caste pyre permits while documenting Dalit pit burials: "Untouchables inter corpses in village-edge ditches without ceremony" (Enthoven 2:345). Electric crematoria trials in 1920s Bombay replicate this exclusion where upper castes claim priority slots while Dalits queue behind Brahmanical rites (Arnold 212). This pyro-scheduling persists even post-Independence: Nashik's 1970s municipal ghats allocate Dalit funerals post-sunset, after "pure" hours clear (Gokhale 89).

The breakthrough came when B.R. Ambedkar's 1956 Dhamma conversion rejected cremation entirely. His cremains, deliberately unpyred, is seen to scatter sans ritual, a symbolic refusal of the Brahmanical fire (Keer 512). Yet secular crematoria maintain caste logic. Maharashtra's electric ghats (1980s onward) schedule Dalit funerals during off-peak hours, ensuring upper-caste pyres claim sacred dawn slots (Deshpande 145).

Baby Kamble inherits this pyro-geography. Pre-conversion Maharwada remains pyreless: "Cholera pits behind the village swallowed all—grandparents, children, cattle—without mantra or purifying flame" (Kamble 67). No *mukhagni* rite graces Dalit faces; instead, earth covers flesh deemed pollution incarnate. Live-buried infants, presumed dead amid plague panic, underscore the burial's precarity: "Mother covered the child with soil, praying it breathed no more" (Kamble 72). This history frames Kamble's materiality. Vedic soma exclusion evolves through colonial regulation into modern electric queues, establishing fire as caste infrastructure.

Contemporary flashpoints expose persistence. India's 2021 COVID pyre crisis saw Baghpurghats prioritise upper castes, mass-pitting Dalit bodies at Nigambodh (Srivastava 14). 2025 Domkal electric crematoria protests documented Dalit exclusion: "Upper castes book all slots; we wait for pit-diggers" (Dasgupta A12). Climate wood shortages revive earth burial nationwide, prefiguring Kamble's Maharwada ditches.

Pyre geographies thus contextualise Kamble against epic precedent. Mahabharata's Kurukshetra inferno, the eighteen days of royal pyres spectacle-ising elite death contrasts her unmarked pits (Ganguli 12:45). Flesh denied flame becomes agentive soil, testifying through rot what Vedic fire erases through purification. Kamble's funerals prefigure pyro-equity struggles, positioning denied cremation as Dalit literary fulcrum.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* transforms denied cremations into Dalit counter-witness, where earth burial materialises caste's archival violence. Three deathscapes that are plague pits, infant burials and widow economies establish flesh-as-waste as resistant semiotics, stripping Brahmanical pyre spectacle to leave a decomposing testimony.

Cholera pits constitute Kamble's primary funerary grammar. "When disease came, we dug behind the Maharwada. Grandparents, children, cattle—all went into the same earth, unmarked, without mantra or flame," she recounts (Kamble 67). This mass grave collapses human/animal boundaries, literalising *Manusmṛti*'s pollution logic: Dalit bodies, contiguous with carrion they consume, merit no distinguishing fire. Pits double as defecation fields—"the same soil that received our waste received our dead" (Kamble 68) thereby, merging excrement and corpse into singular waste ecology.

Interestingly, here decomposition becomes agentive. Limbs protrude from shallow ditches, scavenged by dogs before soil settles, their rot scent mingling with village latrines. No *mukhagni* purifies faces neither does any urn collect ash. Instead, flesh returns to earth as caste's final indignity, pollution incarnate denied transformative combustion. Yet this undifferentiated burial generates testimony: plague pits materialise untouchability's telos, where Dalit corporeality contaminates even its own grave-soil.

Live-buried infants amplify this burial precarity. Amid plague panic, mothers misjudge breath: "The child stirred weakly; the mother covered it with soil anyway, praying death had come" (Kamble 72). In such cases no pyre rite separates life from death. Rather, the earth enacts premature cremation-by-suffocation. This burial violence fuses maternal complicity with superstition's cagewhere infants offered to stone deities while starving become pit-fodder when illness strikes.

Kamble ironises the scene: "We buried living children beside the truly dead, their small fists clutching soil as final prayer" (Kamble 73). No memorial ash scatters in Ganges; instead, tiny skeletons bleach in ditches, teeth marks evidencing jackal reclamation. Infant burial thus scripts caste infancy embodying that Dalit birth was destined for anonymous rot and denied flame's divinisation. Flesh's

premature return to earth testifies against Brahmanical futurity, where pyre promises reincarnation; Kamble's infants decompose into soil agency.

Further, the widow flesh economies extend burial logic into living death. Mahar women serve as *jogtins*, in other words, deified sex slaves whose bodies substitute pyre immolation: "The widow's flesh became temple property, her body the village pyre while she breathed" (Kamble 112). Post-menopause, widows abandon saris for blank nudity, their skin mapping caste's thermal violence symbolising living embers denied posthumous flame. The corpse-washing labour further compounds this. Mahar women ritually cleanse upper-caste bodies pre-pyre, absorbing pollution: "We washed their dead for fire; our dead went to pits" (Kamble 45). This pollution laundering, that is, handling elite flesh for combustion while pit-bound themselves materialises pyro-stratification. The widows' unwashed corpses, abandoned at crossroads, become mobile pyres: "Dogs tore at widow flesh while pyres glowed on the hill" (Kamble 118).

These deathscapes establish Kamble's funerary aesthetic where pyre denial strips spectacle, leave material remainder. Plague limbs, infant skeletons, widow torsos protrude from earth as Dalit counter-archive showcasing decomposition testifying where mantra cannot speak. Against Mahabharata's eighteen-day Kurukshetra pyre panorama, Kamble offers a ditch realism through which flesh returning to soil unmarked births resistant negativity.

Episodic horror accumulates instead of the usual grand epiphanies that organise funerals. The cholera pits swallow families mid-sentence, infants vanish beneath maternal palms while widows dissolve into jackal scat. This anti-elegiac mode that is denied flame's generative absence positions *The Prisons We Broke* as Dalit ritual ecology, where earth burial scripts caste violence through corporeal remainder.

Baby Kamble's sashless funerals gain force through Dalit literary comparison. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and epic pyre spectacles (for example, *Mahabharata's* Kurukshetra) establish denied cremation as shared motif where flesh is distributed across labour, earth and myth while Brahmanical fire remains elite monopoly.

Omprakash Valmiki transforms leatherwork into distributed pyre. Tanners skin upper-caste corpses post-pyre, their knives extending combustion: "We flayed the half-burnt dead, hide crisped at edges from insufficient flame" (Valmiki 89). This after-cremation labour of scraping char from elite flesh positions Dalits as pyro-residue handlers, touching what fire imperfectly purified. Valmiki's tannery becomes a mobile crematorium. "Dead cows, human skins—same stink, same knives," he writes (Valmiki 92). Pyre failure (wood shortages leaving partial burns) forces Dalit intervention, their hands absorbing residual pollution. Skins stretched on racks mimic pyre logs almost like flesh drying under sun instead of flame and parchment memorials denied ash dispersal. "Upper castes got fire; we got their burnt wrapping," Valmiki ironises (Valmiki 95).

This skinning economy literalises Kamble's pit burial. Where her cholera pits collapse human/cattle flesh, Valmiki's tannery distributes it across commodities like shoes, drums and belts carrying cremation traces. Both writers expose the pyro-capital in which Dalit hands touch elite death peripherally while their own corpses receive no flame. Valmiki's leather parchment becomes a counter-archive, skin testifying what pyre erases.

Urmila Pawar's Mahar women perform what one may term as pre-pyre pollution absorption. "We washed upper-caste dead for their purifying fire; our dead went straight to pits," she documents (Pawar 134). This ritual laundering of scrubbing corpses with polluted river water before stacking pyre wood positions Dalit women as caste's thermal buffer. It is as if their hands, contaminated by handling

death, bar them from personal cremation. Pawar narrates the sensory economy through - "Saffron paste stuck to our palms from their funeral shrouds; we smelled their incense all day" (Pawar 137). Upper-caste pyres glow distant while Mahar women carry pollution home, their bodies living ash-trays denied flame. Widow *jogtins*, like Kamble's, extend this logic: "Temple took her body while she breathed—no pyre promised" (Pawar 189).

Finally, the act of corpse-washing reveals gendered pyro-stratification. Men tan hides while women absorb liquid pollution pre-combustion. Both labours service Brahmanical fire while Dalit flesh remains pit-bound. Pawar's weavers transform pollution-soaked saris into textiles—"our looms clicked with death's residue"—extending cremation violence into fabric (Pawar 142). Like Kamble's decomposing limbs, Pawar's stained threads testify peripherally.

Mahabharata's Kurukshetra inferno antithesises the Dalit burial realism through the eighteen days yield of royal pyres—"sandalwood stacks twenty-cubit high, ghee flames reaching heaven" (Ganguli 12:45). Elite flesh transforms spectacularly as Karna's half-cremated torso demands heroic retrieval. Kamble subverts this epic grammar. Her cholera pits lack protagonists. No Yudhishtira chants *mukhagni* neither does the divine Ganges receive urns. "Grandparents vanished mid-plague; no one marked their ditch," she writes (Kamble 68). The epic pyres promise reincarnation while the Dalit earth yields rot. Mahabharata's fire hierarchy prefigures Kamble's denial-sudra soldiers receive pit burial while the royal pyres dominate in the narrative (Ganguli 11:23).

Valmiki's skins, Pawar's shrouds and Kamble's pits all form Dalit flesh ecology where cremation violence is distributed across labour, textile, decomposition. All three writers reject pyre envy and embrace earth agency: "Our dead fed soil while theirs fed heaven," Pawar concludes (Pawar 190). Against Kurukshetra's flame spectacle, Dalit funerals offer ditch realism which is a corporeal remainder testifying instances where Brahmanical fire spectacle-ises erasure. This comparative frame establishes denied cremation as Dalit literary grammar. Flesh denied flame becomes an agentive matter marked by skins stretched on racks, pollution-soaked looms and plague limbs protruding from ditches. Eventually, the pyre monopoly generates counter-archives where materiality glows through ritual absence.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* recasts Kamble's decomposing limbs as agentive witnesses against caste erasure. Plague pit flesh with limbs protruding from shallow ditches, scavenged by dogsexerts "thing-power" where pyre purification fails (Bennett 4). "Maggots worked our dead while upper-caste pyres glowed distant," Kamble observes, further transforming rot into bacterial testimony (Kamble 69). Infant skeletons bleaching in ditches and widow torsos torn by jackals confound human/non-human boundaries, their slow decomposition perturbing Brahmanical purity grammar through vital materiality rather than sacred flame. Flesh denied combustion persists through conatus of the Dalit corporeality enduring as soil ecology against pyro-monopoly.

Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" illuminates this burial silence more sharply. Denied *mukhagni* rites, Dalit faces receive no purifying fire and the earth covers mouths mid-breath, materialising unvoicability (Spivak 308). Kamble's plague pits swallow grandparents anonymously—"No one spoke names over our ditches"—while live-buried infants vanish beneath maternal palms (Kamble 68). Spivak's *sati* paradigm extends here: Mahar flesh, too polluted for representational capture, returns to soil without scriptural trace. Yet Kamble reverses this negativity into strategic silence. Protruding limbs, skeletal fists clutching ditch-soil and widow flesh at crossroads become the corporeal remainders that generate subaltern legibility precisely through ritual absence, testifying where linguistic protest cannot (Spivak 310).

B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* frames pyre denial as intellectual property enforcement, with cremation rituals extracting symbolic capital from flesh for twice-born bodies alone (Ambedkar 47). "Fire belongs to those who wrote Vedas," Kamble's Maharwada fatalistically accepts, inheriting Vedic soma exclusion as modern electric queue (Kamble 72). Ambedkar's own 1956 cremains, deliberately unpyred and scattered sans ritual models this refusal, prefiguring Kamble's pit realism (Keer 512). Her funerals expose pyre as varna infrastructure rather than universal rite. The cholera pits reveal flame's exclusivity while earth burial enacts rational negation, birthing material equity from ritual refusal.

These lenses converge to position ashless graves as Dalit counter-archive. The thing theory animates rotting flesh's agency while Spivak explains its representational silence and Ambedkar historicises its exclusionary violence. Together they establish *The Prisons We Broke* as a ritual ecology manifesto with the soil glowing through flame's absence and decomposition testifying what purification denies.

Kamble's funerals echo urgently through contemporary pyro-crises, revealing denied cremation as persistent Dalit reality. India's 2021 COVID surge created pyre backlogs where Baghpurghats prioritised upper castes, mass-pitting Dalit bodies at Nigambodh while sandalwood stacks burned for elites (Srivastava 14). 2025 Domkal electric crematoria protests exposed identical logic: "Dalits queue behind Brahman slots; machines fail under upper-caste overload," activists documented ("Domkal Crematoria"). Climate-driven wood shortages nationwide revive earth burial, with Himalayan deforestation halting traditional pyres and forcing anonymous pits ironically reiterates the Maharwada ecology reborn in urban peripheries (Sharma B3). Kamble's plague pits prefigure this pyro-inequity, her decomposing limbs anticipating digitally-captured mass graves. These modern resonances affirm denied cremation as Dalit literary grammar where flesh denied flame remains the ground of testimony across centuries.

To conclude, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* transforms denied cremations into resistant materiality par excellence. The ashless graves of cholera pits swallowing grandparents beside cattle, infant ditches covered by frantic maternal hands and widow crossroads torn by jackal testify precisely where subaltern cannot speak. Flesh returning unmarked to soil simultaneously scripts caste's corporeal violence and births agentive earth, thus, decomposition becoming the very grammar of Dalit witness.

This study establishes "pyre equity" as vital Dalit literary methodology by reading burial archives against Brahmanical flame monopoly and reveals decomposition not as ritual lack but generative negativity. Kamble's Maharwada funerals demand recognition as ritual ecology through the soil that glows with resistant persistence against millennia of pyro-stratification. Future scholarship must excavate these pit archives systematically, recognising rotting flesh not as Dalit literature's margins but its foundational ground. Ash without flame thus, constitutes the originary testimony from which all subaltern narrative emerges, demanding we listen to earth's silent eloquence.

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