

SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION IN RELIGIOUS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A STUDY OF BAMA'S KARUKKU

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INTRODUCTION

Dalit writing in India is emerging as a powerful voice claiming the rightful place for Dalits. It is increasingly attracting the attention of critical and literary discourse in India. Today it is a distinct literary genre with a poetics and politics of its own. The term 'Dalit Literature' can be traced to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958, which passed a resolution defining the term. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer traces the origin of Dalit literature to Dr Ambedkar. The revolutionary ideas of Ambedkar stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature portray how Dalits have been exploited and humiliated by the Upper Castes at different social spheres. It has been a response to oppression. It is the self-expression of people whose voices have been suppressed and denied space for articulation. It is the literature of 'marginals'. Dalit literature is written in all genres of literature, but the genre of autobiography has proved a great catalyst to Dalit literature. Autobiography as a genre gives possibility to a person to share his/her lived experience. Dalit writings reflect the pain, sufferings, insults, and agonies faced by them. They had no access to public facilities such as wells, rivers, roads, schools, markets, for several centuries. But the question arises, why Dalits were not allowed to the public spheres? The possible answer could be, because they were considered polluted, so untouchables, according to Vedas, which were considered the holy books or books of God's commandments (if this can

be said) of Hindu religion. However, the truth was that they were strategically discriminated. This was a strategy designed by Upper castes to oppress and rule Dalits. It is a known fact that education is one of the important means of reducing ignorance, inequality and helps to raise one's social status. Knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes acquired through education help an individual to lead desired quality of life. It allows them to communicate, argue and to have control over their lives. Dr Ambedkar, a visionary Dalit leader and architect of the Indian constitution, once said, "Deprive a man of knowledge and you will make him inevitably the slave... deprivation of knowledge is denial of the power to use liberty for great ends. An ignorant man may be free... but cannot employ his freedom to give him assurance of happiness." (Ambedkar-1987, 39). Therefore, education and knowledge must be available to all. This paper tries to present the oppression borne by Dalits at the hand of the institution of education and the Church in Bama's *Karukku*. This novel discusses various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits by upper castes, specifically on the Paraiyar caste of Tamilnadu. In her autobiography Bama presents her experience as a Dalit Christian. Thus, Bama becomes voice of all the Dalit Christians across India.

CASTE BASED DISCRIMINATION AT CHURCH AND SCHOOL

Bama's *Karukku* was first published in Tamil in 1992. The English translation of the novel by Lakshmi

Holmstrom appeared in 2000. The novel focuses on the narrator's spiritual development through the nurturing of her belief as a Catholic. Bama has portrayed how Church controlled and influenced the lives of Dalit Catholics. However, in the early phase of her childhood she was unaware of the untouchability. But she had felt and experienced that they were treated differently by the upper castes. She observed that the Dalits houses were positioned outside the village. In the novel She writes, "I don't know how it came about the upper-caste communities and the lower-caste communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village, and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts" (2000, 7).

But once she saw an elder of her community brings Vadais to Naicker (an upper caste) holding the packet by string so that he cannot touch the packet. At this sight Bama want to laugh at first, that such a big man carrying a small packet in that fashion, but her innocent laughter soon disappears when her elder brother tells her about he reason for that stupid action is the caste system and Untouchability. Bama had never heard of Untouchability before. Here, at a small age first time she comes to know her community's pathetic state.

In the novel through her childhood experiences Bama present the problems face by Dalit children in school. Bama's father was in the army and he understood the value of education, so he decides to send his children to school. Bama tells, in school upper cast teachers misbehave with the lower caste students. They always criticize the lower castes. If anything, wrong happens in school they will immediately and without any reason take the name of low caste children. They would say, "It must be one of the Cheri-children who did it." (16)

Bama narrates one incident when Bama and her friend were playing at the in the evening, at that moment somebody had stolen the coconut. The guilt was thrown on her (Bama). Everyone said that it was Bama who had plucked the coconut. Although she was not guilty, but headmaster treated her badly. He

scolded her in the name of her caste. When she protested, the headmaster told her, "You the people of low caste like the manner you have... we cannot allow you inside the school, stand outside. " after that she was suspended from the school. She felt ashamed and insulted but could not do anything to prove her innocence.

In another episode when Bama was living in a hostel for her further education. She tells, in the hostel her life become more difficult, as by now she was aware of the caste discrimination in the society. Bama says, the warden sister of the hostel never loses any opportunity to make comments on lower caste students. About these poor children she says, "These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here, and they grow fat." (17)

Bama also point out further that low caste children were not only treated badly by the school masters but also used as labourers. She says

" Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house. We watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school." (16)

In such kind of environment Bama gets upsets. Throughout her period of her education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste.

After completing her school, Bama went to college for graduation. She expects at the higher level of education no one will bother about the caste difference. But that is not so. Caste system is so deep routed in Hindu society that even the axe of education can not cut it. For Bama going to college was a new experience but the environment was similar to school. In college also she faced insult and humiliation.

Later, Bama started teaching in a Convent school with a hope that in such an institution she will be able to help the children of low castes. But her experience in the convent are not the happy ones. The environment of the convent was totally different from what she expected. Bama along with her

community has a blind faith in the church (the religious institution). Like on the New Year it was a custom to go the mother superior and to the Priest with fruits or biscuits as a gift. The feeling of the people was so strong that even though they had never tasted the fruit themselves, they somehow went through every effort to buy that fruit for church elders. Bama has intention to help low castes through religion but the picture she sees in the convent is hard to believe. About the church she says:

In the name of God, they rob from the poor who struggle for their very livelihood. They teach them to shut their eyes when they Pray with the deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at the full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall. What kind of piety can this be? They make themselves into Gods so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone? Then so-called gods walking about here are the priest and nuns and their relations; no other. (94)

This account by Bama gives a very satirical portrayal of Christianity as practiced in the convent. We usually associate caste system with Hinduism and think of Christianity as a religion which believe in equality and in unconditional love of God. Bama says, "They claimed that gods love is limitless, subject to no condition. Yet inside, the convent there were innumerable condition..." (92)

In *Karukku* Bama shows how Church in India is casteist in its dealings. She says, "It is only the upper caste Christian who enjoys the benefits and comforts of the church. Even among the Priest and Nuns, it is the upper caste who holds all the higher positions ... And if Dalits becomes Priests or Nuns they pushed aside and marginalized..., we find there is no place for us there." (69)

In the book she also shows that Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the Church choir, are forced to sit separately; are not allowed to bury their dead in the village cemetery but are made to use some different graveyard outside the

village. Bama's family becomes Christian to escape from casteism. But the irony is that even after the conversion they remains low castes. *Karukku* is concerned with the issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its institutions. She tries to show the "rift between the professed values of the Church and the actual practice".

CONCLUSION

To sum up this can be said that *Karukku* is a work that has exposed the dominant concept of history, the caste system in the society. It also exposes the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which while claiming to care for the Dalit converts, rather, they also exploit them, as much as the rest of society. The institution of religion and education treat Dalits badly and inhumanly so that they can instill the fear of caste in their minds. The motif of such institutions is to make Dalits believe that whatever treatment they are getting is their destiny and this how the caste system operates which no one can change.

In the book once Bama's grandmother says to Bama about upper castes, "these people are the maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them how will we survive? Haven't they been upper castes from generation to generation and haven't we been lower castes? Can we change this?" Dalits learn these lessons throughout their lives either from upper castes or from their fellow caste people. They accept their oppression. The life of a Dalit has changed a bit from the days of *Manusmriti*. Now Dalits are more conscious, and they are trying to empower themselves. Bama says in *Karukku*:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate,...we must dare to stand up for the change. We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully as into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who is high or low...it is we who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and just society where all are equal.(25)

In this regard Dalit literature is playing a vital role. Dalit writings not only bringing out the exploitation, humiliation, trauma and suffocation experienced by Dalits in the hands of Upper castes, but it is also talking about self-realization, self pride and equality.

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