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BAMA'S *KARUKKU* : A SCATHING ATTACK ON RELIGION IN DALIT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT
India is the birth place for many religions. Religion gives certain recognition as if people follow a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices to lead their life. But Hinduism back worded some sect of people and marginalized them. Dalit literature has awakened many new social strata and made new literary contributions. Equality, freedom and social justice are the basis of Dalit literature. Dalits people were silent and mute in the history for centuries. The Hindu philosophy and ideology is based on inequality. They have been a part of the Hindu society and yet were outside it is the sense in which they were marginalized and inescapapaly reduced to servitude. The origin of all art can be located in religion and it was responsible for the most in human exploitation of the dalits. The Hindu religion, Hindu Gods, Hindu culture and Hindu social fabric deny equality, justice and freedom to Dalits. After independence and thanks to the revolutionary movement of Dr.Ambedkar, Dalits became aware of their self-respect and equality. Now, the Indian caste system is changing but not fast enough. The speed of social change is very slow, but there is change. Dalit women like Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila pavar and many more Dalit women writers themselves are taking the pen to articulate and record their experiences of hurt and humiliation subverts centuries old historical neglect (by the elitist nationalist discourse) and a stubborn refusal to be considered as a subject. Bama Faustina is the most distinguished Dalit fiction writer in Tamil, and one of the most acclaimed of all Dalit women writers. Her autobiographical novel *'Karukku'* (1992) was the first Tamil Dalit text on the Christian Dalit community. In this book she speaks about the religion which is one of the causes to exploit dalits.
Key Elements : Christianity, Hinduism, discrimination, exploitation marginilization.

In *Karukku* Bama explores a significant aspect relates to privations of young Dalit Christian girls. They denied pleasures common to her age like watching a movie at a theatre (for fear of molestation by upper caste youth), Dalit girls are subjected to severe restrictions at home and outside. Dalit Christian girls are further forced to attend a strict regimen of Rosary classes ('Mantra Class') in the mornings and evenings, learn hymns and japams, and attend sessions of regular, weekly confessions and so on. It is an enforced rather than a devout exercise. Early in the morning, before sunrise, sleepy eyed girls are made to run to the church to attend the morning mass. They are severely punished at the school assembly the following day if they absent themselves. They are caned either by the priest or the teacher. In the evenings the mantra class cannot be skipped. As soon as they returned from school, suppressing their hunger, they rush to church.

The interaction between the girl-child and the church takes place in an unmistakable atmosphere of fear, punitive ethos, superstition and violence, physical as well as psychological. The sisters at the church feed the girls on a staple diet of ghosts, demons and, black devils equipped with horns, tails, protruding nails and teeth who kept a record of the evil deeds committed by the girls and pounced upon them when the notebook overflowed with their "sins Bama recalls that as soon as she entered the church, visions of terror and torture would conjure up before her and she would therefore rush to confront every single directive of the sisters to escape the devil's net. She would recite mantras frequently, run for every errand set by the sisters without delay and attend confession sessions every week.

It is remarkable to note the nature of this session. Confessions made mandatory for the girls were simply tutored passages that the girls recited after learning them up by rote. Neither the "sin" nor the punishment ordered by the priest ever changed. The confession went thus:

Prayers to the omnipotent. I am a sinner. Kindly bless me. It has been a week since I offered confession. I lied four times; I stole five times; I did not obey my elders; I stared here and there at the temple (church). I confess and regret these and all those sins I forget to recall. (69)

While the adult narrator is able to bring to this section a critical perspective, the narrative nonetheless evokes the terrified state of mind of the young girl. It was sheer terror to run to the altar to recite the prescribed verses in the dark, deserted space of the church. And that too on a rumbling stomach, starved since school time! On Sunday evening, special mantra class was held followed by blessings (Asirvadam) at the church. It would be a long drawn out affair punctuated by a lecture, followed by questions and clarifications, etc. The children would feel sleepy at this session. But the sisters would keep vigil over them. They would hit them violently on the girls' backs or pinch them hard on their thighs or punch them on their heads. Each act of violence would follow one after the other to prevent nodding children from dozing off! The girls wou!d be often shocked out of their wits by such violent reprisal that some of them would wet their skirts. The traumatised girls' experience is no less violent or painful than the brutality borne by adult Dalit men and women at the hands of the policemen.

Although Bama always won prizes and excellent marks at the castechsim class, she was not spared the violent punches or derogatory casteist taunts. Bama learns to estimate institutionalised religion as oppressive and unfair to the poor and socially marginalized groups. Hesitant protest and little subversive notes, malicious depiction of the sisters laced with humour are strategies employed by the narrator to mark the disenchantment of the Dalit girl with the ecclesiastical cadre and its edict"..s. There are moments when the girl reeling under a tight punch or pinch vows to hit the sister with a stone when she grows up. Religiosity is equated with terror, faith is rooted in fear. The church upholds hierarchy and authoritarianism. In this context, it validates the oppressive structure upheld by the upper castes and the State in relation to the Dalit community. When she reaches college, Bama realizes the deception practised by the sisters and the priests towards poor Dalit devotees. She questions the dictum of daily visits to the church and the routine of japam classes and periodic communions. I felt that the sisters and priests had deceived me a lot. I was made to believe that god could reach me only through them. But I recognise now that god is nowhere near them. They are the most ungodly creatures. I fought with them. I questioned them. Oh! How fraudulent are these people? Cheats, hypocrites, actors-I hated them. (83)

Her identity as a Dalit Christian adds a further texture to the notion of social oppression. Her protests and subversive acts including her choice to invade the literary space hitherto dominated by upper caste male writers are rooted in her experiences and driven by her caste identity.While all Dalits are Highly treated and discriminated against, Christian Dalits face more specific forms of discrimination. Dalits who had converted to Christianity or born in Christian families experience caste discrimination within church and its various official organisations.

Christianity and Islam, theoretically, donot practise untouchability. But a separate category of Dalit Christians or Dalit Muslims has emerged in our country underlining the hegemonic structure of caste that permeates every layer of our society. When Bama in *Karukku* enters a nunnery, she is appalled to discover that this profession too is not untouched by caste hatred. Teachers, disseminators of knowledge and ethical

conduct, also practise untouchability. They enjoin upon Dalit students to sweep and mop the classrooms and clean the toilets. Thus students are employed as unofficial scavengers, a caste defined profession (20-1) The author laments, "Is there no s). Bama's narrative thoroughly rejects the casteist basis of institutionalised religion - both Hindu and Christian. While it shows that Dalits' conversion to Christianity (in her grandparents' generation) as a phenomenon was precipitated by the unjust caste system among Hindus, it also documents how Dalits continue to be ill-treated on the basis of caste even in the religion they have converted into. It thus tries to extend the question if caste beyond the religious discourse and brings the debate into the arena of culture, political and social space. Caste is a social category, legitimised by religion and unaddressed by political authority, argues Bama in *Karukku* and in her second novel Sangati.

As Bama is born into a Dalit Christian family - and therein hangs the tale. She critically explores the implications and practical fallout of such a categorisation - Dalit Christian. Theoretically speaking, Christianity does not recognize or prescribe any caste gradation. Caste is a category that is specific to Hindu lifestyie. However, in practice, all those Hindus who convert to another religion that preaches egalitarianism, manage to carry or are cursed to be fixed in their erstwhile castes. And this continues into future generations as well. Thus we have new categories of Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, nee-Buddhists, Ramgaria Sikhs and so on pace without the presence of caste?" (21)

While we examine the reasons that account for Bama's decision to become a Kanyastree at a Matam. We have earlier discussed how the girl narrator felt oppressed, threatened and subjected to physical violence by sisters and priests. Despite such an Experience, Bama believes that the church could make a positive intervention in the lives of Dalit Christians. Her commitment and concern for Dalits motivate her to join the Matam to help Dalits march forward in life. (*Karukku,* 19) She is warned by friends and her family that caste bias exists within the various issues. But Bama decides to take the plunge in order to help and protect poor Dalits from casteist Kanyastrees. Thus, we see that Bama believes in the theoretical matrix of Christianity. She enrols in the Matam to serve the poor and uplift the downtrodden. For the next seven years she continues to fight the system from within. She argues, protests, fights with Kanyastrees and authorities, works to break stereotypes constructed by church authorities regarding Dalits. But soon enough, she has to concede that caste is an overriding category that subsumes all other social criterion. She is pained to notice how Dalits are treated within church - forced to render menial service, shouted at, branded as uncultured creatures, not amenable to improvement. (*Karukku*, 21)

Dalits render not only menial service to church authorities, but also offer gifts to them at Easter, New Year, Christmas, etc. These are often expensive items, much beyond their means. Such occasions are termed "sandipuf/, sacred meeting. Although Dalits never get to taste expensive fruits like orangeor grapes, they buy these fruits on festive days, as gifts for Mother Superior or Father Priest of the church. Some of them even carry goats or hens as their personal gifts. In return, the priest or mother puts a mark of Holy cross on each kneeling devotee's forehead, blesses her and sends her away. No souvenirs or fruits are given to them by the holy church officials. What is worse, they are shouted at and herded like a pack of unruly cattle and set off with a parting shot, "Alright, alright, now leave. Do not lean on the walls or touch them with your hands.The church finds no hesitation in accepting gifts from their "untouchables/ believers but they cannot entertain any physical "contacf' with them.

The church clearly does not uphold or practise what it preaches-charity and love. It treats the rich and the poor differently, it discriminates between the upper castes and lower castes. The narrator is disillusioned with institutionalised religion when she confronts caste hatred among nuns and priests. Those who enter the Matam may have renounced their family but tlney do not renounce their caste. They do not erase the memory of their birth in an upper caste. Therefore, the paradox of Nadar priests, Naidu priests, Neicker sisters, Dalit sisters, etc., seriously undermines the fundamental premise of Christian thought: Love thy neighbour as thyself. An alienation sets in amongst the church and its neighborhood-based on caste. They need the Dalit parish but only to swell the numbers of their faith. The Dalits remain uncared for by the church.

At the mass, Dalits are made to sit in a separate enclosure, they are put up in an exclusive choir (of homogenous, Dalit caste). They are ordered to sweep and mop the church floor before the entry of the

upper caste Christian devotees. Dalit Christians, are allowed to bury their dead in a cemetery that is outside the village boundary, different from the cemetery meant for the upper castes that is situated closer to the church. No priest enters the Dalitstreet, Cheritheru, to look up the dying or the sick. The only interaction between Dalits and church seems to be in an arena bereft of religious or spiritual significance, one that validates the discriminatory social practice of fixing Dalits as scavengers whether at church-run schools or the priest's residence or at the church; Dalits' menial services alone are acceptable to the church. Bama comments, "There is no space in Thirusabai (holy church) for those Dalits who wish to renounce. There is a huge business that goes on, using up Oalits as the capital. Dalits out number other castes in the churchfold. But all the comforts and blessings are enjoyed by upper caste Christians. They corner all the posts and hold court over us. Dalit priests and sisters are marginalized within the church." (65)

Bama's *Karukku* also depicts that the church keeps the Bible out of reach of Dalit consciousness. Bama's earlier belief that the church acts as a sacred intermediary between the faithful and Jesus is supplanted by her painful recognition that Jesus is erased out of church by his priests and nuns. The church twists the message/ spirit of the Bible and teaches the oppressed the hollow virtues of "patience, obedience and suppression of anger". (85)

Majority of Christians are poor, marginalized Dalits while the ecclesiasts are rich, upper caste persons. They wield the power of church over the poor Christians. They use their power to forge servility and a superstitious faith among the poor so that they may rule over these unsuspecting souls while sustaining a cushy life for themselves. Bama argues that the church enjoins upon the faithful to offer their prayers with eyes closed lest their eyes should open up, it teaches the poor to prostrate at the altar so that they never learn to stand against injustice. The church has driven out god from its premises and has donned godliness as a cloak to camouflage its greed for power. (88-89)

Bama thus, argues for a rejection of institutionalised Christianity and points out that Dalits' social empowerment is possible only when they agitate for freedom from oppression -both social and ecclesiastical. True faith lies in liberation not enslavement. The church, her analysis proves, is keen to enslave Dalits and hold them subservient and abject, thereby ensuring Dalit subservience and social abjection in the context of dominant caste hegemony prevailing in society. Her reading that Dalits should reclaim Jesus from the ecclesiastical construction which seeks to distort his true identity as a defender of the oppressed, as a champion of the poor, is a radical strategy to deploy faith in the cause of Dalit liberation. Bama keeps away from political rhetoric or angry outbursts but points out that the time has come when Dalits have woken up to the double standards of church functioning.

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