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Bama's *Karruku* and *Sangathi*: The True Reflections of Indian Dalit Women

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In India a large section of people living a life of suppression and unendurable sorrow though it is largest democracy in the world. These section of people are termed as Dalits and the cause of their wretchedness is our strongly caste structured society. The word was used since the early 20th century, the beginning of the Dalit social movement. Dalit means broken, oppressed, untouchable, downtrodden, and exploited. The caste system in India has isolated innumerable Dalits, from mainstream of life. The term Dalit sounds censure and denounce as itself implies lowest stratum of society. The caste system in India is built on the standard of purity and impurity. Purity means rich and white, impurity means poor and dark. Being socially segregated for centuries, they are obliged to live a helpless life without menial facilities. As published in *The Hindu*, "every sixth person in the world as an Indian, every sixth Indian is a Dalit. In spite of the guarantee of civil rights and the special law enacted (in 1989) to prevent atrocities against them, the Dalits continue to be the victims of social discrimination and oppression across the country" (15). In this context we can guess the miserable condition of Dalit women. Dalits, in liberated India are still barred to use the free amenities; such as water taps, schools, temples, restaurants, hotels etc. the Dalit women have been beaten by the upper caste women while filling water from public taps. Dalit women have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family.

Dalit literature is a literature of dispute, pain and anguish. Its beginnings can be tracked to the undocumented oral folklore and tales of the past decades. Dalit literature as a genre was established in the 1960's and 1970's. There have been numerous writings on the caste system by authors from different disciplines in social sciences in India and outside the country. Because of celebrated Dalit writings, a strong network of Dalit writers is established. The Dalit writers convey every Dalit entity into a 'unified community' of fellow sufferers. The Dalit community made these experiences of subjugation as device to stimulate them against the iniquitous social system. There are several examples of non-Dalits writing on Dalit situation but when Dalits themselves write about their situation, it accounts to the literature a new strength and idiom. Some kind of a protest had been part of the Dalit writings. But it has been drawn a little response in the literary arena of the country and is peculiarly noticed in case of Dalit women writers.

Bama Faustina Mary was born at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Her family was converted to Christianity way back in the 18th century. Her father was Susairaj and mother Sebasthiamma. Bama's *Karukku* is the first autobiography in Tamil Dali literature. It is an authoritative representation of Dalit suppression. The book was enormously successful and received by readers and critics alike. It begins with the first person narration. The narrator moves from the past to the present in exploring the varying manifold sets of different incidents, which have taken place in her life. *Karukku* represents the Dalits' life and their misuse and repression, as its author believes, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. *Sangati* includes events and happening of the lives of author and many Dalit women. Bama accounts struggles, frustrations

and triumphs and survival of Dalit women. The novel covers the stages of author's life starting from young girl to womanhood.

Faustina was almost banished from her village when she published her first novel, *Karruku*. People allowed her enter the village after realizing that the novel was in their favour. She narrates in her own language and style that is not accessible to many of people and takes a lot of time to recognize her as a writer. As a woman and a Dalit she had to struggle hard to get her established. She depicts about the injustice done to her people. Her celebrated novel, *Sangati* includes a number of stories of her and her people's experiences. Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the book – there is also a reflective voice that moves across the narration of events in *Sangati*. The novel *sangati* becomes trend setter because of the narrating style that is examining and logical. With thoughtful depiction, culture is scrutinized and explored as a set of practices that characterized as a natural authority in a community

The Status of Dalit Women in Society

Taking birth into discriminated caste results a Dalit woman to face multiple oppression that violates her economic, political, social and cultural rights. She is inaccessible for education and social privileges. The situation of Dalit women in India is just inexplicable. They are one among the worst sufferers of socio-cultural, political and economic exploitation, injustice, oppression and violence. They are oppressed by the broader Hindu society, their own community's men and also their own husbands. In the interview to the daily *The Hindu*, Bama also says, "Because Dalits have been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe they are degraded... they have reached a stage where they themselves, voluntarily, hold themselves apart... The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption." It is true that *Dalit* made to believe that they are filthy and out casted. For centuries they deemed themselves lower are nowhere equal to upper caste people and hold apart from society. The Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realize their rights. As Ruth Monorama says, 'Dalit women are discriminated against three times over:

They are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits.

In India in spite of constitutional guarantees of non-discrimination on the basis of caste and gender (*Article 15(1)*), the right to life and security of life (*Article 21*) and the Constitutional directive to specifically protect Dalits from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (*Article 46*) Dalit women are subjected to subjugation.

It seems to Bama that "their lives are unceasingly tedious" and their "bodies, mind, feelings, words and deeds are always under control and domination". And as Dalit women they have a double cross to bear: not only are they exploited outside home by the upper castes, they are also abused by the highly patriarchal men within the community

India's freedom struggle witnessed mass contribution at an extraordinary level and many of these participants were women. Unfortunately, several of them have remained invisible to this day, unidentified and unsung. The few women who came from influential or middle class backgrounds made it into history books and their male relatives had often encouraged them to join the movement.

According to Ruth Manorama "Dalit women have been active throughout history often this has not been recorded. They were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of Indian villages. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land rights. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders

in the Panchayati Raj institutions. However, they are unable to put an end to the structural discrimination and exclusion. Violence and impunity are used to keep them in their place.”

M. Swathy Margaret, educated shares in an article when she was in her post graduation, given a nice room in the corner of the wing in the Ladies Hostel. But the only thing was that it was unused for a couple of years in spite of it being the best room in that wing, she was told. Later she was told it was the room where one Dalit woman Suneetha hung herself to the fan, after continuous sexual exploitation and ultimate rejection by a Reddy man when the question of marriage came up. Some inquired if that fact scared her. The ghost that stared at her was not the thought of a hanging female body but it was her own body which is Dalit and woman and is as vulnerable as Suneetha's. The stories of Dalit women being used and thrown by upper caste men, told and retold by her mother came back shouting loudly in her ears.

Here, Baby Kamble's words reasonably opted: “What a beastly thing this Hinduism is! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy - it is the very life blood of the Mahars!” (56) In *The Prisons We Broke of* Baby Kamble, she furiously declares that, the pride of the caste Hindus is at the cost of the lives of the ignorant Dalits.

The suffering of Dalit women starts from their infancy. They live “hard lives” as Bama recalls. Their suffering starts even when they are babies. The case is different for boys, “if a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls.” (Bama, 7) She continues saying that the case doesn't change even after they have grown old, “boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time...” Even in their own caste Dalit women are discriminated, boys are given more importance than girls. Many Indian middle class and lower class families feed their girls left over and seldom think about their health and boys are given to eat fresh and healthy food.

‘I thought about the fact that only women – and Dalit women in particular – become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The one who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; the reath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best way we can.” (68)

Degree of violence on Dalit Women

Violence against women in India has been a general practice. Women in the Indian society have been victims of humiliation, torture and harassment as long as one can observe from written records and newspaper reports. Dalit women have been the object of violence in greater degree from their own men folk, and also from higher caste men. In our society everything auspicious are named after woman. But in reality she is subjugated and ill-treated in many ways.

Bama recollects how Rakkamma, a helpless woman of her community behaved when she was beaten by her husband she shouted obscenities and shamed him by lifting her sari in front of the crowd and she supported her act by saying, if she had not behave so, he would surely have split

her skull in two. At first Bama disgusted by her behavior, but Bama is clear that no one is going to help the unfortunate women of her community, certainly not the government. It is up to the women themselves to take their lives into their own hands — for a start girl should be given the same treatment as the boys (even the fair-minded grandmother gave food to her grandsons first). Baby Kamble recollects in her autobiography how Kamble was a victim of her husband's male chauvinistic mentality, "Once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profuselyThe same evening we returned and he was so angry that he kept hitting me in the train." (155)

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme lewd verbal abuse and sexual labels, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit women.

According to Overview Report of Study in Andhrapradesdh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Utterpradesh Verbal abuse often accompanied physical assault, perpetrated against 274 women in the study. Over 500 incidents of physical assault on these women were recorded, with 30 women facing regular physical assaults. Violence in the Family Within the family, *domestic violence* is prevalent. A total of 215 Dalit women have recorded regular incidents of domestic violence that span several years of married life. This violence often manifests itself in verbal abuse of the woman, accompanied by physical assault, but also entails sexual abuse including marital rape. Several cases of inter-caste marriages ending in domestic violence reveal caste and gender discrimination against the Dalit wife leading to violence. In most cases where a Dalit husband is concerned, the violence takes on a strong patriarchal dimension: women are tortured within the home for not bringing enough dowries, for not bearing male children, for being supposedly ugly, or too beautiful, or allegedly unfaithful, for talking back to her husband, etc. Alcoholism among Dalit husbands is also a strong contributing factor to this domestic violence. Domestic violence resulted in some women being deserted by their husbands, or being forced to leave their marital home. For the majority of women, however, the social norms and pressures of married life and "duties" of wives to their husbands ensure that they continue to endure this violence

The Lack of wholesome food

Dalit girls suffer lack of good healthy food as she is consider as outer, who left home after marriage. She is fated to work hard in home as well as at outdoor to provide something for household not only after marriage but also before marriage. Bama recalls how she ate the "leftover skin" of the mangoes her grandmother brought. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her fingernails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins. (8) This malnutrition leads Dalit girls to diseases and lack of immunity results into uncertain life span.

Miserable childhood and early marriages

Destiny of an Indian girl is to get her married as soon as she enters her teens in case of Dalit girls the situation is worse than this. They demanded to be like young women and look after household works. As Bama recollects, 'in our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood.

Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the house work, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter'. (75)

Baby Kamble was married at the age of thirteen. Before she got married, she was considered to be an aged girl for marriage. She has recorded that the Mahars were so ignorant that they could not know whether a child suffered from a fever was alive or dead. Kamble herself was declared to be dead when she was two and a half years old because she was not feeling well and had fallen unconscious. She was about to be buried. However, one of her elderly relatives there noticed that Kamble was still alive. That was how she was saved. Kamble says that many such alive but unconscious and unfortunate children were buried in those days just because of a lack of awareness among the Mahars.

Bama get irritated and felt sad about her community women who are not educated and ready to accept the humiliation and torture at home and at working place. She admits that 'People were ignorant of the outer world and all they want in a girl child is to get her married after her puberty and beget children. She emphasizes on education and is furious for not being learnt. "... I have a little education; I earn a living, and stand on my own two feet. But when I think of the women from my community who can't tell „a“ [the first letter of the Tamil script] from „aa“ [the second letter of the Tamil script] and bend low to receive endless blows at home and at work, I am filled with frustration." (122)

Girls without healthy food suffer from malnutrition and the ignorant family accuses the girl instead, and relies on "pujaaris". Mariamma is one such motherless child and she suffers in the hands of ignorant women, "... it seems that in this town called Maduragiri, there's a pujaari. If he says a mantram over a lucky charm, and then ties it round their wrist, it seems barren women conceive, and girls who haven't come of age get their periods. Why don't you take your grandchild to him?" (Bama, 14) Superstitions among Dalit woman leads to wretched condition to their own community. Instead of providing healthy food they take their children to pujaries and tantric to get them well.

Lack of Education and mortification at Schools

Like other Dalit students in the past, Kamble was humiliated, harassed and discriminated against by her classmates as well as by her teachers. However, what is interesting to note is that Kamble and her classmates belonging to Mahar caste would fight against their caste Hindu girl fellow students. The school in which Kamble was getting education was a girls' school. She and her friends were not scared of their classmates at all. But their teachers were in favour of the caste Hindu students and punished Kamble and her friends when caste Hindu students made complaints against them to the teachers.

Bama painfully recalls the nuns commenting on the Dalit children. Bama expresses her grief: The warden-sister of our hostel could not abide low-caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat the fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home just skin and bone (17-18).

In a soliloquy Bama very pathetically speaks about her own community's present state. She also gives very supportive encouragements for the new generation of her community. She narrates

the social needs of her community like the need of education, and social; upliftment. She very positively speaks about women's cultural position and the enlightenment of women.

Faustina Soosairaj (Bama), said, "Before I pursued writing I was like a wounded bird in a cage. Today, after being an established writer, I am like a falcon flying high. I chose to write to break through the system without breaking down." As a debutant writer, Bama was fiercely criticized and excluded by her own people for sharing the facts of discrimination in her novels. Later a young boy named Arual read out her works to Bama's village folks and explained the core of her writings which helped Bama re-claim her respect and love from her community.

Sharmila Rege in The Hindu said "we need more of loud thinking and sharing on the relationship between researchers and social movements and intellectuals and the academy." Delivering a talk on Dalit studies as pedagogical practice, she said there was a need for putting together interdisciplinary teaching/learning materials to promote political and interpretative engagement with issues of caste and perspectives from Dalit collective struggles.

Like the great Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar, Bama believes that education alone can uplift her people. Her father, who served in the army, made sure that all his children were all educated. The support from the family helped Bama to blossom into a full time writer. Her journey into the writing world wasn't that easy.

How to End the Suffering of Dalit Women

Bama requests her community to follow a few things to put an end to the agony women. She asks them to treat both 'boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults.' Girls too must be given freedom and make them realize their strength. Then she is sure that, 'there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end, and she is sure that the saying „Women can make and women can break“. (123) will come true and "such a day will dawn soon."

Indian Dalit women have been subjected to cultural biases and atrocities since centuries. Equipping them with enough knowledge, support and resources to stand up for themselves certainly change the scenario.

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