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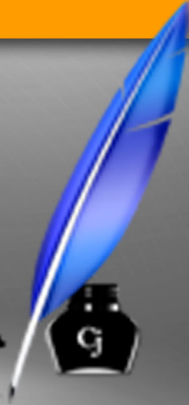
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## **Caste System, the Scourge of Indian Civilization and Culture: Bama's *Karukku***

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*Karukku* is a critique of the patriarchal and religious hegemonies in the Dalit society and their oppression by the hands of the upper castes. Bama's *Karukku* is the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil, for Dalit writings in this language has not produced the spate of autobiographies which have appeared in other languages. It grows out of a particular moment; a personal crises and turning point in the author's life which drives her to make sense of her life as a 'Woman', 'Christian' and a 'Dalit'. Bama in her autobiographical work dealt mainly with casteism with the Roman Catholic Church. Her focus there was the rift between the professed values of the Church and actual practice. Lakshmi Holmstrom says that it's the driving quest in Bama, for integrity as a Dalit and Christian shapes the book and gives it its polemic. Her attack is on the institutionalized casteism and patriarchy, Roman Catholic Church and the power relations within and outside the Church. Most importantly, she examines the simple faith with which she grew up as a Roman Catholic and restates it in the light of her experience as a Dalit and a woman.

The present paper reflects the autobiography of Bama, her struggle and fight against the colonial and religious dominance over the Church and society but with a note of hope for a future that brings with it a better socio-political scenario.

Caste system has been the scourge of Indian civilization and culture. The battle against this oppressive and inhuman is older than even some of the great religions of the world. The first warrior to wage against this system was probably Gautam Buddha who waged the war against this inhuman system in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. No doubt, Buddha was able to put some dents in the system, but after the Nirvana of Buddha, the system once again rose like a phoenix and gained strength to crush humanity. In fact, the system has proved to be the most agile and resilient against the liberal human traditions. According to Porter:

Caste represents the most memorable, comprehensive and successful attempt ever made by an order to oppress humanity in its own interest. Its enactments broke up the race into many fragments never to be reunited, separating Aryans from other peoples by impassable barriers, permanently fixing their occupations, interests, associations and aspirations. As men were born so they must remain. Their course of life was prescribed, their places after death predetermined. (Porter, 25)

The system not only crushed people, but also affected the history of humanity, as there were many people in the history, many unrealized geniuses who could not mature their talents and could not contribute to the advancement of humanity because they were forced to follow the

professions that were predetermined for their caste. In the distant past, the system was fluid, as caste was based on individual and not inherited, that is why people like Valmiki could write a great epic like Ramayana and were respected by all and sundry. But the system became rigid in the Middle Ages when transcending the restrictions laid by the system asphyxiated the individuals and their talents died within them.

In the recent times, conversion to other religions was practiced by these oppressed people to escape the tyranny of caste, but what they could do only was to leave their beliefs; their caste traveled with them. Their hopes of a respectable life dashed and the people of other religion also treated them as inferiors. In this case, eminent social scientist M.V. Srinivas writes:

The conversion of so called low castes to Islam and Christianity in many parts of India, and to sects such as Sikhism and Arya Samaj in Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh, was often motivated by a desire to shed the odium attached to being low. But the converts found that it was not at all easy to shake off their caste and that, in fact, they carried it with them to new faith or sect. Indian Islam and Christianity both bear the stamp of caste system; this is not to say, however, that the caste system among Indian Christians and Muslims is same as the caste system among the Hindus. (Srinivas, 80)

In fact, conversion could not provide any respite, but added to the miseries because now they were restricted by the rules of alien faith. The current paper is a study of Bama Faustina's *Karukku*. Bama was born into a family of Christian converts. From her childhood she followed the rites and rituals of Roman Catholic denomination. Bama's grandmother converted to Christianity to escape the tyranny of caste system, but her writings testify that Christianity turned into shackles around their feet. In *Karukku*, she deals mainly with casteism within Roman Catholic Church. In *Karruku*, she writes that oppression in Roman Catholic Church is more acute as it operates at many levels. In Church the children are conditioned to obey the rules of the nuns blindly and are frightened with the stories of God's punishment. For example, when Bama had to take communion for the first time, she was told in preparation class that she should not chew the thin wafer given to them. They were told that if they ever chewed it, then blood would flow down their hand and everyone would know that they disobeyed. They were supposed to swallow it down which was a difficult task. Bama's nature of questioning and reasoning led her to test this. She writes:

It seems in some village or the other; one lad had bitten into host with his teeth. From that very moment that morning, blood streamed from his mouth. It didn't stop throughout the day...the sisters told us this story. I wanted to test that out too, so another time I put my head cloth against my mouth, and terrified by what I was doing bit and chewed and swallowed. I wiped my mouth with my cloth and looked at it. No blood at all. Then I knew that this too had been an empty threat by the sisters. (*Karukku*, 74)

The incident makes it clear that telling lies was an important method used by the nuns to inculcate obedience in the children. The conditioning in the Church started very early. Though, Bama realized that all the threats were lies, casteism in Church was a harsh reality. Like their

Hindu counterparts, people in church also practiced ostracism based on birth. In the school run by the church every mishap was blamed on Paraya children. The priests had built the school in the Nadar Street. The church too, was in the same street; so was the priest's house. As a child, Bama used to think that the school and the Church were not built in her street because her street was full of filth. But gradually she understood that the reason was not filth of the street, but it was the filth filled in the mind, about the inferiority of the people residing in her street.

The important thing is that her school was not the only institution that reeked casteism, but it was rampant everywhere. When Bama went to High school in a neighbouring town, she had to stay in a hostel. The warden-sister of her hostel could not stand low-caste poor children. It was a crime for a girl of the lower-caste to be a plump. The warden would say: "These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat" (Karukku 17). And when they returned to school after holidays she would say:

Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill  
and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state which they come  
back from home-just skin and bone! (Karukku, 18)

Such was the state of the Dalits even when they paid their fees like the rest in that school. In the bus she had to face discrimination from the passengers, if they came to know that she belonged to a lower caste.

In the book, the readers are given glimpses to the writer's spiritual development both through nurturing her belief as a Catholic, and her gradual realization of herself as a Dalit. The readers are given full picture of the way in which the church ordered and influenced the lives of Dalit Christians. Every aspect of child's life is instilled with Christian religion. The day is ordered and influenced by religious rituals. Until Bama attended the convent, she too enjoyed the rituals that she did not understand. It was a pleasure of wearing new clothes, meeting friends and enjoying good food. That was the meaning of festivals to them. Christmas and Easter were celebrated in a grand manner, but only Dalit Christians participated in the celebrations. The upper caste Christians did not participate in the celebrations which show that the wall of caste had not melted even after converting to Christianity. The converted upper castes still did not feel it good to mingle with the lower caste Christians and preferred to bolt themselves in their houses. The festivals play an important role in bringing the people together and merging the boundaries between them. But in the absence of this intermingling of the upper and lower castes, the festivals and religions become meaningless and celebrations become futile. The Sisters and the Priests too do not say what needs to be said, but only speak words which are irrelevant and meaningless. Because of all these experiences, festivals fail to enthuse Bama. She understands the importance of Easter only when she left home and went to study outside:

What passes nowadays is merely a matter of doing things out of a  
sense of duty. When I developed some commonsense and  
discrimination, it began to strike me rather than jostle among the  
crowd in the name of festival, I would much prefer to worship at  
home. (Karukku, 85)

Bama's autobiography reveals that conversion to Christianity was a mistake on the part of her grandmother because it failed to change their status. The claim of the missionaries that

Christianity offered them a life of dignity and a chance to live in a casteless society proved to be fatal. In fact, Bama's autobiography reveals that the people who try to convert these people: priests and nuns are themselves not free from such biases.

In the convent the bitter truth is revealed to Bama. She did not reveal her caste identity to the other people and so was able to hear their real views which were seeped in caste biasness. She tells that the people in the convent did not know the meaning of the word Dalit. The few, who knew, showed utter contempt for them. Bama knew that if she would reveal her identity in front of the convent people she would be rejected, but her lie offered her a chance to know the unadulterated views about her people from God's people. She wondered sadly, how the sisters would bear in God's kingdom where there are neither high nor low. Bama quotes the talk of some Sisters about Dalits:

How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if we were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place. There is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we shouldn't do anything for them. Because to do so, would be to help cobras.

Even if we were to do something for them, they will never make progress. Their natures are like that. These days these people go about reasonably dressed. So you can't even make out who they are, sometimes. The government goes and gives these people all sorts of privileges. Why do illiterate people need all these things? (*Karukku*, 100)

The above quoted lines show that Christianity does not offer a casteless society in India. Bama feels disillusioned by the nuns in the convent. In fact she feels cheated by the empty promises. Her book reveals that the people are hypocrites; they are not what they show themselves to be. In fact, the casteless society is not the only fiction about Christianity, but when Bama enters the Convent she finds that the stories about abstemious lifestyle of the nuns are also fictionalized. After joining the convent she finds that nuns do not lead a pious or abstemious life style, rather they live a life of luxury:

Before they become nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. When the bell rang, there was a meal.... There was always food of all kinds... in abundance. There was a comfortable room to live in, each had a bedstead, a fan, table and chair, and drinking water.... At ten in morning there was coffee and snacks. At twelve, a hot meal. Once again tea and snacks at four in the afternoon, and a hot meal at seven. (*Karukku*, 67)

After joining the convent, Bama realized that her idea of coming to the convent was a foolish one. The convent offered a luxurious and comfortable life. Bama wanted to become a nun to help the poor and the oppressed people, but in convent she realized that her dream will always remain a dream. She pleaded with the sisters of the convent to transfer her to another school where she could teach poor children. Even may be to a village where she could dedicate her life



to educating the poor and the oppressed. However, in the end all of it fell on deaf ears. In addition to refusing her request, they intimidated her by talking of 'obedience' and 'faith.' They insisted that she could go only where she was sent. She was supposed to do only what she was told. She writes:

They exhorted me to see with the eyes of faith. All I could see was their authority flying high like a flag. I simply could not understand how I could see all this with the eyes of faith. (Karukku, 98)

Certainly, Bama's autobiography shows that conversion is not a solution to the problem of casteism. Changing one's religion means escaping from one oppressive structure to join another oppressive system. Bama rejects conversion as a solution. In her autobiography, it emerges that the only solution to the oppression is the empowerment that is offered by education. Her autobiography testifies that education makes other people respect them. Only education allows them to transcend their caste identity. In her autobiography she quotes an incident related to her brother. In an incident in the library in the adjacent village, the librarian was looking at her brother in a certain way because he was a Paraya lad from Cheri Street. So while signing out his books, he added his title M.A. on a sudden impulse. Immediately, the attendant brought him a stool to sit on and started addressing him as 'Sir.' Citing such incidents from his life, Bama's brother told her this:

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (Karukku, 15)

Bama religiously followed the words of her elder brother and studied hard. She stood first in her class and as her brother said, many people in her class became her friends, even though she was a Paraichi (lower caste). Her autobiography reveals that education allows the people freedom, freedom from menial jobs and proves that they are capable of doing anything. In Bama's case, education provided her economic freedom:

I could go about independently, as I pleased. I could buy a sari or jacket that took my fancy, and wear it. I could go wherever I wanted to go. I could buy and eat what I liked. I could even have a few pieces of jewellery made for myself. I became aware that if you have little money in your hands you can gain some status, and prestige. And I realized that those who have the cash to spend can always live in comfort. (Karukku, 66)

Thus the message in her autobiography is clear that only education can emancipate the Dalits from ignominy of caste. Education did for Bama what conversion and promise of a dignified and casteless society failed to do for her and her ancestors.

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