

Bama's Voice against Violation of Human Rights

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Abstract

'Karukku' (1992) by Bama portrays how Tamil Dalit Christians are subject to oppression. An important issue of concern in the text is dual oppression of Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender. Dalit patriarchy allows Dalit women's subjugation and perpetuates hierarchical relations within Dalit community thus making it a triple marginalization on caste, class and gender. Bama's stepping out of the nunnery after seven years of stay is the main issue of voicing against human rights. She felt it unjust, unchristian, discriminatory conduct of church authorities towards Dalit-Christians. It was distorting the real image and teachings of Christ. Karukku celebrates Dalit women's lives, their wit, their humour, their resilience and their creativity. The term "Dalit" itself represents their struggle for humanity. It is not Bama's story alone but the representation of the pain of her community. This autobiography is an inner quest for self-discovery and the resultant courage which forces her to move away from the life of a nun to live "the life of a Dalit woman" fighting for human rights for Dalit women and her community too. Her writing is mainly for liberation of Dalits so that they would have dignity human rights.

Key Words: Karukku, Human Rights, caste, discrimination, Dalit, Paraiyar

The purpose of the present paper is to discuss *Karukku*, a Dalit autobiography by Bama as a voice against violation of human rights. In 1992, this autobiography was warmly received by readers and critics. Bama wrote *Karukku* in a natural expression of her lived-experiences. *Karukku* means Palmyra leaf and Bama finds many congruities between her strife-filled life and the saw-edged *Karukku*. Bama describes in the preface: "The driving forces that shaped this book are many cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and lift me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was split then; all these taken together" (xiii). The text shows collusion of patriarchy with caste hegemony in respect of a harsher and more unjust suppression of Dalit women. It also presents a significant aspect of the oppression of Dalit Christians in the church. Ambedkar says, "The caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically" (2014: 5). Caste is such an ill that made Ambedkar say: "*Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them*" (2014:18). This indicates how Caste has been the operational force for oppression of lower castes by violating human rights.

Human rights are such rights which are inbuilt in all human beings irrespective of their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. It is apparent that all human beings are equally entitled to their human rights without any kind of discrimination. Certainly human rights are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. Due to the impact of caste factor in Hindu society, Dalit Christians are not allowed to sing in the church choir; forced to sit separately not nearing the upper caste Christians; not allowed to bury their dead in the cemetery, behind the church, etc. In all Dalits are denied human rights. The Paraiyar, the caste of funeral drummers who play the *parai* drum, converted to Christianity to escape caste-oppression by orthodox Hindus but they are disappointed as they are oppressed within the church-fold and they could not get reservation benefits being Dalit Christians. Discrimination of Dalit women makes R. K. Bakshi say, "Dalit women are the triple burden of caste, class and gender" (2010:13). Dr Ambedkar says that Caste is made by man and not by *Shastras* and "...endogamy is the only characteristic of Caste and when I say *Origin of Caste* I mean *The Origin of Mechanism for Endogamy*" (2014:14). Hence he says, "I regard endogamy as a key to the mystery of the Caste system" (2014: 9). As a result, asserts Ambedkar, "Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste" (2014:56). Many leaders from the lower castes like Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule, Ramaswami Naicker, etc. started massive struggles for the liberation of untouchables. They wanted to safeguard their human rights. Babasaheb Ambedkar was the most towering figure among all the Dalit leaders; in fact he was not simply the leader of Dalits. He knew that emancipation and empowerment of Dalits is possible only through education.

With *Karukku* Bama's community found a place in the mainstream media. The history of her people had no place in Tamil history and with this it is changed. It also became the pioneer of the human rights for the Paraiyar. When she left the convent she had a very difficult time. She had to face all sorts of problems. She was treated like an outcaste. She faced poverty, apathy and even scorn from near and dear ones. Bama likes the Communist ideology but she has a problem with the Communists in Tamil Nadu as many of them talk about economic uplift and equality but make no mention of caste differences. Her act in the inauguration of Dr Ambedkar's statue in Tamil Nadu in the centenary year seems direct bearing on her writing. History witnesses that Ambedkar is the esteemed pioneer of Dalit literature that protests all kinds of segregations and proves their identity as human beings. Akash Singh explains, "Identity within the caste system as both 'touchable and untouchable' or 'high and low' survives because it continues to provide meaning under the present system" (2011:99). Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of human rights consciousness. Rekha Ojha elucidates, "Dalit women see their liberation as linked to the solution of caste oppression. Such a conception is based on the community and not individual since the Dalit women feel a part of the community" (2012: 132). Dalit writers' writings call attention to caste hegemony and patriarchal structure which seek to control a Dalit woman's sexual life and conduct. "Dalit writers see their writing as a means of human liberation", affirms Limbale (2010, 35). Dalit writers do not care for the nature of the narrative; they want to have their identity through their writings. The Dalit movement emerged in response to the

numerous injustices suffered mostly in silence by Dalits for centuries. Dalits had to endure the disgrace associated with the patronizing names imposed on them by caste-Hindus. The violence that suffuses Dalit lives attacks their literary expression and they thrash hegemonic, traditional, mainstream literary and aesthetic parameters. “To be human is to respond to human sufferings and pain with compassion and effective concern” (Agnihotri 2012: 208). The bearing of this attitude will never allow violation of human rights.

Dalit movements dominated mostly by men had a tendency to sideline issues concerning Dalit women who were compelled to voice their misery doubled up due to caste and gender discrimination. It resulted in the rise of Dalit Feminism. As an exponent of Dalit feminism Bama has found in *Karukku* the right space to articulate the sufferings of Dalit women. Bama thinks that Dalit consciousness can be illustrated by people from other castes but their narratives can be of sympathetic attitude and not the outcome of direct experiences of Dalits as they cannot experience the pains of untouchability. “... Hindus were enlightened intellectual, who confined their activities to abolish the enforced widow-hood, child-marriage, etc., but they did not feel the necessity for agitating for the abolition of castes nor did they have courage to agitate against it” (Ambedkar 2014: xiv). Bama says that women writers have another tale to tell as Dalit women writers have double marginalisations to narrate. She feels that Poona Pact did a great harm to Dalits and women. Had Dalits been given separate electorates the change could have appeared fast in their lives making them the instrument of change. She regrets that although many Dalits became Christians, but their caste did not go off. A Dalit woman is ‘other’ for Dalits as they are ‘others’ for the upper castes. Bama is doubly oppressed by her caste and gender. Bama’s position is further endangered by her existence as a Dalit Christian. Hence *Karukku* focuses on three essential forces that cuts across and sears Bama’s life, namely: caste, gender and religion. Bama describes her appalling experience: “When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker woman sitting next to me in the bus, she’d immediately ask me which place I was going, to what street. As soon as I said the cheri she did get up and move off to another seat. Or she did tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I did settle into my seat even more firmly. They did prefer then to get up and stand all the way rather than sit next to me or to any other woman from the cheri. They’d be polluted, apparently. This happened to me several times” (18). Simple touch of an untouchable pollutes upper castes. This is also a form of violation of human rights. The violation of human rights was at school too. When the class teacher or PT teacher would ask all the Harijan children to stand up at assemble or during lessons was very humiliating for her, like many kids.

Unlike other Dalit kids, Bama had a little privilege to get education as her father worked as a sepoy in the Indian Army. After her graduation, she did her B. Ed; taught in a high school for some years; resigned and became a nun to teach Dalit children with dignity. This shows Bama’s zeal for human rights of Dalits. The afterword of the autobiography presents author’s zeal for liberation of Dalits:

I have met several people who work with zeal for the single objective of Dalit liberation. And it has been a great joy to see Dalits aiming to

live with self-respect, proclaiming aloud, ‘Dalit enrdu sollad; talai nimirndu nillada’: Say you are a Dalit, lift up your head and stand tall (106).

After centuries of silence, Dalit writers began to express their lived-experiences. Bama faced lot of problems due to caste but fought courageously. She says, “I did not care a toss about caste. Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully” (20). Bama struggled hard throughout her life but knew the importance of education. She advises, “If you are born into low caste every moment of your life is a moment of struggle” (23). At the end of her autobiography, Bama compares herself with a bird whose wings were broken:

I am like a bird whose wings were broken. After its wings have been broken it is protected only if it stays within its cage, but if it comes out it can only flap its wings uselessly unable to fly. And that is the state in which I am now (104).

Bama is not frightened but optimistic. She hopes to fly again like a bird and there would be strength in her wings – the strength of education and human rights. She says:

I don’t know when my wings will heal and gain enough strength so that I too will be able to fly again. Just as people throw sticks and stones to wound a wingless bird, many people have wounded me with their words and deeds. Yet I know I am moving forward slowly step by step (104).

Apparently it is the confidence and optimism of Bama. *Karukku* is a painful journey that is open-ended. It is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation and education, etc. Bama presents a vivid picture of the caste oppression of Dalit Christians not only by the upper castes but within the Catholic Church too. As a child at school she was burning with anger when she “saw that all the menial jobs were done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way” (23). These lived-experiences taught her to raise a voice against violation of human rights. S. Lata Agnihotri says, “Vulnerably positioned at the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies, Dalit women experience endemic gender-and-caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations” (2012: 10). Bama was pained, “to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the Sisters had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them” (23). Obviously the violation of human rights was on high in the church. Bama is not marginalized just as a Dalit and a woman but a Dalit-Christian too. She was about to finish her training as nun. Soon she would become a full-fledged nun and she was shocked when she heard a Sister say about the caste-based discrimination. “Generally in the male-dominated society, polygamy is allowed and more so in many dalit families”, asserts Agnihotri (2012:5). Thereupon Bama felt that “this convent was not without its caste division” (22). The term ‘Harijan’ applied for Dalits by Mahatma Gandhi is very humiliating and robs of human rights of Dalits,

thus makin the a great harm, asserts Bama. So she says, “because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation” (24).

Bama hoped to teach in a village school to help Dalit children but she could not get this opportunity because of caste. She could not understand why the Sisters were making such discrimination on the basis of caste when Jesus didn't. The saw-like edges of the leaf made her recall not only the “social cuts” people like her got every day but also the more important fact that they had to cut through this oppressive system. “It is a pity that Caste even today has its defenders” (Ambedkar 2014:46). See the wretchedness of Caste! S. Lata Agnihotri says, “Despite Constitutional guarantees to provide social and political equality since Independence, the practice of discrimination against lower castes – and particularly Dalits – is upheld as part of tradition” (2012:52). Just the law or the constitutional provisions can't help Dalits enjoy human rights. For that the upper castes need to change their attitude and become humanistic. “Caste does not result in economic efficiency. Caste cannot and has not improved the race. Caste has however done one thing. It has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus” (Ambedkar 2014:50). It seems that Bama has a message from the Buddha and Babasaheb to be the instrument of change as none would come forward to bring changes in the life of Dalits. “Lower-caste women are singularly positioned at the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies” (Bakshi 2010:51). Bama's sociological position is the same in the society and the church too. If one wants to be liberated from such injustices and seek the human rights the inner force is required. Bama did it because of her internal power taking inspiration from the Buddha who preached, “Be thy own light”. So Bakshi says, “Emancipation is thus firstly an internal process. It involves a process of liberation of the self from the old internalized prejudices” (2010:67). Bama affirms: “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us” (25). She tries to encourage her people: “We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no feelings; we must dare to stand up for change” (25). For regaining the human rights, Bama angrily expresses:

We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission, and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are 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).

Bama's words give the message of “liberty, equality, fraternity and justice.” Bama's anger is quite visible from these words: “Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes such as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? They treat us in whatever way they choose, as if we are slaves who don't even possess human dignity” (24). By hook or crook, Bama says, Dalits must achieve their huam rights. But for that they have to peep into themselves. According to P. Lakshmi Narasu, “The so-called nationalists of a nationless India boast that the social system of India was perfected thousands of years ago and console themselves by attributing all their miseries to the foreign invasions. But they forget that these invasions have been

possible only through the emasculation wrought by spiritual and social slavery” (2009:127). In this connection Bama says, “If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle” (24). This suggests that Dalits have to struggle to bring change in their life. They can’t rely on anyone for their prosperity and happiness as none would come to their rescue. If they want dignity and human rights they must be ready for struggle. Bama says, “In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy” (23). S. Lata Agnihotri claims, “Dalit women face violence in the family over a range of issues, suggesting the assimilation of the larger patriarchal caste system’s norms by particularly Dalit men, with negative implications for Dalit women’s personal lives and interactions in their community” (2012: 14). Caste is so attached to man in India that even after death it does not vanish away. But the most surprising thing is that the cemetery in Christianity has the label of caste, so Bama says, “The upper-caste Christians had their own cemetery” (25).

Narrating gender discrimination, Bama says, “It was always girl children who had to look after all the chores at home” (45). Further she narrates: “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is” (11). Article 17 of the Indian constitution has abolished the untouchability but in practice still it is prevailing. During her schooling she had bitter experiences but she somehow “managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination” (20). In the convent, all those nuns “said that caste-difference counted for a great deal within convents” (20). This experience in the convents made Bama ponder over seriously: “They all go about filled with caste-hatred. Why even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste” (24). This shows triple marginalization of Bama: caste, gender and religion. “Christian Dalits thus have a dual social and psychological identity, Christian as well as Dalit, and have to live with the tensions built into that dual identity” (Khanna 2011:126). And it is true in the case of Bama who became a nun to serve the poor children. But she was upset when she found that the convent could not even care to glance at poor children. It was a painful scene for her. Thinking over the things going on in the convent, Bama was battered and bruised. She finally “left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited” (67). She was upset for some time after leaving the convent as there was nothing left for her - no job, no clothes to wear and nothing to eat. Her boldness vanished and she became completely meek and timid. Bama ends her autobiography:

For, time being, I cannot see my way ahead. Yet I believe it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears (104).

Bama has left the convent with a purpose to serve the others. Although these are Bama's childhood experiences, yet they give some insight and philosophy of life. "Domination, social segregation, and violence are regular features of the daily lives of millions of Dalits – those who have been regarded as "untouchable" by orthodox Hindus" (Rawat 2012:1). Bama has exposed certain aspects of Indian society which are very much shocking and no readers of her could ignore her experiences as a Dalit, a woman and a Christian. "Dalit literature is life-affirming literature. All the strands of this literature are tied to life. It is the clear assumption of the Dalit writer that: 'My literature is my life, and I write for humanity'" (Limbale 2010: 105). It becomes clear that Bama discards one religious community to join another 'religious' community. Whatever Bama did or has been doing is for the sake of gaining human rights which have been denied Paraiyar for ages. "Dr. Ambedkar was fully equipped to go into the depth of the socio-economic problems and fix the problem", says Akash Singh (2011:7). Human rights are safe in democracy. And "Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Ambedkar 2014:57). Bama got inspiration from Babasaheb Ambedkar to fight against the violation of human rights. It was Ambedkar who said, "If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on *Liberty, equality* and *Fraternity* (2014:57). Seeing the boldness of a Dalit woman like Bama makes Surinder Khanna say, "Dalit intelligentsia is making serious attempt to construct their cultured past and history as against the upper caste Brahminical hegemony" (2011:195). Social and human emancipation has been the goal of Dr. Ambedkar who makes us believe that the goals of social change and development are not just possible with the intervention of law but primarily through transformation of social relations with the help of sound governance framework. Thus the mental change of human beings is the most important factor in abolishing discriminations, may it be caste, class or gender. This will lead to social justice and equality. In the opinion of U. R. Ananthamurthy, an eminent writer and academician Dalit literature, may it be oral or written, has been an integral and enlivening part of Indian literary traditions for centuries. In a very simple manner human rights are moral principles or norms which describe definite standards of human behavior and they may be taken together with fundamental rights, civil rights, and natural rights. So far Indian constitution is concerned, there are seven fundamental rights: right to equality, right to freedom of speech and expression, right to freedom of religion, right against exploitation, cultural and educational rights, right to constitutional remedies, and right to education, which is newly added. Bama has played her role not as a Dalit but as a writer as well as a practical supporter of human rights.

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