

# The Plight of Dalits in Bama's Karukku

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**Abstract** - Casteism plays a vital role in Indian society and is considered as a part of the people's lives; it gives identity to all people in Indian society. Casteism invariably allocates the status of hierarchy at birth itself. This casteism makes many people "untouchables" who are subjected to innumerable atrocities by the members of grown up castes. Though many people like Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, Bharathiar and etc. oppose the operation of caste system, the caste system continues to prevail in various forms.

**Index Terms** - Casteism, society, hierarchy, untouchables

## INTRODUCTION

In that system Dalits are the most affected that they do not find any place devoid of ostracism, humiliation and oppression by the name of caste. "Dalits in India have been socio-economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically marginalized for centuries" (Shah 14). Dalits are denied access to many places like common well, schools, hospitals hotels, temples, etc., because of caste discrimination that perennially exist in Indian society, despite the constitution of India prohibits the practice of untouchability by any form. Bama, here narrates her experience as a child. She also narrates about the games which she used to play along with her friends during their childhood. They have no gender differences in the days of their childhood, the boys and girls play together. Some of their games have life likeness. "Two or three boys would play of being Naicker. The rest of us would call them. 'Ayya, Ayyaa' and pretend to be their pannaiyaal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They would call out to us 'Yeppa, Yeppa', humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work" (Bama: Karukku 56). Bama here writes out her agony of being a Dalit.

In Indian society people usually convert themselves to Christianity to get rid of themselves from the clutches of caste tyranny. The colonial novels celebrate conversion into Christianity, for the conversion into Christianity provides them with food, shelter and

education and equality to all. More and More Indians especially Dalits convert them into Christianity believing, "Christians are not obsessed with caste as the Hindus were". Ideologically the theory of creation seems to be different from the Hindu philosophy of creation, whereas in practice people are segregated and separated on the basis of caste even in churches. Jesme observes on the class disparity found in the convents:

The less-educated and the less privileged among the professed nuns belonged to a lower class, undergoing a different manner of training under a separate Mistress. These sisters, though also from the lower strata, were differentiated from the cheduthies as they, too, took the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and wore the sister's habit. These nuns could not sit on chairs alongside other more privileged sisters but only on their 'trunks'. They were given jobs in the kitchen, parlour, fields or compounds. There is a 'Fair Ethelamma' and a 'Dark Ethelamma' in the province. The fair one belongs to the higher strata and the dark one to the lower, not only because of the difference in complexion, but mainly because of the disparity in education and wealth. Despite our proclaiming the ideas of justice and equality before God, such class distinctions exist in the convents and seminaries. (47-48)

Bama is of no exception, she is also a Dalit, converted into Christianity, and decides to take up the position of a nun to help the poor and the destitute. In convents the Tamil nuns are treated differently. She undergoes double ostracism: first as a Tamil and second as a Dalit. "Tamil people were looked upon as a lower Caste. And then among Tamils, Parayar were a separate Category" (Bama: Karukku 24). Bama is informed by a sister that by certain order the Harijans are not allowed as prospective nuns. Bama feels alienated. She enunciates, "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste" (Bama: Karukku 25).

The schools run by the missionaries unleash the caste disparity. It is common to note such disparity. The Dalits are ill treated and the welfare schemes offered to them are misappropriated by the authorities. Jesme observes:

According to government rules, the scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe students are given a quota of a certain number of seats. To keep these seats for the management, sometimes false numbering is resorted to. Fictitious application numbers are allocated where by those seats can be grabbed (57).

The convent where Bama undergoes training is attached with a school. In that school the Dalits are allotted menial jobs like “Sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories” (Bama: Karukku 25). Dalits are forced to do those jobs in schools. An article entitled “Dalit Children in India – Victims of Caste Discrimination” enumerates:

A survey by Indian human rights organization Navsarjan Trust reveals that teachers, local governments, and community members routinely subject the children of manual scavengers to discrimination and forced labour as part of daily experience of attending school and living in their communities reports reveal rampant discrimination against Dalit children and students in direct contravention of numerous international and domestic laws banning caste discrimination and ‘untouchability’ practices. (n. p)

In schools, one can find such kind of disparity even today. The teachers speak very insultingly about the low caste people; they are not considered as human beings. “According to their notion, low-caste people are all degraded in every way. They think we have no moral discipline or cleanliness nor culture all the menial jobs there done by Dalits who were abused all the time and treated in a shameful and degrading way” (Bama: Karukku 26).

Bama, on completion of her studies, gets a job of a teacher in a school run by nuns by chance. By that time she has realized that the nuns are nothing but “whited sepulchres” (Bama: Karukku 102). She has worked in that school for five years. There have been many poor children and also three fourth of them belong to Dalits. There have been many atrocities wreaked against the poor people, instead of serving them and that has irritated Bama. “They ran a boarding school which was nominally for the sake of destitute

children, but in fact they made those children do every menial task that was needed. They behaved as if they were queens there, and everybody else was there only to run errands for them” (Bama: Karukku 103). Even there are a few nuns with slightly humane attitude; they are not able to do well as they are ostracized from the entire community of nuns. Amongst them, one can witness the caste divisions, class divisions and racial divisions. Bama avers, “I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too, associated himself mainly with the poor” (Bama: Karukku 104); she feels that nobody teaches the real God. They are eager to show God as “loving, Kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient” (Bama: Karukku 104), but not as “just, righteous, angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality” (Bama: Karukku104); in such a way she has begun to understand God and His ways and decides to become a nun to serve for the entire humanity.

At the first instance after her training as a nun, Bama has been posted at a convent, where there is no connection between God and suffering poor. The school is fed up with children from wealthy families; there is no love among the people who used to preach God as loving and merciful.

They claimed that God’s love is limitless, subject to no conditions. Yet inside the convent there were innumerable conditions about how you should be and who you were in order to deserve love. When outsiders arrived, flaunting their wealth and education, they were treated with one sort of love; if they did not have these things, they were treated in a different way . . .” (Bama: Karukku 106).

Bama realizes that the churches teach one thing but practice another thing, here love is subject to what one has in their pocket, and “it is injustice that dances like a demon in the convents . . .” (Bama: Karukku 106).

Bama also assesses the proceedings of the contemporary church; they are not backing up the cause of the oppressed but rather they turn them into slaves in the name of God, while they live in comfort. Only the upper caste Christians enjoy the fruits of the religion; the upper caste people are able to come out of the caste based oppression, wreaked on them by the Hindu hegemony, whereas Dalit Christians are humiliated and deceived by the name of God, by blindfolding their eyes, they are maintained as stone steps that others tread through. Bama concludes:

Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect, and with a love towards all humankind". (Bama: Karukku109)

Christianity as a whole as it is practiced today has no love for humanity; Love is restricted based on caste, class and level of wealth.

Originally church and the missionary come to India with a view to serve the humanity; they have provided education to the suppressed and the exploited free of cost. Now the face of church has changed and that they exorbitantly charge for providing quality education and only rich people are accommodated. They justify their stand by saying that the money collected is used for service in other places. Nominally they admit a few poor. They usually shun the rich ones and lurk in corners trembling. There is disparity based on the economic stratification—rich and poor. "The rich children would say, we don't want to sit next to those ones, they are dark-skinned, they are poor, they are ugly, they don't wear nice clothes" (Bama: Karukku 112).

Dalits have only a few clothes; they are not affordable to purchase dress as they want to. Consequently they have to manage with the dresses available with them. Here Bama explains how she has suffered psychologically during her studies at college for want of adequate dress and ornaments. Bama undergoes the course of poverty throughout her studies. She has no ornaments and even no footwear to wear.

Some of the students asked me, 'Why aren't you wearing anything in your ears and about your neck? You don't even have chappals on your feet', they said. It

was true that almost all of them came to college wearing all kinds of trinkets and with fine clothes. But where would I go for such things? I even pawned my small earrings in order to pay my examination fees. And my clothes certainly weren't anything much. (Bama: Karukku 75)

Bama highlights different kinds of exploitation and voiceless condition of the Dalits. The upper caste people bribe the policemen to demolish Dalit superiority; they feel that the Parayars are disobedient; consequently, they want to wipe them off.

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