

OPPRESSION OF DALITS IN BAMA'S SANGATI

Khagendra Sethi

Lecturer, Department of English, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack-753003, Odisha



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This article makes an objective study of the inexplicable plight of the Dalits, especially the Dalit women have faced in Bama's Sangati. In other words, this study will show three layers of discriminations that the Dalit people especially the Dalit women have encountered in their everyday life activities on the basis of caste, religion and gender. The present novel notes the agony of the marginalized where they are discriminated in every walk of life. Bama, being a Dalit woman has tried her best to put up a strong protest for the cause of the Dalits in general and the subjugated people of Tamilnadu in particular.

Dalit literature is the literature of protest. It came into limelight in seventies and subsequently spread to the adjacent states like Gujrat, Karnataka, Maharastra, Tamilnadu and others. In Tamilnadu, Bama, a Dalit fiction writer of high importance, has written for the cause of the Dalits against discrimination on the grounds of caste, genre and religion. In Karukku, her autobiography, she has exposed the politics of caste system and religious conversion. Her fiction Sangati, an autobiography of her community, has attacked the three fold marginalization of the Dalits in the context of caste, religion and gender.

In the context of the deplorable conditions of the Dalits, Bama's novel *Sangati* is the perfect illustration of the Dalit writings expressing their exploitation and a strong voice of protest. So *Sangati* is not the sad story of an individual but that of the whole Dalit mass. The novel moves from the story of an individual struggle to the rebellion of a whole community comprising the Paraiya women, neighboring friends and their relatives. The narrator of this novel is a woman who gives a concrete account of the events experienced as well as heard by her in her journey of life from girlhood to adolescence. This work is a genuine expository of the lives of the Dalit people who face three-fold discriminations on the basis of caste, religion and gender. Bama writes:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his

slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment. (Bama: 35)

The Dalit males are also the worst victims. They feel castrated not only before upper caste males but also upper caste females. The upper caste young Mudaliar women of the village not only call aged Adi-Dravida men by their names but even make sexual advances towards the lower caste men. S. Anand writes:

... the sexual encounters between Mudaliar women and dalit men were a terrain of more complex negotiations with serious consequences for the masculinity of dalit men. (2002)

Like men, the Dalit women are constantly and frequently vulnerable to the sexual harassment of the upper caste people. They are abused both at home and outside and mostly at the work place. The women lead a very insecure life for fear of rape and molestation. Bama has cited so many instances of such gruesome violence inflicted on these women. Patti is too much concerned with the safety of the women. She makes the women alert while going out to collect firewood. She warns them not to go to certain parts of the area to drag the lascivious eyes of the upper caste people. She sets the example of Mariamma. Mariamma, once upon a time, on her way back home after collecting firewood was molested by Kumarasami, an upper caste man. Fortunately she could manage to escape. When she revealed this incident to her friends, they warned her not to make it public in order to save her from further blame and harassment. Nobody will believe her or take her words into account. It is because she is a Dalit woman. So she decides to keep quiet. They warn her:

“It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that, it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore ... Are people going to believe their words or ours”. (Bama 20)

But the story of her trouble does not end here. Kumarasami apprehends that his act might spread as news. He makes a plan to come out of this situation. He adopts the method that attack is the best form of self-defense. He complains to the village head of the Paraiya community that Mariamma has behaved him in a dirty and immoral way. The village head takes exception to this unbecoming incident. He fines Mariamma of Rs 200 and forces her to pay. On the other hand, Kumarasami, due to a high caste man, pays only Rs 100 and thereby

evades imminent danger and shame and remains in an advantageous position. Mariamma's suffering gets doubled.

In this context we can agree with Padma Velaskar when he says that in a caste based society both Dalit men and women look alike and:

... Share equally the impure natural substance and occupy a shared structural location and cultural construction... in the status order of caste-hierarchy. (2010)

The Dalits have converted to Christianity with the prospect of equality before God. The church is supposed to be against of the caste practice. But the notion is proved wrong. Rather it complicates their problem. The Roman Catholic Church confines them to servitude and bondage. Nowhere are they free from discrimination. Bama writes:

At church they must lick the priest's shoe and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell. (Bama 35)

The plight of the Dalit converted Christians becomes more grievous in the church. The novel shows to a great extent how the church and its hegemony play on the Dalit converted. Bama justifies this when the narrator speaks:

Sothipillai shouted angrily, just look at what goes on in our church as well. It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we have finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else. I have stood it as long as I could, and at last I went and complained to the nuns. And do you know what they said? It seems we will gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially. (Bama 23)

Bama takes note of it seriously. She points out that even before God the Dalits are marginalized. They are the servants of both high class and high caste people. She registers strong protest when she questions: "Why, don't these people need God's blessings too?" (Bama 25)

The text questions the role of conversion from the prospective of Dalits. The basic objective, for which they got converted, did not serve the purpose. They left Hindu society because it was caste ridden. After conversion they did not get any respite of discrimination in

Christianity. Change of religion is not a solution. No religion can wipe out the stigma of caste brand. It is as if they carry the brand where ever they go. Bama reacts:

“Why on earth Parayas became Christians, I don’t know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever” (Bama: 5).

The predicament of Dalit women is multiplied in the case of conversion. She repents: “Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we’re all in the same position” (Bama: 97).

In *Sangati*, Bama shows the gender discrimination meted out to Dalit women. Men and women are like the two parts of the same coin. But women are given second place everywhere in the world. They are behaved like beasts and are treated as objects of pleasure. Men ill-treat women and take them as their property. An old Italian saying says: “a woman like a horse, whether good or bad, requires thrashing.” Chinese advice to the husbands is that: “Listen to the counsel of your wife, but act against it.” The Spaniards say: “We shall save ourselves from wicked women and should never be captivated by any that have good looks” (Arora 14). In India, the status of women is not different. They are subjugated in many ways: “There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman in Indian myths and scriptures and her actual situation in life. On the surface she enjoys a very high status and is known as Devi (Goddess), Lakshmi...or Shakthi..., but, in real life, she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways” (Arora 16).

The novel explores the exploitation of Dalit women in a great way. She knows the vulnerability of Paraiya women. She creates the characters who can resist the upper castes. While talking on women, Bama comments in an interview:

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status; they are not even considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit literature...Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, caste and gender. They die in order to live. ((Limbale 116)

The economic inequality affects Dalit women. Here the women are labor class people working in agriculture and construction fields. But they are paid less than the men for the same work. The men earn more and spend leisurely but the women though get less shoulder all the responsibility of the family. At the same time they become the victims of violence by father, brothers, husbands and mostly the upper caste men. Patti says:

We have to labor in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women what good we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vagina shrivels. (Bama 64)

Even gender discrimination does not spare new born babies. Even a mother, being a woman, indulges in partiality in taking care of the infants. It happens so due to the psychological construct of the patriarchy. Bama shows:

If a baby boy cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girl. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With the girls, they wean them quietly, making them forget the breast". (Bama 69)

The novel provides terrible pictures of oppression, torture and harassment of Dalit women. They work like bonded laborers and animals. They keep themselves busy in hard work both outside and inside. Bama gives a precarious account of miserable life of the Dalit women:

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 their children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. (Bama 22)

It is both a matter of pity and surprise to state that the marginals marginalize their own subordinates and their own people. Bama has pointed out gender discrimination within Dalit community. It is because the society was patriarchal. In other words, in the Dalit society the men victimize the women. In their family, the women were not allowed to eat first. They could eat only when the men have finished and gone. Bama points out:

...even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Patti, aren't we also human beings? (Bama, 29)

The Dalit women register the voice of protest in their day to day marital life. They use typical obscene language to hit the male members. Bama shows the feminine protest in the marital conflict between Paakiaraj and his wife Raakkamma. Paakiaraj has assaulted his wife seriously and to which the wife reacts:

Raakkamma got up after kick and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities; she scooped out the earth and flung it about. How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood? And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. That was when Paakiaraj walked off, still shouting. (Bama 120)

Sangati shows to the world that there was time when the women in the past were meekly submitted to the cruelty of the men folk. Now time has changed. In the age of women empowerment, they enjoy economic independence and social security. They are now speaking subject and are fighting for their right and dignity. A Dalit critic has remarked:

As a consequence, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise. In the uncivilized world, they accept the civilized path. They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self-respect. They do not brood over the injustices perpetrated on them, nor do they just rave against it, but take up arms and prepare to fight. The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centered but society-centered. The fight for values of these women, who refuse to sit in the shadow of evil persons to avoid starvation, is important. The courage to fight, resoluteness, and rebelliousness are the very essence of their life. (Lanjewar 193)

Thematically, *Sangati* can be divided into two parts. The first part deals with the oppression, exploitation and sufferings of the Dalit women. The second part explores their indomitable resistance and fighting spirit against the caste hierarchy, patriarchy and religious disparity.

The Dalit women have developed courage, resilience and audacity in the midst of their deplorable condition and have faced life boldly.

To wind up, caste oppression, gender subjugation and religious exploitation are all interlined together and pose a threat to the normal and natural life of the Dalits in general and the Dalit women in particular. So the text provides an account of the life of misery and sufferings of these Dalit people and an attempt has been made to make these people conscious and articulate against these age-old systems. Bama provides a message and at the same time thinks that it is high time to break down the polarities between the upper caste/ lower caste and men/women in the context of the Dalits.

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