

**QUESTION OF LIVELIHOOD IN DALIT LITERATURE:  
A STUDY OF BAMA'S *KARUKKU* AND *SANGATI***

A Dissertation submitted  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree

of  
Master of Philosophy in English



Submitted by

**Naresh**  
M. Phil., English  
Roll. No. 8139

Supervisor

**Dr. Sanjiv Kumar**  
Associate Professor

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF HARYANA  
(JULY 2017)**

## DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Question of livelihood in Dalit literature: A study of Bama’s *Karukku and Sangati***” is a record of *bona fide* research that I conducted under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Sanjiv Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana. No part of this work has been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma or similar titles.

(Naresh)  
Roll No. 8139  
M.Phil. English

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF HARYANA**

**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “Question of Livelihood in Dalit Literature: A Study of Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*” submitted to Department of English, Central University of Haryana in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in English is a record of original work done by Naresh during the period of his study (2016-2017) under my supervision and guidance. This dissertation has not been submitted in part or full for the award of any Degree/Diploma of this university or any other institution.

I deem the present research work fit for being evaluated.

Place: Mahendergarh  
Date:

(Dr. Sanjiv Kumar)  
Supervisor

## **Acknowledgements**

I offer my bottomless sense of indebtedness to my supervisor Dr. Sanjiv Kumar for his guidance, support and encouragement which helped me to complete this dissertation successfully.

I place on record my reverence to Dr. Bir Singh Yadav, Dr. Manoj K. Vidyalankar, Mr. Sudeep Ahlawat, Dr. Snehsata and Mrs. Rinu Yadav for their support and good wishes.

I specially thank Deepak , Carlos, Prof. Krishan Dhanda and Sunil Sharma for their careful reviews and suggestions. I am also thankful to Manoj Kumar and Deepak Kumar, PhD Hindi scholars, for their valuable suggestions.

I specially thank Pankaj Panchal for providing his laptop for the entire period of my research. It is impossible to express in words my gratitude towards my parents, my wife Sangeeta Panchal, and my brothers Ramesh Panchal and Manoj Panchal whose unfailing confidence and faith in me always led me through every moment of my life. I also express my love towards my little nephews Manjeet and Shivam whose love led me to complete this project successfully.

Above all I thank Almighty for giving me such a wonderful life to live.

**(Naresh)**

## CONTENTS

Sr. No.	Title	Page No.
1	Introduction	1
2	Question of Livelihood in Bama's <i>Karukku</i>	19
3	Dalit Women's Response to the Question of Survival in <i>Sangati</i>	39
4	Conclusion	56
5	Selected Bibliography	61

## CHAPTER-I

### INTRODUCTION

History of human civilization is witness to the fact that the weaker section of the society has always been exploited in one way or another. Indian history has vibrantly traced the conflict between the exploiter and the exploited, the colonizer and the colonized, the powerful and the powerless and caste Hindu and the untouchable. It is generally observed that powerful castes and classes always try to dominate and demean the poor and same is the condition of Dalits in India. Dalit, a distinguished term in India, is used for untouchables. The word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit root '*Dal*' which means suppressed, exploited, degraded and down-trodden and etymologically it means "crushed" or "broken to pieces". As far as the term 'Dalit' is concerned, it is not a caste made but used for such people and communities that are historically and structurally suppressed and excluded from mainstream. It is not a caste but a category of socially and economically discriminated people belonging to many castes and different linguistic backgrounds. This term was first used by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule a nineteenth century social reformer in the context of those people who were conventionally labelled as '*shudra*' in Indian society. In Tamil language, the word Dalit means *taazhthapattor* or *othukkapator* (the people who have been pushed away or pushed down).

Dalits have been exploited for many years at every level by upper caste people. Though the Constitution of India provides equal rights to all castes, the lower caste people are deprived of their rights. Dalits have been facing atrocities at many levels since ancient time when *varna* system put to social practice. They were deprived of basic human rights and were treated badly in the society. Dalits could not touch the persons or

belongings of upper caste people and was not allowed to enter their temples or other places of socio- cultural and religious importance. They were denied access to water from common village well, and were forced to perform dirty menial jobs day and night. Ironically, Dalit women were generally raped and molested by the upper caste men and the idea of rooted untouchability didn't discourage them from sexual exploitation of Dalit women. Subsequently, Indian Constitution provided for the abolition of untouchability in any form.

Dalit children were not allowed to go to school so they were deprived of their basic rights of life with dignity and equal opportunities for empowerment. Movements led by eminent scholars and social reformers gave new directions and proposed new postulates for the benefits of Dalit and to give voice to the pain of Dalit population, Maharashtra Sahitya Sangh organized a conference in the year 1958 in Mumbai. The term "Dalit Literature" emerged with the contributions of personalities like Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. They were forerunners who gave vent to their anguish in their writings in English and Marathi languages respectively and were also recognized by the Britons.

An 11<sup>th</sup> century cobbler saint Madara Chennaiah, who lived during the reign of western Chalukyas in Karnataka, was one of the first Dalit writers who wrote about the pitiable condition of lower caste in Kannada . These miserable and pitiable conditions of lower castes may be attributed to the Hindu concept of '*Chaturvarna*' in *Manusmriti* in which there are four *Varnas* viz. *Brahmins*, *Kashatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Shudras*. The *Brahmins* considered themselves superior to other and spread the theory that "they themselves were born from the mouth of Brahma, the *kshatriyas* from his shoulders, the

*Vaisyas* from his thigh and the *Shudras* from his feet” (Dangle, xx). In this hierarchy of caste system, *Shudras* were treated like animals and were given the jobs that were despised and abhorred. The oppressed people who were subjected to constant humiliation, injustices and inequalities were encouraged by the philosophy of Ambedkar, and gathered the courage to revolt against exploitative caste system. Dalit literature derives its intent and content from the writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It is rightly said that—

Dalit literature is a writing that parallels the revolutionary movement spear headed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with a view to bring about psychosocial transformations in the minds of the oppressed. Dalit literature, a strong oppositional voice only raises important question but also narrate the ability of the people at the margins to fight against all odds and injustices. (The Criterion 2013)

Dalit literature was mainly written in Marathi, Tamil and Kannada languages. Gyaneshwar, Chakradhar and Mukundraaj were the earliest Marathi writers and later on saints like Namdev, Eknath, Ramdas, and Tukaram sang in the devotion of God but these writers primarily concentrated on the discriminatory system of Vedas, *Smriti*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*. These Marathi writers didn't paint the true picture of casteism; rather, they glorified only God. It was after 1960 that this literature gained popularity that paved a new path for a new direction.

Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) was a pioneer of Dalit literature in Marathi language. His work *Javha Mi Jat Chorali* (When I Concealed my Caste) written in 1963 was a passionate depiction of a cruel social system and thus gain a new momentum to Dalit



literature. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) was the first man who ignited the fire of revolt among Dalits through his popular book named *Gulamgiri*.

Dalit literature is different in its values, role and nature from other categories of literature as it is written with Dalit consciousness or the Dalit point of view. Unlike mainstream and grand narrative, the primary aim of Dalit literature is depiction of cruel social system guided by the discriminatory practices that tend to oppression of downtrodden by upper caste people. As Tarakateertha Joshi says in the book *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role*, “Dalit literature is that literature which in an artistic manner shows the agony of the Dalits, their painful perplexity, family deterioration, poverty, humiliation, and impoverished condition (75).”

Dalit literature protest against the exploitation and discrimination on the basis of caste and *varna* system. In most of the Dalit writings the concept of purity of God, idea of rebirth and salvation are criticized and condemned. Dalit literature defends principles of equality, fraternity, freedom and justice as values of life. It is thoroughly based on Ambedkarite thoughts and philosophy. Prof. Yashwant Manohar defined Dalit literature in *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role* as-

Dalit literature is the literature of victims of class and Varna. This is the literary conflagration of Dr. Ambedkar’s speech. There are the creative expressions of these neglected hearts and brain whose stomachs and minds have been kept hungry by culture. In the womb of this literature an embryo of human centred civilization is growing with stormy determination. (36)

Now the question is who are Dalits? Dalits are those who are suppressed and humiliated at all levels and are bound by the shackles of atrocities and harassment. The

term, 'Dalit' is used in wider significance and in various perspectives. Scholars from all over the world have defined it in different contexts. Gail Omvedt defines Dalits as, "member of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working people, the landless and poor peasant, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (Omvedt 72). It is widely admitted by the scholars that Dalit is a bitter-fruit of a religious fundamentalist practice especially in Indian society.

Dalits have been oppressed and tormented for many years in the name of caste-based society, and also on the economic and political basis. They were not allowed even to write and read holy books, and it was after 1967 that Dalit literature gained a new direction with the works of Dr. Ambedkar who struggled against the traditional and uneven social-system throughout his life. He rejected the religious notions and beliefs of the holy books like *Smritis* and *Puranas*, and led a historic movement to publicly burn the copies of *Manusmriti* in Mahad on December 25, 1927. Dalit literature castigates the *varna*- system as provided in the classical Hindu text *Manusmriti* and considers this text as the fountainhead of dividing society.

Dalit autobiographical works present the real and live picture of caste-discrimination. The most salient feature of Dalit literature is the hope of liberation from the slavery of casteism. Obviously, this hope emerges from thoughts and principles of Ambedkar. G.B. Sardar justifies it in one of his lectures as:

Dr. Ambedkar's movement revitalized Dalit community and turned it towards self-respect. Forgetting their suffering, they got the inspiration to struggle for their natural rights from this movement. This community started nourishing hopes of leading life as an independent entity in the society by

getting rid of fetters of slavery .... They said no to the dark death like life and marched forward through their writing towards a bright life. (*Dalit Literature: Nature and Role*, 40)

Dalit people in Indian society were humiliated at all levels; they were deprived of their natural rights; prohibited from many things like eating with higher caste people; from inter-caste marriage; separate utensils in village tea stalls, barred from entering into temple; separate *Shamshaan Ghats* and separate seating place for Dalit children in schools. They were forced to observe the social prohibitions in all walks of life. They had to walk to and fro like animals according to the way of higher caste community as if Dalits were not human beings. All these traditions became a tool for upper caste society by which they kept suppressing them and, all Dalit writers narrate the tales of exploitation in their literary works.

Dalit literature, in fact, played an important role to make Dalit people aware and to raise their voice against the traditional society. Motivated by this literature they gained confidence and courage to struggle for their rights. Dalit Panther Movement was one of the important movements against caste-based social context. Dalit literature played a crucial role in the success of the movement. As Ajay Kumar in his book *Dalit Panther Movement* says: “The literature of the thinkers Rousseau and Voltaire played an important role in the French Revolution of 1789 and the writings of Marx, Lenin, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky for the Russian Revolution of November 1917.” (46)

In this context, it is obviously right to say that Revolution and the literature are interconnected and the success of ‘Dalit Panther Movement’ is largely dependent upon Dalit literature. The pioneering works of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar made Dalits

ready to strike against the established notions of social system. Dalit literature and Dalit Panther Movement are closely related with each other. Dalit Panther Movement held a passion of political protest and this passion developed through literature.

Many Dalit writers expressed their real feelings and anguish which they suffered in their lives. These writings are based on Dalit consciousness which separates them from other non-Dalit writers. Dalit writers wrote their confessional works from Dalit perspective and claimed 'selfhood' for Dalit population. Major Dalit writers include Kanwal Bharti, Mohandas Nemishraya, Omprakash Valmiki, Surajpal Chauhan, Arun Kamle, Shantabai Kamble, Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Panwar, Sharankumar Limbale, Raj Gautaman, Ravi Kumar, Tulsi Ram, Kancha Iiaiah and 'Bama'. Bearing in mind that no one, but a Dalit can truly represent the traumatic experiences of downtrodden people. The autobiographical works of Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, Son Kamble and other important Dalit writers, are taken as the authentic account of Dalit lives.

Valmiki, in *Joothan*, shows that caste-system is like a demon and therefore many Dalits hide their caste to protect themselves from humiliation. They are proved to changing their surnames so that they may be treated at par with the non-Dalit caste Hindus. Dalit literature is replete with examples where Dalit are compelled to hide their surname, caste and other identity markers.

The question of exploitation raised by Valmiki emerges from the brutality and insensitivity among the people of upper caste. These atrocities have got different shapes and forms with the passage of time and the form of exploitation have changed drastically. The earlier forms of exploitation were different from the problems of Dalits in the present

context. The installation and implementations of various laws in the Constitution curb ‘untouchability’ to some extent. Law has developed a consciousness among the exploiters. Literature also plays an important role to change the mindset of the people. Contemporary writers like Bama, Valmiki and Limbale have produced a good amount of Dalit Literature for kindling the spark that leads towards a “human-value-based” society than a “caste-based-society”. After analysing the benefits of reservation, a new trend has emerged that is demand for reservation by the upper-class society. The erstwhile critics of caste-based reservation have changed their position. Now they are insisting upon inclusion of their caste as ‘backward’ or ‘scheduled’.

It is Brahmin mentality to consider Dalits as dirty and children in very early age are guided about this concept. Unfortunately it has become a convention among upper caste people to cherish hatred for Dalits. The same is highlighted by Valmiki:

He was given tea in separate utensils. I asked strictly. Yes, there are separate utensils for Muslim and Dalit. Sweta replied politely. Do you think this discrimination is right? I asked. How can we give them in our utensils. She said. Why not?... in hotel, in mess, we eat together. Then why not at home?  
(30)

Tea or food is served to Scheduled Caste (SC) in separate utensils and they can't touch clothes and things in the houses of castes Hindus. They are not treated as human beings as they are assigned either the tasks of cleaning the cowshed in the house of landlords or pulling the flesh from the bodies of dead animals. Dalit do such tasks for their livelihood. It is paradoxical to note that the upper caste people may relish the flesh of dead animals while maintaining sense of apathy towards Dalits who prepare the meat

for them. Dalits are not fond of doing such abhorring works but there is no other way for them to earn their livelihood hence they are victims of circumstances.

*Joothan* also represents the custom of eating “*Joothan*” (the remaining and left-over pieces of food after eating) of *Sawarna* caste people. It is, indeed, not a custom but a compulsion for them because they have no source of income, no piece of land and for them, satisfying the hunger is the most compelling instinct. Valmiki reminded of occasions when he and his mother went to the houses of upper caste on the occasion of wedding or other celebration where they were meted with inhuman treatment and were offered leftover food ‘joothan’. Crushed with poverty and hunger they had no other option but to accept ‘joothan’ for their survival. In his writings, Valmiki portrays the grim realities of caste based discrimination, exploitation and human degradation. He emerged as a true representative of Dalit expectations. Valmiki advocates that he should be accepted merely on the grounds of being a ‘human’ and not on the grounds being a ‘sub-human’ or ‘non- human’ for being born in a Dalit family.

All the autobiographical works by Dalit writers raise the same issues such as question of livelihood, conflict and resistance between lower caste and upper caste, and subsequent exploitation of the Dalit community. Dalits live a life harder than animals. One can feel and analyse the marginality of Dalits when Sharankumar Limbale, in his autobiography *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste*, narrates the convention of Dalit eating food of the flour of the millet drawn from the excreta of animals. It shows the utter helplessness of the Dalit community. This shows that upper caste does not consider them human beings but animals. *Akkarmashi*, indeed, is a work which presents a series of events of real oppression faced by lower caste people; and is a unique work of Dalit literature.

The question, Limbale, raises in this work is that education is the only medium through which one can certainly change the scenario by ascertaining a different place that has remained deprived of basic human right for ages. But access to education has remained a far cry for Dalits. They cannot study properly because they have to help in their parent's works and they do not get proper time and environment for education. The writer tells about a Dalit child Maulya whose parents did not allow him to get education. Limbale writes:

Maulya used to go to school like me every day; but his father drew him back from school and gave the work of looking after landlord's animals. Maulya was doing a job at an early age. Two times food and one hundred rupees annually was his salary. Maulya's mother had no saree to wear on; she was used to sleeping hungry. Now, it was not their concern to give food to Maulya, and after all they got one hundred rupees annually. In this way, Maulya became a source of income for family. (132)

The question of livelihood haunts Dalit population from cradle to grave. In such a dismal scenario they are posed with the questions—How to progress in life? The support and facilities provided to Dalit students don't ensure equal opportunity of access to education in practical sense. Limbale narrates his agony as a Dalit student who has to coat the ground of the school with the excreta of animals every Saturday. To coat the whole of the school with clay was extremely difficult task but there was no other alternative for Dalit children who had to sit in the back rows of the classroom. There is caste discrimination in the school also and the writer has himself faced it. He and his friends of Mahar caste were asked to sit away from the children of upper caste; and the

writer was once beaten by a Teli caste boy Mahadha but no one including the teacher helped him.

Limbale reflects many events of caste discrimination and social inequality in this work. He depicts that Dalit people had to struggle hard to live their life. They drank the water coming from the Swarna's Ghat in which people of Swarna caste washed their dust and dirty clothes. Dalit children were beaten if they played with children of upper caste. Even the children were imbued with the hatred for Dalit as if they are not human beings.

*Tiraskrit*, an autobiography by Surajpal Chauhan depicts the real-life picture of Dalits who faced exploitation and humiliation in their lives. The problem is, Chauhan says, that even the teachers in the school did not behave well with the Dalit children and show apathy towards them. Chauhan says:

The tailed Brahmrakshas of caste always followed me. Vedpal Sharma, a Sanskrit teacher, made me remind again and again the inferiority of my caste. I felt too miserable to hear that Dronnacharya. One day he told to his friends hinting at me if all the chuhdachamar get education, who will do the works of cleaning the streets and cobbling the shoes? (52-53)

The teachers in the city school keep Dalit children busy in cleaning and making shoes whereas the teacher of village school engage them even for working in fields. The comment of the teacher mentioned above shows the tendency among caste Hindu to deprive Dalit children of education.

In the novel, Chauhan and his friends are told to sit separate from the children of upper caste in the class because their touch might pollute others. Therefore, they sit beside a gutter with their slates in hands; and it is very rare that any teacher comes to



them. The novel shows that casteism is not only prevalent in school but also in other walks of life. The story further highlights as to how the pious relationship of friendship based on the axis of belief and equal thinking is affected by casteism and Brahmanism. Anupam Jain, close friend of Chauhan is astonished to know his caste and says; “Abe, look! These ‘Chuhde’ started to become ‘Thakur’, or ‘Rajput’. (54)

Chauhan himself is beaten and abused for his innocent playing with Thakur Pratap’s son, which is taken as an attempt to pollute. The writer presents another event when he and his wife are refused to take water from a well for the simple reason, that is, their caste. Lives of Dalits are marked with deprivation, discrimination and perpetual exploitation.

Dalit, says Chauhan, can’t get education, they are not allowed to take water, Dalit children must not play with the children of upper caste. How are they expected to progress? Are not they human beings? It can be said that by presenting his real experiences in *Tikaskrit*, Chauhan adds the events of miserable Dalit in such a way that it becomes the tale of only Dalit and oppressed people.

Dalit autobiography, in fact, seems to shed tears on the miserable and pitiable condition of Dalit community. Most of the Dalit autobiographies raise the question of survival and livelihood among Dalits. *Athavaninche Pakshi* by P.E. Sonkamble, Pallya suffers even after getting higher education. Bearing all sorts of hardships and tolerating everything that came in his way to education, he becomes a professor in a renowned college but the stigma of his birth in a Dalit family keeps tormenting him. It is a paradox that in caste of Pallya education could not ensure him equal status in society.

After studying Valmiki's *Shavayatra*, one can feel and observe the position of Dalit community in society as this autobiography creatively illustrates the fact that there is untouchability among the lower castes, and those slightly higher in the hierarchical caste system consider the lower ones to be inferior to them. In this work, Kalu, a Balhar boy wants to build a *pacca* house for the sake of his father but the Chamar community and some upper caste people don't allow him to build a *pacca* house they consider it as an offence by a Dalit against those higher to him in hierarchical structure. It is the most shameful to observe that the *vaidha* denies to treat Kalu's daughter Saloni who is suffering from fever only because she belongs to a lower caste. The chasm between Chamar community and Balhar community is so deep that the Chamar community even refuses to burn the dead body of Saloni.

What Valmiki wants to show in this story is not fiction but fact, an ugly fact about the Hindu society. He questions the assumptions and institutions which are responsible to divide human beings on the basis of caste and religion. Dalit Literature, indeed, is written to represent the authentic experience of oppressed people. As Valmiki in his *Joothan* says: "One can somehow get past poverty and depravation but it is impossible to get past caste". (qtd. in *Dalit Literature: Contents, Trends and Concerns* 124)

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, livelihood is a means of earning money in order to live. In real sense of the word, livelihood is not only to earn money but something more than this. Actually, livelihood is a combination of survival in spite of adverse conditions, and earning money to sustain the life and the dignity. By earning the livelihood, one wishes to exercise his/her choices and preferences. The process of earning gradually motivates one to seek liberty, equality and participation in

society. No backward or negative thoughts creep in one's mind which drags one in the state of negativity. But in case of Dalits, everything is changed. The same thing is not applicable in context of Dalits. At every step of their life they find themselves in chains of rigid caste system and untouchability. Every now and then the question of their liberty and individual choice is threatened. In spite of getting liberty from the British, Dalits find themselves chained in rigid and hard boundaries of casteism which seem unbreakable. Though the nation is moving forward in the field of education, superstitious thoughts are being imposed upon Dalits. The upper class still considers them untouchable, degraded and downtrodden and they dishonour and demean them. Dalits are never given the same opportunity as the upper caste people get. Indian Constitution advocated the sublime values inherent in equality, liberty and fraternity but the rigid caste system limits their thinking and therefore 'Question of Livelihood' is always there before them. Because of upper class suppression Dalits are made to do menial jobs and are deprived of right to jobs or positions.

The present Dissertation is about 'Question of livelihood' in Bama's autobiographical works *Karukku* and *Sangati*. Bama was born at Puthupati village in Viruthungar district of Southern Tamilnadu in 1958. The popular name Bama comes from the author's real name Faustina Mary Fathima. In Tamil, 'Fathima' is pronounced as 'Bathima' and gradually the name Bama came. Her family was converted to Christianity in her grandmother's time. She is a Mathematics teacher in a school at Uthiramerur village in Kancheepuram district. After school hours, she spends her time in talking with young Dalit women about religion, oppression, and social changes.

Bama emerged as a famous Dalit writer with the publication of *Karukku* (1992), an autobiographical work in Tamil language which translated into English language in 2000. It won the Crossword Award in 2001. It is the first Dalit woman autobiography which describes the oppression of Dalits on the basis of class, gender, caste, and religion. The autobiography unfolds in itself many events of caste discrimination such as the fight between the Paraiyar and the Chaaliyar, and beating of Paraiyar people by the police that is bribed by the Chaaliyar. It narrates the incidents of molestation of Dalit women in the police station.

Bama truthfully narrates her experiences of being tormented by the upper caste priests and nuns in church and convent. She is well educated but fails to claim any dignity in the caste-based society. She remained as a nun for seven years in a convent and realized how the Dalit nuns and children are tortured and tormented by upper caste nuns. *Karukku* emphasizes on two main aspects, namely caste and religion which caused great pain and sufferings in Bama's life. She tells about the caste-based discrimination meted to Dalit children by the warden sister in *Karukku*, who could not bear low caste children, "these people get nothing to eat at home, they come here and they grow fat". (17)

*Sangati* presents a series of events that generally occur in the lives of Dalits and it highlights the joint struggle of Paraiyar community in search of their survival. It is a critique of patriarchy as well as of casteism within the church. This book dwells on the impoverished and miserable condition of Dalit women who suffer from double discrimination. They are molested by the so-called high caste people and also by Dalit males. They do the same job as their male counterparts do but are paid much less than the male labourers. The discrimination against women is a main issue in *Sangati*. The plight

and miseries of Dalit women and discrimination between Dalit male and female can be seen in this work. Bama herself accepts that Dalit males cannot revolt against their landlords and, therefore they show their anger and strength at home on their wives.

Bama's works depict the social inequalities experienced by Dalit community. Bama wants to say that Dalits are also human beings; they should not be treated like animals. Bama is committed to the larger cause of awakening the conscience of humiliated and downtrodden communities.

Hardship in living, livelihood, suffering, violence, anguish, anger, protest, and suppression both physical and psychological, are the common elements in Dalit Literature and Bama's works are not exception to it. In *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Bama tries to show that the pitiable condition, anger and protest of Dalit can be understood only by a Dalit who faces it and lives with it every moment of his/her life. Both the works *Karukku* and *Sangati* reflect upon the wounded self and dark territory of Dalit consciousness that accept the inhuman treatment meted to them as their destiny. With her lucid expression of pain and humiliation, Bama tries to convert that subjugated consciousness into a strong and liberated response through the means of education.

The present research locates Bama as the voice of Dalits for whom the question of survival and livelihood is the most compelling. Bama works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If *Karukku* emphasizes on getting education, *Sangati* foregrounds organized agitation to encourage oppressed people especially Dalit women to raise their voice against inequality and injustice of patriarchal social system. Bama seems to underline the fact that writing a confessional work is the only way of giving vent to their buried pain.

The problem before Dalits is to survive. There are so many challenges before human beings to meet with. The Dalit people have more challenges than the others as they have been subjugated for centuries. In this century, they have to compete with the elite class that has all the resources. For Dalits, the resources and opportunities need to be created in order to become equal in the society. Dalit writers, in their writings, pose this question again and again. In this Dissertation, an attempt is made to explore the literary representation of the issue of 'livelihood' among Dalits. The researcher has made an in-depth analysis of Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* to understand Dalit lives haunted with the urge to 'survive' and earn their livelihood.

## WORKS CITED

- C. Indu B. "Silence Speaks: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*". *The Criterion* 4.3  
(2013): 1-4. Web. 8 April 2017. <http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n3/Indu.pdf>
- Chauhan, Surajpal. *Tiraskrit*. Delhi: Anubhav Publication, 2002. Print.
- Dangle, Arjun, ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*.  
New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009. Print.
- Kumar, Ajay. *Dalit Panther Movement*. Ed. SS. Gautam. Delhi: Gautam, 2006. Print.
- Limbale, Sharankumar. *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste*. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar. New  
Delhi: OUP, 2003. Print.
- Nimbalkar, Waman. *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role*. Trans. Vandana Pathak and P.D.  
Nimsarkar. Nagpur: Prabodhan, 2006. Print.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014. Print.
- Randhawa, H.S. Ed. *Dalit Literature: Contents, Trends and Concerns*. New Delhi: Sarup,  
2010. Print.
- Valmiki, Omparkash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata:  
Samya, 2007. Print.

## CHAPTER - II

### Question of Livelihood in Bama's *Karukku*

Bama, like other Dalit writers, deals with the question of livelihood of Dalits. In her writings, she depicts the plight of Dalit men and women who have been subjugated for centuries. It is evident from her writings that Dalits are untouchables in society. Still in the 21st century they are trying to assert themselves in society. In this regard, many Dalit writers have raised their voice to bring forward the cause of Dalits. Bama's *Karukku*, an autobiography, depicts that Dalits are reduced to sub-human beings. Most remarkably, she observes conversion into Christianity which has no caste system, doesn't reduce the intensity of pain caused to Dalits. Her personal experience of hypocrisy of the upper caste society makes her autobiography more real and powerful.

Bama's *Karukku* is a path-breaking intervention in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama, a Dalit woman, a former Christian nun and now a school teacher tells about her experiences, her struggle for livelihood and her marginalized position in the society influenced by her gender, class and religious location. She describes the oppression that operates in the lives of Dalits, and more specifically in the lives of Dalit women. For Bama and other Dalit writers, Writings from the margins and about the marginalized are an attempt to empower Dalit people.

'Karukku' means 'leaves of Palm tree'. With their serrated edges on both sides the leaves of palm trees are like double-edged swords. Tamil word 'karukku' containing the word 'Karu' embryo or seed also means freshness. Perhaps the second meaning is more suited to Bama's writing this book as a means of healing her wounds. Obviously she derived a sense of freshness by reflecting reality in the book *Karukku*. In the book, she



tells about the struggle for survival that has been faced by her. Referring to the first meaning of the word 'karukku', Bama's self-expression represents one-edge and the other edge inspired many Dalit people to raise their voice against their oppression. So, it became a symbol of two-edged sword. As Bama herself says in the Introduction of *Karukku*, "that book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive" (*Karukku* IX). The use of the first-person narration is extremely well received by readers and critics alike. The narrator moves from the past to the present in reflecting the varying manifold sets of different events that occurred in Bama's life. It is a powerful portrayal of Dalit oppression. *Karukku* portrays the lives of Dalits and their suppression by people of upper castes.

*Karukku* presents a real account of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. They are illiterate people. Due to lack of education, they are not aware of their rights. They work as bonded labourers and are very poor. Bama describes her mother and grandmother who work for Naicker families. They are the worst victims in the Hindu caste system. They work for upper castes and provide every comfort for them, but they live in extreme poverty. They work on the fields of the upper caste, but they never receive any part of the harvest. They are forced to survive on gruel and water every day. They have neither property nor land or even a decent house to live in. Question of livelihood is always before them. Some have converted themselves into Christianity with the hope to get rid of caste-based discrimination but they could not get equality and just treatment by the Christians. Bama in this book makes an attempt to make Dalits aware of the fact their emancipation is possible only with their self-realization. She has devoted her life to improve the pathetic

condition of the Dalit community and has focused on the importance of education for the liberation of Dalits.

The central part of the book is the story of Bama's life as a converted Christian. She presents the hypocrisy underlying Christianity that is generally considered a way for one's liberation. It is an offer of freedom specifically to the Dalit. As a child, Bama spent her life into the festivities and rituals of her family and community, but as she comes out of this largely self-consolidating world and enters into the school and then consecutively into the convent, she finds only the caste prejudices in the cruel selfish world. For the Dalits converted into Christians the Church and its rituals played an important role.

Bama's story is that of her betrayal by the promise of freedom and dignity as an Indian. The more dominant account is the story of her betrayal in the convent and the church. *Karukku* is the tale of a child's spiritual journey as a catholic and realization of her position as a Dalit. Even in that spiritual life, religious festivals that became part of yearly cycle of crops and seasons formed her life. Later, she described the religious and social life which detained Dalits as untouchables. In her life Bama had bitter experiences and her feelings and expressions are well-placed in the "Preface" of the book:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left 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 all these taken together. (*Karukku* XXIII)

Caste and religion caused great sufferings in Bama's life. She has never heard of untouchability until her third standard in village school when she started internalising her community's pathetic state. In *Karukku* she narrates the incident of her encounter with an elder man who is holding a packet of snacks with a string without touching the packet. He gave it to a Naicker in the village. At that moment she was a small school going child and found this incident to be quite funny and delighting. But now she feels very grieved and broken hearted, and writes:

What did it mean when they called us 'Paraya'? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings. Our people should never run these petty errands for these fellows. We should work in their fields, take home our wages, and leave it at that. (*Karukku* 16)

With the actual realisation of the tragic position of her community in the society, Bama reacts critically to her childhood experiences of discrimination. The elder man was holding out the packet with its string without touching the snacks so that the snacks would not be polluted. Bama thinks that Dalits are behaved as if they are not human beings. They are treated like animals. With this realisation, Bama begins to look out for means to uplift herself and her community from this trampled position. Her elder brother shows her the right path that education is the only way to gain equality and to run their life smooth. Bama's elder brother says:

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* 17-18)

Her brother's counsel made very deep impression on Bama. Ever since her brother motivated her, she studied hard and did her best and always stood first in the class. But in spite of her education, Bama finds that wherever she goes, there is a painful reminder of her caste in the form of untouchability. The governments offered the financial grants and special tuition classes to the Harijans but Bama thought it more of humiliation than consolation because it disclosed her caste identity. Once the identity is revealed, Bama opines, "Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. I was filled with a sudden rage." (*Karukku* 22)

Bama completed her under graduation and B.Ed., and worked in a convent. She felt very depressed when she finds that the nuns working there exploit the Dalit children in one pretext or the other. When she was living in the hostel after completion of her eighth standard, Bama painfully remembered the nuns commenting on Dalit children. The warden sister of the hostel could not fathom the lower-caste children. She'd get hold of them and scold them for no rhyme or reason. If any girl seemed to be on the plump side, she'd even get angry. So, wherever she went, to a school or a convent, she was exploited by nuns and upper caste people.

Bama feels very happy teaching the Dalit children in the convent with some skill and success. Nuns used to suppress Dalit teachers and children. On seeing the suppression of Dalits at convent, Bama suddenly struck with the idea of becoming a nun and decides to sacrifice her life to help the poor and lower caste children. She wanted to help the down trodden, and entered the order. She worked in a Christian religious order

where the Tamil nuns especially the Tamil Paraya nuns are considered inferior and lowest of the low. They are not given any kind of respect and positions in the convent. Bama notices the casteism there. She realizes that one can tolerate discrimination outside from society but it is very hard to tolerate politics and casteism inside the convent. She has to pretend for the sake of her survival. She lives an artificial life. They behave with Dalit nuns in a different way. They don't consider them as human beings. The upper caste nuns converse with each other about Dalits in the abusive and obscene way. Eighty percent of the Roman Catholics in Tamil Nadu are Dalits yet they are not given any respect. Despite the series of humiliating instances, Bama continues to live in the convent because of her strong determination to help and uplift the poor and the Dalit children by remaining in the system. Those Dalits who are getting training with her to become nuns are excited to know about Bama's caste. She tells her caste honestly without any hesitation. The religious order has its own reservation for Harijan women becoming nuns but Bama feels perplexed when Sister says, "they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere." (*Karukku 25*)

She is accepted in the religious order only after she gets confirmation from the convent. The convent is known to be a place for love, equality and services but its services are different towards upper castes and Dalits. They could not admit Dalit students in their convent school, due to the poor quality and say that the standard of their convent will fall. They considered all Dalits as degraded, immoral, uncultured and indiscipline and rowdy. Bama ponders over the question how can the Dalits progress?

How can they be civilized when no one wants to educate them? They are treated as if they are not human beings.

Bama recalls the words of her grandmother who works for *Naicker* families. When she works in the fields, even small children would order her, command her and call her by name. The tiny children do all these things just because they belong to the upper caste. Bama's grandmother, like all the other labourers, calls the little boys as Ayya, Master. When the Paraya or Dalit women feel thirst for water, the Naicker women pour out the water from a height of four or five feet in their cupped hands. Dalits can't touch their utensils and they have to drink water with their cupped hands so that they do not pollute them by touching the utensils. Bama wants to ask the reason behind bestial treatment meted to them despite the fact that Dalits are also human beings. Undoubtedly advised by the Constitution provides all the citizens equal rights. The autobiographical account of pain of being Dalits in Tamil context demonstrates that upper caste people don't cherish sincere respect for constitutional values.

Bama is reminded of the day she went with her grandmother to the Naicker house for work. After her grandmother had finished all her filthy chores, she placed her vessel by the side of the drain. The Naicker woman came out with her stale food and leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped the food into the vessel. Bama wants to protest this behaviour but her grandmother tells her that these people are the Maharajas and without them they can't survive. The acceptance of stale food by Bama's grandmother echoes back to Omparkash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Arjun Dangle's story 'The Poisoned Bread'. However there exist commonalities in the form of attitudinal differences between old and new generation of Dalits. If the old generation compromises 'self-esteem' in the

pretext of survival, the new generation is inclined to resist any sort of humiliation. Listening to this, Bama feels upset and thinks about the plight of Dalits in the name of caste and untouchability since generations. With the series of hostile experiences, Bama feels very alienated in this higher caste dominated society. She wants to break all the barriers and traditions in the name of which Dalits are oppressed; and *Karukku* revolutionizes the Dalits situation on a wider scale by reflecting over the hypocrisy behind the caste system as well as religious conversion. This protest of Bama is justified by Santosh Kumari:

*Karukku* broke barriers of tradition in more than one. The first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer and a classic of subaltern writing, it is a bold and poignant-tale of life outside mainstream Indian thought and function. Revolving around the main theme of caste oppression within the catholic church, it portrays the tension between self and community and presents Bama's life as a process of self reflection and recovery from social and institutional betrayal. (74)

In *Karukku*, Bama vehemently criticizes the practice of untouchability in the Roman Catholic churches in particular and the casteism in Indian society in general. The language she uses is itself a manifestation of her Dalit consciousness. Use of colloquial, Tamil Dalit language instead of standard/mainstream Tamil language shows her faith in the strength of Dalit culture and language. With the increasing pain and suffering that she has passed through, she emerges as the powerful voice to encourage Dalits to protest and to revenge. Sufferings or pain is a double-edged weapon for Dalits. The sharp leaves of Palmyra trees can harm the hands that touch them but it can also defend them. The

awareness to this very status of Dalits can also instigate them to raise their weapon against their oppression. *Karukku*, thus, symbolizes Dalit awareness and Dalit consciousness that instigate them to fight for their survival. Bama realizes this subverted consciousness which inspires other Dalits to articulate their pain. Paula Richman observes, “Bama uses *Karukku* to articulate the notion that pain need not be an ending point; it can spur realization and new growth, as it did for her.” (74)

The close study of Bama suggests that pain is a pre-requisite for Dalits to write or fight back. The story of Bama’s pain and her search for survival doesn’t end here and she has bitter experiences even at the school, one day after school time Bama was playing at the school with her friends. At that moment, somebody has plucked the coconut. Everyone accuses Bama of plucking the coconut but she is not guilty of stealing the coconut. The headmaster abuses her and doesn’t allow her to enter the school. When she approaches the priest of the church he says, “After all you are from the Cheri. You might have done it. You must have done it.” (*Karukku* 19)

It is very shocking incident that the headmaster as well as the priest abuses her in the name of caste while Bama is least informed about the nuances of caste-system. In the very act of remembering the incident she has encoded the mode of resistance that prepared her to oppose the hegemonic structure of the caste system. As a child, she faced many hurdles in her early life, which caused her to think of the casteism, later she is relieved by the words of her brother who tells her the value of education and the dignity given to an educated man. Impressed by the words of her brother she does her best and stands first in the class but in spite of it, she attains no dignity. Teachers use Harijan



children as labourers to carry water to the teacher's house and for the plants. Teachers don't teach the Dalit children, rather they get them work in the schools.

The reading of the text suggests that the children of lower caste community go to school only to work as labourers; and therefore the idea of self-realization and self-esteem is a far cry for them. How can they progress when they are not considered equal to other castes and they are not treated as human beings? Whatever they do, wherever they go, the devil of casteism follows them. They have no source of income – men work in the fields of upper caste and the children collect the firewood in the forests. Bama also did it. Keeping in mind all these circumstances, there emerges unanimity of opinion that Dalits no way of progress and they are destined to remain marginalized. The class teacher would ask all the Harijan students to stand up during the assembly which hurts Bama. Despite all, she was pleased with her caste name when she was awarded as the best Harijan student for S.S.L.C. examinations. This occasion in her life gave more inspiration to Bama. In her village, life of a Paraya is full of hardships since early childhood. Everyone has to work for their by labouring either for the *Naickers* families or in their fields. In addition to this, they are assigned the job of digging wells, carrying loads of earth and stone, going to the hill top to gather firewood and working as labour on construction sites. Practically, each Paraya family is bonded labourer to the *Naicker* family.

Her grandmother is a real and regular servant. She has to wake up before the cockcrows, fetch water and complete all domestic chores. Like all other Dalit women, she has to face exploitation and inhuman treatment. In the market also, *Nadars* take advantage of their helplessness during their bartering session. Dalits are the ones who

work hard to make good. They are everywhere demeaned by Upper Caste. At the high school hostel, the warden sister makes humiliating remarks against Dalit children and the upper caste women refuse to sit by the Paraiya women in the bus. These instances constantly remind Bama of her caste at the school, at the church and at various other places and makes her conscious of her identity as a Dalit only. Bama writes in *Karukku*:

Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every hook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. (26)

Bama writes the above lines very painfully. She is right in her place because it is beyond our reach to be born into a rich upper caste family, and if you are born into a lower caste family, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. Bama's anger and frustration finds genuine expression in *Karukku*. She laments that the upper caste people can't even tolerate their rise and growth achieved through hard work, education and constant struggle. They become outrageous and conspired against Dalit community. Bama's anger against the Swarna castes is obvious when she writes:

How did the upper castes become so elevated? How is it that we have been denigrated? They possess money; we do not. If we were wealthy too, wouldn't we learn more and make more progress than they do? But when it comes to it, even if we are as good as they are, or even better, because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation. (*Karukku* 27)

The overwhelming nature of caste is portrayed here. When Bama lives in the convent, she feels angry at the upper caste authorities, because all the inferior jobs are assigned to Dalits only. Dalits are treated in a shameful and degrading way. She feels pained to see even older Dalit men trembling like small children when they talk to the upper caste priests and nuns. Dalits are frightened by the power and wealth of the nuns. Bama feels uneasy among the unfair and cruel upper caste nuns. She realizes that religion is forcefully imposed on the Dalit communities. In her childhood, she worshipped God, and prayed in the church because she had faith in God and believed that all men are equal in the eyes of God but now she has realised that the upper caste communities oppress them in the name of religion and caste. Now Bama has lost her faith in God and religion; and she does not feel any fear of God. She wants to spread the principles of Ambedkarite thought. Her experiences in the convent further shatter her faith in God and religion. She observes that the nuns and the priests of the church pose themselves as God and maker of religion. Surprisingly caste division is noticed among the nuns on the basis of their richness or poverty or the language they speak.

Bama reflects over the difference between Jesus in *the Bible*, and Jesus who is known through daily prayers in the church. God shows the greatest sympathy and compassion for the oppressed, but neither the priests nor the nuns really insist that God would get angry with those who do injustices and falsehood with the oppressed people. So, Bama criticizes both *the Bible* and the Jesus. Bama experiences and realizes all these through her spiritual journey from childhood to an adult woman. This book also presents a living picture of her spiritual journey and Dalit consciousness as Lakshmi Holmstrom

writes in her introduction to *Karukku*, “It is her driving quest for integrity as a Dalit and a Christian that shapes the book and gives it its polemic”. (XVI)

After renunciation from the religious order, Bama feels a sense of fulfilment because she feels that she would no longer be discriminated by the upper caste nuns and priest in the convent or the church. Lakshmi Holmstorm, in her introduction to the book, says, “the narrator leaves one community (the religious order) and affirms her belonging to another (a Dalit community, particularly of women).” (*Karukku* XVIII)

In the church, Dalits are everywhere on the jobs but nowhere in the society. It is only the higher caste Christians who enjoy the comforts of the church. The Priests and nuns of the upper caste Christians hold all the high positions, show off their authority and throw their weight about. Neither the priests nor the nuns of Dalit origin can get respect, and the upper caste nuns make abusive remarks about them. Bama says that even if Dalits are as good as they are, or even better, they are generally forced to suffer degradation. As Stella writes, “She was disturbed and shocked to find that the convent and the church are completely deviated from the doctrines they preached.” (249)

In the convent, she learns more of God and the teaching of Jesus but the church seems to be hypocritical which makes her angry with the priests and the nuns. The very important feature of the book *Karukku* is that Bama shows her hope for the better future at the end of each chapter of the book. She writes:

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 forwards all human kind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (*Karukku* 109)

Bama says that priests in the church preach that Jesus is born in a poor family, live among the poor and die for the poor, but the nuns always concentrate on worldly things not on spiritual things. They always discuss about what to prepare, what to eat, what to celebrate and how to enjoy, what to build and what to break. When Bama sees these things in the convent, she thinks about the misery of her own people, who live on gruel all the time. Then she decides to leave the convent to liberate Dalits from the clutches of poverty and serfdom. She observes that in the name of principles of religion, they are asked to bow the head before the priest so that they never stand with self-pride. Stella justifies this and writes in *Shodh, Samikshaau Mulyankan*, “The vow of obedience and the virtue of humility become subtle tools of intimidation and she found herself caged in that special world of bondage.” (250)

Fed up with the caste based atrocities and discrimination she leaves the convent in 1992. Through her experiences as a Dalit, Bama realizes that through education Dalit community can be empowered to earn a dignified livelihood for themselves. The whole process of Bama’s emotional encounters and experiences is a trail of discovery, which makes her a self-made woman. The life, as depicted in *Karukku*, throws light on the most agonizing and unfortunate lives of the Dalits. The portrayal of her experiences is indicative of the unfortunate situation bequeathed in a greater degree of self-awareness and quest for achieving loftier and nobler things in the lives of Dalit women. Her journey is tedious; encounters are painful; and the experiences reveal agony. But the process of self-discovery, identity and empowerment is an ordeal.

Bama feels utterly depressed when she finds that the oppression of Dalit woman is more than that of Dalit man. Bama gives an important example of feminist point of view by narrating the instances of a game played by children in a Paraya village, In the game, the boys play as *Naickers* (upper caste landlords); the girls play as farm labourers; the boys would pretend to keep shop and the girls would buy grocery; the boys would pretend to be priests, the girls to be sisters; and above all the boys would act as drunken husbands returning home and the girls as wailing wives getting the blows. Thus, even in the child play, the girls of lower caste are in a subordinate position. In relation to the Dalit boys, the girls are located as victims who could be counted upon to legitimize the male authority.

Schooling for lower caste children is placed within the context of their survival tactics. It is very shameful thing that poverty deprives them of their right to education yet it is also poverty that drives them towards the church (the church bell), and school to get the free meal there. Dalit children who are lucky to go to school regularly are subjected to caste discrimination and numerous forms of harassment. Their poverty is mocked at everywhere. Apart from that, the lower caste students are the target for ridicule, condemnation and public humiliation due to their caste. Bama in *Karukku* shows her hope for a bright future for Dalits through education.

The narrator is a witness to a caste-riot between *Paraya* and *Chaaliyar* where the *Paraya* boys and men are brutally beaten by the Police because the *Chaaliyar* community has bribed them. They butchered a sheep for them, and arranged a feast. The police beat every man and arrest whoever they see. The police are on the *Chaaliyar* side. They unleash a reign of terror on Dalits. *Chaaliyars* frighten *Parayas*, harass young *Paraya*

girls on their way to school, and bribe the police by serving lavish hospitality. The police beat up Dalit men, frighten young girls, and molest Dalit women. This embarrassing experience is an eye-opener for the girl narrator who analyse, critique and judge the issues relating to Dalits existence and position in a casteist society. Bama shows her anger against the oppressor and writes:

Are Dalits not human being? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes 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.  
(27)

The narrator has received good education and now she has recognised the importance of education in granting a possibility of social dignity to Dalits. It is a significant phase that helps her to take up the responsibilities of an activist working for the upliftment of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. Dalit men and women do the work in the fields but women are paid less than the men. It shows the general perception about woman as weak, frail and secondary. Responding to the question of Dalit women representation Capsi Paltati says:

Dalit women have been the silent, suffering minority in the works of both upper caste and Dalit male writer. Denied a voice, the Dalit women withers away at the margins of such literature. Dalit women are oppressed both by men from the upper caste and men from their own community. (184)

It is also of significance to realize how caste overrides gender in this book. Dalit women work at *Naicker's* fields or cowsheds. We note here that unmindful of human dignity

*Naicker* women ill-treat Dalit women, abuse them, call them by obscene terms and throw stale food and water at them. The *Naicker* women assert their caste superiority over Dalit women and are completely unaware of women's misery and indignity. Perhaps, *Naicker* women's insensitivity towards Dalit women is a response to the violence inflicted on them by their husbands in their family. With their rude and violent behaviour they practice the power which is denied to them in their domestic space. This, it would be right to say that gender overrides caste in this context.

Bama describes that all the people belonging to lower castes are ill-treated and discriminated against, but Christian Dalits face more specific forms of discrimination. Dalits who have converted themselves to Christianity or are born in Christian families face caste discrimination within church and its various official institutions. Theoretically, Christianity doesn't prescribe any caste-system or untouchability but in Indian context Dalit Christian have occupied a place equivalent to untouchables or '*shudras*' in traditional *varna* system. It shows that structure of caste permeates every layer of our society. No place of social experience is untouched by caste politics. When the narrator in *Karukku* enters the church as a nun, she is filled with horror to discover that this sacred profession too is not immune to caste-hatred. She is shocked to observe that even teachers, who disseminate knowledge and moral ethics, practice untouchability. They force Dalit students to sweep and clean the classrooms. Observing all these things, Bama uses her pen in *Karukku* like, "a sharp edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land. (184)

The unpleasant experience and the suppression have to compulsorily undergo a traumatic change. Bama's act of commission or omission is not individual but that of the



society. Bama suffered the pain of caste-discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but the book *Karukku* has given her courage and has helped her to love life once more. It has been written as a means of strength to the multitudes whose liberty, equality and dignity have been lost and destroyed. Thus, *Karukku* examines the wounded dark territory of Dalit consciousness which accepts their downtrodden state and tries to subvert that subjugated consciousness into a strong, self-sufficient and respected existence. It subverts the Swarna caste authority that accepts the lower caste people as untouchables, polluted, contemptible and inferior. *Karukku* instils self-respect among Dalits and has enabled many oppressed people to raise their voice against injustice.

It is the need of the hour that the suppressed or the downtrodden must stand against their depressed existence. Indeed, *Karukku* spreads the defiant message that encourages Dalits, despite of all the oppression, to stand firm and revolt against all the indignities and the destructive factors that hinder the creation of an equal and just society. *Karukku* describes how the female narrator comes to know the various dimensions of her Dalit community that is always obsessed with the question of livelihood. Bama breaks the shackles of poverty by educating herself and by becoming a teacher. Now she wants to make Dalit people aware for a bright future. The critical analysis of *Karukku* suggests that this is an autobiography of painful memories, disillusionment, despair and the pathetic conditions of the life and culture of people.

Bama gets education and empowers herself as a novelist. After reading *Karukku*, it can be said that there is a close link between education, writing and empowerment that Bama uses as tools that could liberate Dalits from degradation and oppression. *Karukku* is a mode of revolution that tries to free Dalits from the clutches of casteist oppression. The

narrator herself suffers the pain of caste-discrimination, untouchability, poverty and destitution but *Karukku* has given her courage to articulate her past to gain strength for future. Bama is considered the first Tamil Dalit woman writer and whose writings are replete with the series of instances that manifest the wretchedness of Dalits who are always posed with the question of survival and livelihood.

## Works Cited

- Bama "Author's Preface". *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.
- . *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.
- Holmstrom, Lakshmi. "Introduction". *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.
- Hornby, Albert Sydney. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Ed. Joanna Turnbull, Dilys Parkinson, Diana Lea, Patrick Philip, Ben Francia, Suzanne Webb, and Victoria Bull. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Kumari, Santosh. "Power, Consciousness and Quest for Identity in Dalit Fiction." *VSRD* 4.4 (2013): 73-75. web.12 April 2017. [www.vsrjournals.com](http://www.vsrjournals.com)
- Paltati, Capsi. "Reflections of Dalit Feminist Voice in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*". *IJARMSS* 1.6 (2012): 182-184. Web. [www.garph.com](http://www.garph.com)
- Rao, Koteswar M., and Uttam Bhagavan Ambhore. "Quest For Integrity: A Reading of Bama's *Karukku*". *Shodh, Samiksha aur Mulyankan* 2.7 (2009) : 245-250. Web. [www.ssmrae.com](http://www.ssmrae.com)

## CHAPTER- III

### **Dalit Women's Response to the Question of Survival in *Sangati***

In the previous chapter we have discussed that Dalits didn't have a voice or choice. They suffer discrimination and struggle on all levels. In this chapter, the focus is on the struggle of women for livelihood and how they are doubly marginalized –being Dalit and a woman. Bama, in her novel *Sangati*, depicts the plight of woman as she is always treated as subordinate to man. The patriarchal system does not provide her the status of equality as she is treated just like an object of sexuality and not as a human being.

Autobiographies or Self-referential books have always been powerful tools for presenting the real condition of Dalits. *Sangati* is the autobiography of a Dalit community. The word 'Sangati' is literally translated into English as events. *Sangati* describes about the community and as the literal meaning signifies, it is a recollection of events from the lives of the marginalized Dalits. Bama, through the arduous task of narrating her experiences and of her community brings the Dalit women to the centre of the discourse. As Smriti Singh justifies, "In *Sangati* Bama uses the form of the autobiography not only to portray her life but also to portray the lives of other Dalit women by giving them an identity through the narration of their story". (114)

It is an account of some personal impressions on certain atrocious and blood curdling events in a Dalit street. These events describe neither a story nor any characterization that is often associated with a novel. *Sangati* flouts the traditional concept of a novel. It owes its popularity to the contributions it has made to both Dalit literature and feminist literature, especially, in a Dalit-feminist perspective. Dalit feminism is a reactionary

movement against academic feminism. As Sharmila Rege writes that; “The writings and manifestos of different Dalit women’s groups underlined the fact that the unmarked feminism of the 1970s had, infact, been in theory and praxis a kind of Brahmanical feminism.” (qtd. in *SRJIS* 1209)

Hailed as the first Dalit woman writer, Bama wants to present the real condition of Dalit women. The narrator of the book makes us aware that Dalit women are at the lowest rung in the hierarchy and they can get rid of their oppressed position only through education.

In *Sangati*, Bama presents the impoverished and violent world of Dalit women. Her female characters suffer from double discrimination; they are oppressed by the so-called upper caste people and by their own Dalit males. They constitute most of the work force, work very hard and engage in agricultural activities. Women do productive works, earn wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less than the male workers. This unequal division of wages becomes a major issue in *Sangati*. The Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system whereby Dalit men oppress their women counterparts. As Abedi writes:

What again makes *Sangati* special among Dalit autobiographies is the exhibition of double discrimination which Dalit women face. Untouchability, along with machismo mark out a woman’s body as a site for control and oppression. (116)

The condition of the Dalit women is more horrible in the Indian society as they are discriminated based on class, caste and gender. Dalit women have been presented as the silent suffering community in the works of Dalit writers. They are not treated with

respect. They are denied a voice and are at the margins of such literature. Being illiterate, they are the most exploited community in the society. Dalit women are sexually exploited. They are deprived of education, and they are also subjected to gender bias. It is only in the writings of male writers that they show some sympathy towards Dalit women. But in real life the picture is different. Even within their own Dalit community, Dalit women have been alienated by the dominant male and are considered as mere objects for sexual pleasure and for reproduction. They are considered ugly, sluggish and unintelligent.

Dalit women among whom Bama has lived are subject to sexual exploitation by both upper caste men and Dalit men. Dalit women show a marked difference from upper caste women whose torment is silenced within the four walls of their homes, Bama says that Dalit women really are the worst sufferers and she writes herself: “It is not the same for woman of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands.” (*Sangati* 65)

Bama describes how the men in their streets went about drinking and beating their wives. She observes that Dalit men give vent to their suppressed anger by beating their wives. According to Bama, the same Dalit male population are like dogs with their tails rolled up when they work in the fields, and deal with their landlords. They can't show their strength against their landlords. So, they vent their anger at home on their wives and children. But it remains a hard fact that Dalit women are tormented both within and outside the family. For them, the question of survival and livelihood is so compelling that at the end of the day they lay down with bodies wracked with pain.

Although both men and women come home after a hard day's work in the fields, the men go off straight away to the bazaar to spend their time and come home only for the meal but the women must do all the chores at home. Besides, Bama's upper caste women don't show any pity or kindness to Dalit women and treat them with contempt as if they are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of self-respect. As Dr. C.S. Robinson justifies Bama:

In the second novel, *Sangati* Bama becomes the voice of the Dalit women. She candidly narrates the harassment meted out to the Dalit women by the upper caste men. Even as Bama articulates the harsh reality of the Dalits she assumes a Dalit feminist position by espousing a positive sense for the Dalit women. (10)

In *Sangati*, which is a recollection of events from the life of her community, Bama presents the myths about Peys (evil spirits) possessing only Dalit women. Bama suggests that the reason behind the possession of Dalit women by evil spirits is the psychological stress that women of her community must endure. From the moment they get up early in the morning, they start working either in their homes or in the fields for their livelihood.

Besides the harassment by the landlord in the fields, Dalit women are oppressed by their husbands. They live a suffocated life and are crushed by their own disgust, and exhaustion. Subsequently, they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by evil spirits. All these things depress Bama and she tries to awaken people of her community. She is of the opinion that such blind beliefs and self acquiescence can be removed only by collective action:

We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (*Sangati 59*)

The patriarchal distinctions between male and female are initially inculcated in children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games play an important role to achieve this goal. Bama understands the crafty nature of gender games they play. Girl children are not allowed to play the games of boys. ‘Kabaddi’ and ‘marbles’ are played by boys, and cooking, getting married and other domestic games are played by girls. Man’s authority is obvious when she writes:

Even when we played ‘mothers and fathers’. We always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, ‘what sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!’ In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell. (*Sangati 31*)

Elders consider that boys are permanent in a family and they will earn the livelihood for the survival of the family. Boys are supposed to take care of their parents in old age; on the other hand, girls are considered transient members who are to go in another family. Boys and girls are brought up in different ways. Boys don’t do any work while girls must do many domestic chores. Above all, boys are served good food than girls. This causes gender prejudices in the minds of parents.



Two of the stories that Bama tells is that of Mariamma and Thayi whose marital disharmonies are described to reveal the Dalit predicament. Both are misbehaved and beaten up daily by their husbands.

Kumarasami, worried that Mariamma may complaint against him, goes to the head of the community and spreads rumours that Mariamma and Manikkam are engaged in a dirty relationship. The upper caste man's false account of problematizes the issue.

Mariamma is humiliated by her father, by the landlord and later by her husband. She is a true representative of the entire community of the tormented Dalit women. She is unjustly accused of being in a relationship with a village boy Manikkam and is summoned to the village meeting. Though she is not guilty, nobody has the courage to defend her. The women are prohibited from speaking in village meetings and their Dalit men do not possess the courage to stand erect before the upper caste men.

Bama realizes that women occupy a claustrophobic space in the male-dominated society and are constantly under menace. They are not safe in agricultural fields, in homes, in churches and even in public spheres. They are constantly under the threat of sexual exploitation in the fields of work. Family, churches and courts are usually male-dominated. Justice delivery system seems to be different for men and women. Manikkam pays only 100 rupees while Mariamma pays 200 rupees as fine for the same offence. Bama says that whatever a man does, the blame falls on the woman only.

The narrative reveals that Dalit girl children face a great deal of domestic violence. A girl child in Dalit community is used as a source of cheap and unpaid labour. She is a surrogate mother to her brothers or sisters. She comes to rescue her mother who can take up work at the fields outside and leave the domestic responsibilities to her

daughter. A Dalit girl's chores mainly include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding, washing and taking care of her younger siblings, working at the farm for handful of gram, working at factories and handing over the wages to a drunken father. The girl child gets discriminated right from birth, especially if she is dark in colour. In *Sangati*, the narrator observes, "But she was a little disappointed that I was so dark, and didn't have my sister's or brother's color." (3)

She further observes that it is a norm in her village that a male baby is never allowed to even cry while the female baby is left unattended for a long time. In case of weaning also, the male infant enjoys breast-feeding for a longer time compared to his female infant. Such discrimination is ordained upon her due to her gender.

In *Sangati*, the story of Maikanni is heart-wrenching. Maikanni is a representative Dalit girl child who is constricted by her gender. The narrator describes the life of such a girl who enters the vicious circle of work, violence and injustice that engulfs the lives of Dalit women both at home and outside. Maikanni is an eleven year old child. Her name is Jayarani but she is called Maikanni for she has large, beautiful and attractive eyes. She is now the bread winner for the family as her father has deserted the family. She works in a matchbox factory. She represents the misery of child labour in Dalit community. She talks of an instance when she is lured by a man when she goes to pick firewood in a lonely part of the forest. But she is wise enough to gauge his intent and escapes the scene. The narrator wonders and feels pain reflecting on all that has happened to this girl at such a young age and writes, "If she was required to work far harder than her years demanded, she also behaved with a common sense for beyond her years." (*Sangati* 75)

The girl child in the narrator's community has a very brief childhood to enjoy. The girl child is surrounded with responsibilities looking after her siblings, fetching firewood and water and to top of it, bringing home a wage. Maikanni tells her aunt of a caste-clash that takes place in the matchbox factory. Children from her village are called Paraya and they are addressed with abusive names by the other child workers in the factory. Although their economic condition is same as these Dalit children, they have the pride of caste.

Maikanni too do many works at home and outside. When her mother is due for delivery, she would work in the matchbox factory. As her mother is not able to do works in the fields, Maikanni's earning would be the only source of income for her family. She works at the factory and at home. Her brothers do not do any work at home or at factory. This discrimination is on account of her gender. Her father's desertion affects her the most. She is deprived of schooling, games and a happy childhood. When she leaves for the matchbox factory before the sunrise, she suffers from constipation. Every Saturday, her father comes to grab her wages. Once tempted to buy an ice candy for one rupee, she gets severely beaten up by her father. Maikanni, thus, has no rights even over her earnings. Even the boys at the bus don't allow her to sit near the window and often beat her up. Bama notes that the violence at the hands of her father, bullying boys at the bus and the ceaseless domestic chores at home fall to her fate due to her gender. Actually, the female members face numerous wounds in Dalit community at every level. Dr. C.S. Robinson is right in saying:

*Sangati* examines the wounds that hurt the Dalit women. Those are wounds caused by discord in marital relations; a stained communication between the

woman and the man. The woman in the Dalit home is subject to untold physical and mental harassment. (10)

By narrating the events of many women from the Dalit community, Bama presents before us the rural Dalit women's struggle. Though the struggle is much due to the double oppression of caste and gender, their strength is also revealed. Dalit women stand by each other at the moment of crisis. Bama doesn't hesitate in describing violent domestic or street quarrels. In *Sangati*, we hear the voices of women in pain, anger, and frustration. Sometimes the language is very abusive because it is their sharp tongue that can protect Dalit women against their oppressors.

The whole book is filled with such stories of Dalit women's struggle for livelihood, exploitation and oppression. They use various tools for their survival. While Mariamma accepts what comes to her without any revolt, Pecchiamma protests her husband. Language is one of the effective tools they use against their oppressors. In *Sangati*, the native language of the Dalits itself becomes a language of protest and political challenge. It becomes a language of human rights articulated by liberated protagonist. This native language of political resistance includes a free use of abusive and obscene words. Women give vent to their oppressed feelings by addressing their neighbours with abusive names or shouting the names of their body parts. According to Bama, this is an effective tool to maintain their psychological equilibrium. Raakkamma also uses abusive language when her husband beats her up. Dalit woman is prone to create all hell if her husband keeps a mistress. But when she quarrels with any woman, she will call her, 'my husband's whore.' (*Sangati* 68)

In fact, by using abusive language they get some sort of satisfaction. When they come home after a day's toil, there is endless work at home also. Besides, they have to deal with the anger and domination of their husbands at home. Their lives are tedious. When they are so frustrated by their oppression, they are driven to vent their anger by fighting, shouting, and using obscenities. All these things give them some sort of comfort. If they don't use abusive terms in quarrelling, they become victims of psychological stress and mental ill-health. On account of psychological stresses Dalit women act as if they are possessed by Peys (evil spirits). It is in this context that Bama's Dalit women are possessed by evil spirits.

In *Sangati*, Bama's chosen castes are *Parayas*, *Pallars*, *Koravars* and *Chakkiliyars*. Among these castes, only the *Parayas* have been converted into Christianity. The present book describes how conversion to Christianity has brought constant disadvantages to Dalit community, especially to Dalit women. The divorce code prevalent among Dalit communities is favourable to women. Dalit women can ask for a separation or annulment of a marriage if their husbands are drunkards or adulterous. The *Panchayat* addresses the meeting and allows the couple to separate and give directions related to custody of children. This occurs only in the Hindu Dalit communities. However, Christian Dalit women are denied such divorce code. They are not allowed to marry again.

The narrator belongs to a Christian Dalit community and observes such discrimination. The Hindu Dalit women enjoy such privileges while Christian Dalit women don't possess such freedom. The Paraya community is tempted by church missionaries that guarantee free education to their children. But this coerced conversion

of the Paraya brings nothing except economic deprivation as they have lost their right to reservation which is provided to scheduled castes. The Dalit children cannot attend school because they have to assist their parents in work. So, the free education scheme cannot attract the children. In matters of marriage and love, Dalit women are discriminated. Paraya women are not allowed to marry a man from the *Pallar*, *Koravar* and *Chakkiliyar* community whereas men have the right to marry whoever they like.

Bama feels tormented after seeing such kind of discrimination. She now draws a comparison between Dalit and non-Dalit women. Upper-Caste women lead lives shut up inside their mansions, eating, gossiping, and doing their husband's bidding. They give the superficial impression that they never quarrel with their husbands. Bama comments that the upper caste women submit to their husbands like cobras that shrink back into their boxes.

According to Bama, condition of Dalit women is better than that of higher class women who have been forced to live in most vulnerable condition. They find no way to express their pent-up feelings. The narrator feels proud that their women have economic freedom and men and women both go out and earn. They work hard in the fields and bring up their children. Most of the men in Dalit community never give their wages in the family and it is the woman who looks after everything in the family. Bama regrets that though Dalit women earn their food they are beaten and stamped upon for no reason. That is why they quarrel with men. If men show their strength, women show the sharpness of tongue. They can't hit back, so they curse men loudly. What else can they do?

The textual analysis of *Sangati* suggests that Dalit women must work for their survival. They are daily wage earners. If they don't go to work even for a day, the family would remain hungry. They would die of starvation. They work from Monday to Saturday, from morning to evening. If the Naicker calls them over on a Sunday, they must rush to work. Young girls also go with their mothers, aunts and neighbours during school holidays to work in the fields and thereby earn their livelihood. If they work all day, picking gram or breaking ground nuts, then the Naicker would pay only a five or ten paisa per measure. They could earn only five rupees a day after a painful labour.

Here, Bama tries to say that whether it is Dalit community or Upper Caste community, the condition of woman is not much different. They face discrimination on every level. The narrator's grandmother who is the general commentator in *Sangati* explains their plight:

We have to labour 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 a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel. (6-7)

Men of Dalit community have their own defence system. Since they can't protest their landlords in the fields they show their authority on their wives at home. Women suffer caste oppression outside and gender oppression at home. Bama wants to make the women of Dalit community aware that they must uphold their rights. They must stand up for themselves and declare that they too are human beings like everyone else. If Dalit

women believe that someone else is going to uplift them, then they are doomed to remain where they are, forever.

Bama, a Christian Dalit woman and the first Tamil Dalit woman writer, faced many miseries and caste discrimination at every level. She realizes her place as a Dalit. She identifies many dominant issues of early child marriage, poverty, lack of proper health care and education as certain barriers impeding Dalit women from coming out of their submissive state.

The child narrator in the early chapters grows melancholic and rebellious due to the real incidents occurring around her. When she grows into a young woman she focuses on the need for a radical change and comes forward for action against the oppressors. Observing these exploitations of Dalit women, Bama tries to make them ready to gain their rights and the book *Sangati* is replete with the lines where one can analyse that Bama uses this book as a means of motivation to Dalit women. As Bama says, “I don’t know when we will be free of all this. We must somehow dare to take control of our lives. Then, as the proverb says, ‘Even the ocean will support us, if we only dare.’ (67)

Such powerful words will encourage people and in *Sangati* too, the effect of Bama’s motivated lines is obvious when Bhakkiyam said: “At least from now on we should stand up for ourselves. Well, I must go. My son told me to buy a newspaper. Every day he reads out news items to anyone who wants to come and listen. I will see you soon, won’t I?” (104)

Bama exhorts women to take pride of their caste and come forward to social empowerment. She makes them remind of their extreme strength for hard work, their spirit of protest, their culture’s absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She tells



about her grandmother's courage who pawns her *tali* to bring her children up, Katturaasa's mother who bears her son by herself while cutting grass and about Mariamma who returns to work even after an accident. But their voices are nipped at the bud. When the narrator admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, her grandmother says that what the men say is right. Don't think that everything is going to change just because she has learnt a few letters of the alphabet. So, it can be said that even elders are victims of preconceived notions that men are more dominant than women and they must obey the men.

Indeed, the revolutionary intention behind writing *Sangati* grows out of the hope that the Dalit women will rise up to revolt and to begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society in which everybody will be equal. Everyone will get justice in this society. And the ideals of Bama are listed by Lakshmi Holmstrom in her Introduction to *Sangati*:

And the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather, courage, fearlessness, independence, and self-esteem. (XIX)

By studying and judging *Sangati*, it can be said that the above lines are true as Bama tries to strengthen Dalit women and to make them aware to grab their rights. Their conditions are worse within Dalit community. The present novel discusses many incidents related to the oppression of Dalit women. She wants to make them ready to revolt. She knows that it is not so easy to gain equality, justice and their rights rather they will have to grab their rights.

Although Bama is well educated, she faces discrimination. Now she protests against the cruel social structure of caste and religion; the religion that doesn't recognise this discriminative structure. In *Sangati*, Bama urges women to unite and organise themselves to struggle for their rights. Bama has, through her book, especially in the form of the autobiography, relocated herself and other Dalit women to the centre and carves out an identity for them. She has regained self-esteem. The book gives Dalit women an identity through the narration of their story. Bama, through her narrator and the use of Dalit language, challenges and disrupts institutional (upper-caste or mainstream language) language. She criticises superstition and belief in 'Peys' in this book.

She uses proverbs to reveal the condition of the Dalit women who are behaved with contempt not only by the public but also by government institutions. She urges them to get their rights and declares that they too are human beings. She focuses on the struggles, suppression and assertion of the self as well as the world of Dalit women. The language used in *Sangati* is reclaimed by the narrator as the language of the women of Dalit community. We can find multiple female voices speaking to and addressing one another sharing their experiences of daily lives.

Bama, in *Sangati*, shows the ability of the women of her community to think and analyse situations for them. They are independent subjects in the process of recognising their value in society. A close and critical reading of *Sangati* shows how Bama has tried to give Dalit women their voice.

The beginning of the novel shows a state of depression and hopelessness of the Dalit women, but the latter part displays the vigour, courage and the resilience of women even in the midst of their misery. They face the situations with their solidarity. They

converse and laugh with each other to forget their miseries and they celebrate their newly found inner strength. The narrator too becomes free of the bondages of her limitations. She lives by herself and earns her livelihood. In the end of the chapter, it can be said that *Sangati* does justice to its title by presenting the news, happenings and events in the lives of several Dalit women. Bama records the tribulations, struggles, frustrations as well as the joys and survival of Dalit women.

The novel *Sangati* is more than a study of Dalit oppression. It is a womanish study and is written from a feminist perspective. It is true that both Dalit men and women are tormented but Dalit women's position is worse than Dalit men. While Dalit women face discrimination due to their caste identity, their oppression both at home and at fields on accounts of their gender adds another dimension to questions of survival. The double oppression of caste and gender places Dalit women in worse position than Dalit males. The pure womanish attitude of Bama is seen when she expresses her anger against Dalit males.

## Works Cited

- Bama. *Sangati*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. Print.
- Holmstrom, Lakshmi. "Introduction". *Sangati*. Bama. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. Print.
- P. Prasara V. "Modes of Resistance in Dalit Feminism: An Insight into Bama's *Sangati*". *SRJIS* 1.6 (2013): 1206-1214. Web. April-May 2017. [www.srjis.com](http://www.srjis.com).
- Robinson, C.S. "Dalit Literature Becomes a Voice of Protest in the Context: Special Focus on Bama". *Research Nebula* 3.1 (2014): 10-12. Web. 27 Feb. 2017. [www.Ycjournal.net](http://www.Ycjournal.net)
- Singh, Smriti. "Narrating a Subaltern Consciousness: Bama's *Sangati*". *IJEL* 5.5 (2013): 113-118. Web. 15 March 2017. <http://www.academicjournals.org/IJEL>

## CONCLUSION

Both the works *Karukku* and *Sangati* present the struggle for livelihood, caste discrimination and gender discrimination. Caste and gender are so complexly linked that it is difficult to understand whether the narrator is oppressed more due to her caste or due to being a female. As Bama's suffering and struggle is representation of her community's alienation from the mainstream society, it can be observed that she herself is unjustly treated for being a Dalit. Her identity as a Christian Dalit increases the notion of social oppression.

*Karukku*, in short, is an autobiography in which Bama forms her personal sphere according to her own design. She searches the voice that will articulate the sufferings of her people. She regains the assurance of the confident, liberated revolt which would expose the hypocrisy and duplicity in the religious institutions like church and convent. Bama feels it is a sin to tolerate injustice silently. She takes the weapon of words to express her sorrows. She lives a hard life like other Dalits but she doesn't want to be a mute spectator. She wants economic, social and political reforms. Bama is committed to awaking the conscience of her downtrodden and marginalized people. So, it can be said that her individual voice becomes the social and communal voice.

Bama's works are written in the form of autobiography, and struggle for survival is the main theme of Dalit autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies are not only a search for true self, but these also describe the struggle faced by Dalits. There are many events which threaten the stability of the self of Dalit community. Writers question the dominance of the upper caste and depict the evolution of an individual self as well as the collective sufferings of the community.

Dalit women autobiographies react to the privileged dominance of males, focusing on socio-psychological conditions of Dalit females. Bama too is a Dalit woman and she too protests against male dominance within and outside her community. Childhood days are presented in such a way that there is not much distinction between private, public and social life. But the depiction of later years is full of caste discrimination and oppression. Above all, Dalit women make their writings a tool for reclaiming their brutalized selves and affirming their identities. These autobiographies generally describe Ambedkarite Dalit movement, participation of Dalit women in the movement, their struggle for survival, the man-woman relationship, humiliation and degradation of Dalit women.

Bama has enriched Dalit women's writings through her autobiographical narratives. Her novels give a close view of female experiences. Her novels are, therefore, a presentation about real patriarchal society and her own struggle for survival and livelihood as a woman. Bama's novels present a live picture of patriarchal hegemony within and outside Dalit community. Moreover, her works mirror the miserable conditions and subjugation of Dalit women. The violence inflicted on them by upper caste people on one side, and by Dalit men, their husbands and other relatives on the other hand, is obviously depicted in Bama's works.

Bama's autobiographies portray the conditions that brutally tear Dalit women's lives to pieces. The narrator hopes for a new society where equality and justice will prevail for all. *Karukku* and *Sangati* reflect the plights of the Dalit community and Dalit women respectively. Bama's novels are historical narratives which awake readers' mind about Dalit woman's struggle. Both of the works are powerful Dalit woman stories which

present the untold miseries of Dalit women struggle for livelihood and their courage to resist oppression. In spite of their subjugation and humiliation by their own men and upper caste people, these women possess a rare spirit and zest for life. *Karukku* is concerned with the caste discrimination within Catholic Church and its institutions, and presents the reality of church as to how in the name of religion poor people are exploited while *Sangati* is the story of struggle of whole community.

Bama's novels argue that education is the only means for Dalit empowerment. They can rise above their abject poverty and indignity only by acquiring good education. Bama is inspired by her brother Annan to get education and to raise high in life. She wants to make Dalit community aware of their rights and about the need of an organized demand for social justice. The primary motive of Bama's novels is the upliftment of Dalits and the oppressed.

She uses her writings to implore Dalits to adopt education as a certain strategy for self-empowerment and self-esteem in society. Bama's entry into academy, her presence at literary meetings, and her continuous contribution in the sphere of education as a school teacher, are various aspects of her empowerment as a woman.

Bama's novels have won critical popularity over the years. Her use of Dalit vocabulary and unconventional use of language is criticized by mainstream writers. But after thorough study of her works it can be said that her works indicate a conscious choice in terms of form, language, mode of narration, and content. Mainstream writers and critics call her language vulgar and obscene but Bama defends it by calling it the language of Dalits.

The most dominant characteristic of Bama's narratives is her hope for a bright future. At the end of every chapter in both of the books, Bama tries to make Dalit people aware to revolt against their oppressors. She makes them realize their real existence in upper class dominated society. She presents a live picture of her experiences that are heart-wrenching. She uses such sharp words that will surely knock at the door of their minds. They will realize their existence and become ready to revolt against those who humiliate Dalit community in the name of caste and religion. They make temple but they are not allowed to enter the temple. If all are equal in the eyes of God, then where is God? Where is justice? Where is equality? If Dalit people enter the temple, enter the upper caste houses they will pollute everything. If they are not human beings, wherever they go, they are treated like animals. They have no land, no better sources of income. They are compelled to do the menial jobs. They have no equal opportunities of progress in the field of education. They are always denied their basic human rights. These are some questions Bama raises in her writings.

Indeed, Bama tries her best to make Dalit community aware. She is a role model of such a woman who despite all her miseries, and caste and gender oppression proved herself and became able to strengthen her identity as a woman. Her life is a true representation of every Dalit life. She wants to make them realize that they must crush all the institutions that put Dalits down. All human beings are equal. No one is high or low. Those who have found their happiness by oppressing Dalits are not going to let them go easily. It is Dalits who have to place them where they belong and bring about a changed and fair society where all are equal.



At the end it seems justified to conclude that Bama uses her writings to console her marginalized self, and it is writing alone that helps her in living a smooth life. It is also true that the writings give her enough strength to live a life full of confidence. Although it is true that Dalits are not given adequate opportunities by the upper castes, they can resolve and address the question of livelihood and survival through education and awareness of their rights.

## Select Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

- Bama "Author's Preface". *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.
- - - . *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.
- - - . *Sangati*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. Print.
- - - . "Ten Year Later". *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.

### Secondary Sources:

- Abedi, Z. *Contemporary Dalit Literature: Quest for Dalit Liberation*. New Delhi: Arise Publishers and Distributors, 2009. Print.
- C. Indu B. "Silence Speaks: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*". *The Criterion* 4.3 (2013) : 1-4. Web. 8 April 2017. [www.thecriterion.com](http://www.thecriterion.com)
- Chandra, Subhash. *Dalit Atmakathaiyan: Anubhav se chintan*. Delhi: Itihas Bodh, 2006. Print.
- Chauhan, Surajpal. *Tiraskrit*. Delhi: Anubhav Publication, 2002. Print.
- Dangle, Arjun, ed. *Poisoned Bread: Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009. Print.
- Holmstrom, Lakshmi. "Introduction". *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2012. Print.

- - - . "Introduction". *Sangati*. Bama. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. Print.
- Hornby, Albert Sydney. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Ed. Joanna Turnbull, Dilys Parkinson, Diana Lea, Patrick Philip, Ben Francia, Suzanne Webb, and Victoria Bull. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.
- Kumar, Ajay. *Dalit Panther Movement*. Ed. SS. Gautam. Delhi: Gautam, 2006. Print.
- Kumari, Santosh. "Power, Consciousness and Quest for Identity in Dalit Fiction." *VSRD* 4.4 (2013): 73-75. web.12 April 2017. [www.VSRDjournals.com](http://www.VSRDjournals.com)
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Akkarmashi: The Outsider*. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: OUP, 2003. Print.
- Nimbalkar, Waman. *Dalit Literature: Nature and Role*. Trans. Vandana Pathak and P.D. Nimsarkar. Nagpur:Prabodhan, 2006. Print.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2014. Print.
- Paltati, Capsi. "Reflections of Dalit Feminist Voice in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*". *IJARMSS* 1.6 (2012): 182-184. Web. [www.garph.com](http://www.garph.com)
- P. Prasara V. "Modes of Resistance in Dalit Feminism: An Insight into Bama's *Sangati*". *SRJIS* 1.6 (2013): 1206-1214. Web. April-May 2017. [www.srjis.com](http://www.srjis.com).
- Randhawa, H.S. Ed. *Dalit Literature: Contents, Trends and Concerns*. New Delhi: Sarup, 2010. Print.
- Rao, Koteswar M., and Uttam Bhagavan Ambhore. "Quest for Integrity: A Reading of Bama's *Karukku*". *Shodh, Samikshaaur Mulyankan* 2.7 (2009): 245-250. Web. [www.ssmrae.com](http://www.ssmrae.com)

- Robinson, C.S. "Dalit Literature Becomes a Voice of Protest in the Context: Special Focus on Bama". *Research Nebula* 3.1 (2014): 10-12. Web. 27 Feb. 2017. [www.Ycjournal.net](http://www.Ycjournal.net)
- Singh, Smriti. "Narrating a Subaltern Consciousness: Bama's *Sangati*". *IJEL* 5.5 (2013): 113-118. Web. 15 March 2017. <http://www.academicjournals.org/IJEL>
- Valmiki, Omparkash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Kolkata: Samya, 2007. Print.