

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 *othukkapattor* (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 11th 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 case 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.

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