

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.

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