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Patronising the Upper Castes: The Church in Bama's Karukku

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Abstract

The caste system is a form of disgraceful social stratification, unique to the Hindu society in India. It is a two pronged system that privileges the upper castes and marginalizes the lower, thus creating a monumental gap between the two. To escape the brunt of casteist discrimination, some untouchable communities had chosen to get converted to Christianity which is egalitarian by principle. In Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, we find the community of parayas who had proselytized to Christianity. Despite their proselytisation, they are still subjected to caste-based discrimination. The present paper attempts to establish that despite endorsing egalitarianism and social justice, the institution of Christianity, in the Indian context, have proved unsuccessful in rescuing the dalits from caste-based

discrimination. This paper further focuses on the economic deprivation the dalit Christians are suffering because of their Christian status.

Keywords

proselytization, caste discrimination, Christianity, casteist ideology, social justice.

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The Christian religion, though originating in the foreign countries, has struck root in India as well. It reached India, according to popular notion, in the 6th century A.D. It is believed that Saint Thomas had landed in Kerala in the 6th century A.D. and effected the conversion of some Brahmin families in South India to Christianity. These Christian converts were known as Syrian Christians. In the 400 A.D., the Christian missionaries succeeded in getting a considerable number of Hindus proselytized to Christianity. As a religion, Christianity claims to be egalitarian in principle. The Christian missionaries preached that within the Christian fold every individual is treated as equal with love and respect, and there is no hierarchy among human beings. For the untouchables, deprived of every social right and human dignity within the Hindu fold, the Christian religion brought about a scope for escaping the scourge of untouchability and also for obtaining a caste-free society. Lancy Lobo, in her

article "Visions, Illusions and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India", states that "In south India, conversions took place in some castes almost 400 years ago, in others 200 years ago, and in a few cases, as early as a 100 years ago" (Lobo 243). Though in the following years, several dalit communities like Chuhras of Punjab, Chamars of Uttar Pradesh, Vankars of Gujarat, Mahars of Maharashtra, Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu, and Pulayas of Kerala (Sobin George 7) etc. converted to Christianity, the missionaries had to encounter much hindrance from the caste Hindus who impeded their mission of spreading the faith of Christianity in India. Nicholas Dirks, in his book *The Castes of Mind* (2001), reports that the caste issues had been one of the most significant causes which resulted in the Sepoy Mutiny in the year 1857. The revolt of the Indian soldiers, in the year 1857, was provoked because of the bullets they were given to use by the British authorities. These bullets had to be bitten with teeth before launching. The Indian soldiers feared that they would lose their caste if they bit the animal fat which covered the bullets. Consequently, the missionaries found that in the Indian context, the institution of caste acts as an agent that binds the people to their religion. However, Dirks cites Max Muller who commented that caste "which has hitherto proved an impediment to the conversion of the Hindus, may in future become one of the most powerful engines for the conversion not merely of individual but of whole classes of Indian society" (Dirks 133). Proving Muller's words to be

true, a significant number of dalit communities got converted to Christianity in order to escape the oppression of the caste Hindus. Sabin George, in his article, reports that after the Chuhra community in Punjab got converted to Christianity, the number of Christians rose from a mere 3912 in 1881 upto 3,95,629 in 1931 in the Punjab region only (George 7). This growth in the number of Christian converts was mainly due to the philanthropic activities undertaken by the Christian missionaries. The humanitarian doctrines of Christianity motivated the dalit communities to get converted to Christianity in the hope of a better life. The missionaries too were aware of this caste aspect of conversion. Robert Caldwell, a missionary from the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, is known to have said that "the lower castes initially came to Christianity for protection and material help" (qtd Dirks 134).

Despite knowing the fact that the lower caste converts sought a relief from the caste discrimination within the Christian fold, has Christianity succeeded in emancipating the dalits from their dalithood? This paper intends to read Bama's *Karukku* as a document of caste discrimination meted out to the Christian converts hailing from lower castes. In this paper, I have argued that in spite of endorsing egalitarianism and social justice, the institution of Christianity in the Indian context failed to provide the dalit Christians a safe haven from casteist oppression.

Karukku, Bama's first novel, is autobiographical in genre. It records even the minute details of not only Bama's life, but also the village in which she had grown up as well as the particular community she belonged to. Along with depicting how she attained maturity through several bitter experiences, she also presents the daily struggles which her community, the 'paraya' community, had to encounter. In Tamil Nadu, the paraya community signifies a community of dalits who had been proselytized to Christianity. In her second novel *Sangati* (2005), Bama mentions the reason why the entire paraya community got converted to Christianity. She says that the Christian priests had assured their community members that if they get proselytised, their children would be provided education free of cost (Bama 5).

Corroborating to Bama's affirmation that the Christian missionaries had persuaded the paraya community to proselytize by taking recourse to dole politics, Arundhati Roy also claims that the missionaries distributed charity to the impoverished dalits in order to win their support. In her seminal novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy asserts that a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (dalit communities in Kerala) became Christian converts in order to "escape the scourge of Untouchability" (Roy 74) and also because the Christian priests also gave them "a little food and money" (Roy 74).

These dalit communities had been deprived by the upper castes of every kind of opportunity which could lead them to a better and dignified life. While the upper castes acquired education and attained respectable jobs, the dalits were condemned to their specific caste jobs only. Moreover, the dalits being mostly paid in kind, not in cash, their financial conditions never ameliorated. Therefore, the offer of food and education free of cost, by the Christian missionaries, provided the opportunity of financial as well as social advancement or the dalits.

Along with their humanitarian mission of uplifting the conditions of the downtrodden, the Christian missionaries were also entrusted with the task of spreading the religion of Christianity. Though they took in the dalits within the Christian fold, a section of the Christian missionaries considered the Brahman converts to be the success of their missionary activities (Dirks 135). Such mindset of some of the missionaries attests to the fact that they attached more significance to the social status and intellect of the Brahmins who, as the Christians assumed, had chosen the faith of Christianity by comprehending the intricacies of its doctrines and by concluding that Christianity is superior to Hinduism.

However, from the very outset, the missionaries were well aware of the presence of caste hierarchy within the institution of Church in India. Caldwell observes “the native converts (being) sneered at by the governing race

as 'rice Christians'; and dissained by the Brahmans and educated Hindus as a new low-caste begotten of ignorance and hunger" (Dirks 134). The native Christian converts of the upper-caste origin, being regulated by caste prejudice, continued to look down upon the lower caste converts as inferior. As was observed in the Hindu religion, similar graded hierarchy was put into practice within the Christian fold as well. Bama, in *Karukku*, recounts the ways in which the Christian converts from lower castes have been discriminated against by their upper caste counterparts. The settlement pattern of Bama's village was such that the Christian converts from upper castes resided in a different section of the village, away from the association of the dalit Christians. Bama affirms "The post office, the panchayat board, the milk-depot, the big shops, the church, the schools ---- all these stood in their (upper caste Christians) street" (Bama 6). Such distinction between upper and lower caste Christians confirmed that the former occupied the position of superiority in the Christian society. Roy also seconds Bama's claim that the paraya community had a separate cemetery in the village. She further states that the dalit Christians had separate school, separate church as well as a separate low-caste priest to attend to their religious affairs. However, it is not that the Church authorities had never attempted to eradicate caste distinction from the Church premises. However, any attempt from the part of the Church authorities to obliterate caste hierarchy had

been countered by the upper caste Christians. Prakash Louis, in his study "Caste-based Discrimination and Atrocities on Dalit Christians and the Need for Reservations", reports:

The Vellalars of Vadakkankulam refused to take communion, that is, symbolic and sacred body of Christ, within sight of Nadars after the priest had knocked down the wall, which had kept the two groups from seeing each other in the church. If in the Hindu system, the shadow of an untouchable falls on the caste Hindu he is polluted. In Christianity, if two castes see each other in the holiest of holies, it results in pollution. (Louis 18)

The dalit Christians were discriminated against even in the matter of appointment of nuns and priests in the Church. Louis confirms that though 75% of the members of the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu hail from the lower castes, only 6% of the priests and nuns are dalit Christians (Louis 21). Not only are the dalit Christians discriminated against when it came to appointing the higher authorities of the Church, they are marginalized in the educational institutions as well. Bama laments that whenever anything went wrong in her school, the priests unfailingly blamed the dalit Christian children (Bama 15-16). Similar discriminatory experiences awaited her in her college which was situated in a distant village. In that college, though the upper caste students were allowed to go home every time they applied for it, Bama was refused leave for the First Communion of her younger brother and sister.

The Warden and the Principal of the college exhibited their narrow outlook towards the dalit Christians by commenting disparagingly, "What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion" (Bama 19). Bama's life was exposed to hundreds of similar instances of bigotry. When she became a teacher at a school run by the Church authorities, she noticed that the dalit Christian children were ostracized and maltreated in the convent. The convents refused the dalit students admission under the pretext that they are not intelligent enough. The convent authorities argue that if their school admits the dalit children, "their standards will fall" (Bama 102).

In *Karukku*, Bama narrates a fight between the paraya and the chaaliyar communities and the outcome of the fight. This episode not only reveals the mental strength, determination and ingenuity of the women belonging to the paraya community but also brings out that the priest of the Catholic Church was least bothered about the well-being of the paraya community. The priest neither stopped the police from arresting the paraya men, nor did he loan them a few rupees in order to release the paraya men from the police custody (Bama 39).

Viewing that the nuns and priests treat the dalit Christians contemptuously, Bama decided to join the Church herself so that she could help the miserable dalit children learn something and lead a better life. This new phase of her life, from its very inception, occasioned sorrow and dismay

to her. Even before joining the order, that is when she was a trainee, one of the Sisters told them that some orders do not allow dalits Christians to join them. She also informed them that there is a separate order for the dalit Christian nuns exclusively. Though she was accepted in the Order, she witnessed the marginalization endured by the dalit Christians within the nunnery. She remarked "the people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories" (Bama 22). The Catholic Church, which is supposed to be egalitarian and humanitarian, observes a similar hierarchical social structure as found in the Hindu society. Instead of catering for the poverty-stricken and underprivileged dalit Christians, the Church authorities in India has changed into a profit-making institution, prioritizing the best interests of the upper castes only. Bama's despair at the profiteering motives of the Church authorities can be surmised from her lament "Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty" (Bama 66).

Bama, in *Karukku*, has recounted her experience of meeting a white-skinned missionary who had come to visit her school when she was a little girl. Impressed by her ability to recite prayers, the missionary had lifted her up, kissed her and gifted her with a five-paisa coin. Though

she signifies that the white-skinned missionary was free from any form of caste-bias, all the white-skinned missionaries did not possess similar kindness and compassion for the lower castes in their hearts. As mentioned before, the Christian missionaries, who had arrived in India from foreign countries, had valued the upper caste converts a lot more than the lower caste ones. From that perspective, they felt a need for appeasing the upper caste converts who didn't prefer to interact with the lower caste converts. Even after entering the new faith which did not acknowledge caste hierarchy on principle, these upper caste converts maintained their prejudiced and discriminatory behavior towards the lower castes. To fulfill the demands of the upper caste converts, the Christian missionaries had also conceded to the practice of caste hierarchy within the Church. Prakash Louis, in his article, cites a letter by Pope Gregory XV, written in 1623, which accepted the plea of the missionaries in India to comply with certain caste practices within the institution of the Church, considering the discomfort and difficulties encountered by the upper caste converts (Louis 19). The letter granted the upper caste converts permission to continue certain traditional customs and rituals like wearing the sacred threads, perform ablutions etc., even after their proselytisation to Christianity. In the letter, the upper caste converts were expected to show "charity and respect towards people of obscure conditions" (Louis 19).

Bama realizes, after reading the Holy Bible, that God has not desired His followers to discriminate between human beings. In the Bible, it is declared that God has always associated himself with the poor and the oppressed (Bama 90). Being devotees of Christ, it is the duty of the nuns and priests to provide support to the downtrodden and to aid in their social and economic advancement. But by catering to the upper castes, who were already socially and materially privileged, the Church authorities prioritized material gains over philanthropic deeds. Bama laments that these nuns and priests have disobeyed the teachings of God. She affirms "the Word of God... no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others" (Bama xiii).

Arundhati Roy captures this pathetic condition of the dalit Christians through her comment "they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire" (Roy 74), signifying that the dalits suffered even more misfortune on account of their conversion to Christianity. After the independence of India, the Hindu dalits, who were referred to as Scheduled Castes in the government register, were provided with reservations in the fields of education and government employment. Such a move was made in order to ensure human justice through the socio-economic advancement of the lower castes. But those dalits who had got proselytized to Christianity found themselves ineligible for

such government benefits. The Indian government argued that being Christians, these erstwhile lower caste people are now living in a caste free society at present, and hence do not require any government assistance for their social progress. That the assessment of the Indian government is erroneous can be perceived from the report submitted by the Mandal Commission:

the change in religion did not always succeed in eliminating castes. The converts who carried with them their castes and occupations to the new religion (sic). The result has been that even among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, casteism prevails in varying degrees in practice, their preaching notwithstanding. Casteism has thus been the bane of entire Indian society, the difference in its rigidity being of a degree varying from religion to religion.
(qtd. in Louis 32)

Though the Indian government denies the fact, Bama's account reveals that the dalit Christians are discriminated against and subjected to caste prejudice within the Christian fold as well. Bama depicts the inhuman manner in which the dalit Christians are treated by the upper castes. She says that her paatti or grandmother, who worked at upper caste households, was humiliated on a daily basis by her employers. Bama comments "...when she (Bama's grandmother) was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste" (Bama 14). She was given leftover food

from the previous day which she considered as “the nectar of the gods” (Bama 14). Bama herself identifies a particular incident of her childhood to be the watershed in her life. She claims that she hadn’t known what untouchability meant until she witnessed an elder of her community deliver a packet of snacks to an upper caste member by holding the packet in a weird way. The paraya community member was holding the packet carefully by the string so that in no way the packet gets touched by him. On seeing this, Bama’s initial reaction was amusement. But her elder brother told her that the upper castes treat the lower castes as untouchables; the lower castes are forbidden to touch anything belonging to the upper castes, and that was the actual reason behind the peculiar behavior of the paraya elder. On hearing this, she realized the terrible injustice that has been meted out to the dalits (Bama 12-13). For more than once, Bama had been denied employment under the pretext that she was a dalit and the job was reserved for upper castes (Bama 101). These instances firmly establish that the dalit Christians continue to be victims of caste discrimination even after their conversion.

In *Sangati*, Bama focuses on a crucial aspect that adversely affected the dalits, especially the dalit Christian women. In *Sangati*, Bama introduces the case of her friend Pecchiamma, belonging to the Chakkiliyar community. Instead of getting converted to Christianity, this

community had remained Hindus. On meeting Pecchi, Bama came to know that she had ended her marriage with her first husband, and married again. Her life with her first husband was miserable as her husband was not only a drunkard but kept a mistress as well. He used to beat Pecchi and take away all the money she earned. Despite having two children with him, Pecchi ended her marriage with her first husband with the permission of the panchayat. After remarrying, she is leading a peaceful life now. Bama came to know that among the pallar and the chakkili communities, this system of ending one marriage and marrying again is prevalent. But, she observes, that in the paraya Christian community, even the girls who suffer from miserable marriages never venture to terminate their marital relationships. The priests and nuns portray God as wrathful and merciless, thereby instilling a sense of fear in the hearts of the paraya Christians. They, being compelled by their fear of God, continue to lead miserable, stunted existences. These priests and nuns have moulded the minds of the innocent parayas in such a way that they consider it a sin to break their marriages. Bama's mother says "In our Christian religion, you can't leave a husband and go off on your own that easily. Haven't you heard the words the priest speaks at the time of the tali-tying?... He blesses the tali saying no law nor panchayat nor courts of justice can separate a wedded couple. Whatever it is, we have to live our lives according to the promise we made to God in front of four, five people" (Bama 94). Bama does

not say that it would have been better if they had remained Hindu, rather she condemns the preachings of the priests and nuns, who limit the independence of the gullible paraya women, thereby condemning them to lives of misery.

In *Karukku*, Bama raises another objection against the Church authorities. She asserts that the approach taken by the Church authorities to bring in reform in the lives of the dalit Christians is not suitable for ensuring social justice to the dalits. Bama objects:

Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matters, and made aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything they said to the children, everything in the manner in which they directed them suggested, that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; that there was no possibility of change. And mainly because of this, those children seemed to accept everything as their fate (Bama 89).

The ignorance of the dalits has prolonged their suffering in the hands of the upper castes. In order to usher in social justice and help the dalits attain their social rights and entitlements, they must be taught to confront the upper castes. To reclaim their rights, they need to fight for their dignity and social justice. The Church authorities, while telling the dalit Christians about God, mention that God is “loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient” (Bama 90). Being

taught to be docile and patient, the dalit Christians are rendered acquiescent to their subjugation. Bama refers to her paatti who justifies the maltreatment meted out to her by her upper caste employers saying that they have been superior to the lower castes for generations and this hierarchy cannot be altered. Had the Church taught her to confront the upper castes and fight for her social rights, the mind of her patti could have been decolonized. However, Bama came across yet another facet of God after reading the Bible. She became aware that "God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality" (Bama 90). This image of God would have made a significant influence on the minds of the dalit Christians. It would have rendered them articulate about their rights by shirking off their docility. Bama asserts that the approach employed by the Church authorities is not proper in bringing about true reform among the dalit Christians. Lancy Lobo, in her article, comments that as the Church has emphasized on docility and obedience among the dalit Christians, they lack "the sting of militancy and (the urge for) fighting for their rights within them" which is "visible among Dalits of other religions, specially Islam and Buddhism" (Lobo 255).

In *Karukku*, Bama discloses the casteist face of the Catholic Church in India. She also claims that the dalit Christians have realized that the priests and the nuns are treating

them unjustly and presenting the image of God in an inappropriate way. She confirms:

But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this, has not spoken like this. They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated; and to begin to live again with honour, self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. (Bama 94)

As Bama's autobiography upholds, the paraya community, despite getting converted to Christianity, have not escaped caste discrimination entirely. The major reason behind this is that the priests and nuns who are inflicting injustice on the paraya Christians had been upper caste Hindus before getting proselytized. The caste bias is so inveterate that even conversion to an egalitarian faith has failed to uproot it from their minds. Even after getting proselytized, they cannot liberate themselves from the casteist mentality. They view the lower caste converts as inferiors and insignificant people. The casteist ideology overpowers the teaching of Christ that every human being is equal.

Bama's *Karukku* establishes that in order to annihilate casteism from Indian society, the casteist mindset of the Brahmanic society should be eliminated. To eradicate the practice of casteism, measures like proselytisation, in the Indian context, are quite superficial as they fail to address

the main issue, i.e. the casteist ideology. Bama depicts that the dalit Christians, due to their proselytized status, suffer tremendous loss in the fields of education and Government employment. However, had the priests and nuns actually followed the Christian doctrine of egalitarianism, the lower caste converts could have experienced a much better life.

Notes

This paper is a revised version of a paper presented by me at the Young Researchers' National Conference on "Cultural Representations: Race, Class Gender and Caste" on 5th September, 2013, organized by the Department of English, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal.

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