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Caste and society in light of bama's 'karukku'

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Abstract

The caste or the *varna* system was established during the Early Vedic period on the basis of the work done by the people. Later, during the Later Vedic period, corruption and the hunger to take control over the weak by the upper-caste led to a caste system on the basis of birth of an individual. History has been a witness to subjugation and marginalisation of the lower caste. This paper is an attempt to highlight the experiences of the lower-caste in India in light of the events of the autobiographical novel *Karukku* by Bama. This paper also delves into the fact that education is not the only tool to overcome these problems as they existed among the educated masses too. This paper explores one of the biggest tools to understand the concept of self-worth and that everyone is born equal. It also identifies the reasons behind this continued oppression for centuries.

1. Introduction

*“chātur-varnyam mayā sṛiṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśah
tasya kartāram api mām viddhyakartāram avyayam”*

According to Dr. B.R Ambedkar, Dalithood is a kind of condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology. Dalit literature is a result of several centuries of exploitation of the people of lower-caste by the 'lords' of the upper-caste. The anger that had been suppressed for ages began to erupt through the tales of characters in Dalit or subaltern literature. "Dalits are nameless and faceless people in dominant Indian culture" (K. Satyanarayana 64). They have remained invisible for centuries in the society until people from their own community began to write about the atrocities experienced by them in their day-to-day lives. Many have penned down the details of injustice faced by the Dalits but none have expressed it better than the people of their own community as they have been the victims themselves. Their condition is absolutely heart-wrenching which can be seen in the literary projects of many authors. *Karukku* by Bama is an autobiographical account of the author's experience with casteism and social bias at a very young age. The novel portrays the sad reality of the lives of the people of the lower-caste in her village. The author is able to do absolute justice to her work as she has had first-hand experience of the marginalisation faced by the people of her own community. Dr. B.R Ambedkar has rightly said, "The path of social reform like the path to heaven at any rate in India, is strewn with many difficulties" [38]. Bama also faced many difficulties from a very young age. She had to break the shackles and barriers of casteism in her village to be liberated.

2. Injustice and bias in the Society

Bama's village was a breeding ground for caste bias. The caste of a person could be determined on the basis of their street of residence. The Naickers in the village owned all the lands while the others in the village such as the Nadars, Koravars, Chakkitiyars, Kusavars, Pallars and Parayars were people of lower-caste. Each community lived on a particular street and weren't allowed to dwell elsewhere. The upper-caste ensured that they stuck to their side of the village for the fear of being polluted by the impure lower caste. The lower-caste were exposed to filthy living conditions. They cleaned the drains and lavatories with bare hands while the upper-caste had all the amenities in their side of the village. Bama came to realise at a very young age that, "If you are born into a lower caste, every moment of your life is a struggle" [27]. Bama highlights the humiliations faced by the lower-caste people, including the elderly. She narrates one incident that she had experienced as a child which changed her perspective. On her way back from school, one day, she had seen an elderly man carrying a packet of *vadai* holding it by the string by not touching the packet as such. The Parayar elderly man carried it to a Naickerman and upon handing it over, he bowed low and maintained a safe distance to refrain from touching him. This sight was quite amusing to Bama and she narrated it to her brother upon reaching home. He explained the entire matter to her and said, "...if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities" [18]. She went on to become a teacher later. The condition of the village school was beyond the scope of words. The children who came from lower-caste families were made to do all the chores. In fact, the teachers looked at them with contempt. Bama writes, "because Dalits have been enslaved for generation upon generation and been told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable" [28]. The Dalit servants were heinously treated by the upper-caste families. When they finish cleaning the rooms and the utensils, a member from the family would sprinkle some 'holy' water in order to sanitize and unpollute them. Bama also criticized her grandmother for her excessive service and gratitude towards the Naicker household she worked for. She believed that the rice and curry which was a leftover of the Naicker household was the "nectar of the gods"- remarked Bama sarcastically. The Naicker lady poured the leftover in her grandmother's vessel ensuring a safe

distance from where she didn't touch her for the fear of being polluted. Her mother reasoned her, "say you are from a different caste. They'll never know" [20] but caste, to her, was her identity. Before being a Christian, she was a Parayar- a Dalit. She has always been aggressively progressive about the ill-treatment of the Dalits. There was one such incident in school where she wasn't allowed to attend a family function on a weekend which was quite important to her. She has lost her temper and demanded answers from the principal and the warden. When in college, the Harijan students were asked to stand up to be enrolled for special tuition as a government scheme. It was then she realised that discrimination existed everywhere and education was not enough to fight back. She had come to understand that the people had to change their faith and belief system and only then there would be true liberation. She also learnt that they had to be fearless and speak up about the marginalization of their community. Bama resorted to writing to reach the educated mass who had the power to differentiate between the normal and the abnormality subjugated to the subaltern community. *Karukku* was a canvas where Bama painted the atrocities faced by the Dalits making way for them to fight back and emerge as victorious. She often kept silent to cross the rough seas of humiliation and discrimination. She writes, "I swallowed the very words that came into my mouth; never said anything out aloud but battled within myself." She continues, "being a coward, I survived somehow" [26]. She believed in a silent rebellion, gathering people in the community to be a part of this social uprising, together and unified, fighting for their rights against the social stigma of caste bias and discrimination. This was only possible if they could reach their target audience- the upper-caste. As Dr. B.R Ambedkar said in the Prologue to *Annihilation of Caste*, "but what can anyone expect from a relationship so tragic as the relationship between the reforming sect of Caste Hindus and the self-respecting sect of Untouchables where the former have no desire to alienate their orthodox fellows and the latter have no alternative but to insist upon reform being carried out" [35]. Bama narrates a few instances from her own experiences to elucidate the humiliation that one had to face if they were from a lower caste. Once her brother was on his way to the library where he had encountered one Naicker man. The man unknowingly was very courteous to him and asked his name with a lot of respect. Upon knowing his name and the street where he lived, he was simply angry for he had spoken to a man of the lower caste who had replied boldly to him. Bama herself had experienced such behaviour many times. Upon travelling in a bus one day, the woman sitting beside her asked where she lived on the pretext of learning of her caste. When she smilingly gave a reply that it was 'Cheri Street' where the Parayars lived, the woman left her seat and sat elsewhere for Bama was untouchable to her.

3. Bias in the house of the Lord

Bama wished to awaken the spirits of the down-trodden and serve the poor. She decided to be a nun and joined the convent for this reason but the lavish lifestyle at the convent baffled her. She soon came to realize that discrimination and marginalisation was not away from the house of the Lord. A Sister told everyone during the last few days of their training to become nuns- "...in certain orders they would not accept Harijan women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere" [25]. As days went by, she came across more startling revelations of the convent and the nuns. The nuns had no compassion for the Dalit children and spoke poorly of them. If they fell asleep in the middle of a *Pusai*, the nuns resorted to giving a blow on their poor and fragile backs. The Dalits were ironically considered as faithless by the nuns, whereas, they were all devout believers and worshippers celebrating every religious ceremony with utmost devotion and good faith even when they had very limited resources. The convent was nothing more than a symbol of hollow and vague promises of the church and upon its realisation, Bama wanted to be set free to take flight with her wings spread. Bama writes, "I have entirely lost faith in all the talk of service to the poor from within the convent" [121]. Bama began to teach children in a school after that. Here, the Dalit students "were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories" [25]. The old and the young both shut their lips to sacrifice pride and self-respect, and gave in to subjugation.

4. Conclusion

Dr. B.R Ambedkar says, "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change" [68]. The people have to be mentally dissociated with caste and learn that there's no pride in it. The essence of the human and humanity must be imbibed within us from infancy. I would be wrong to blame the generation born in the decade after independence that wasn't able to instil this value within us. Caste system is a two-thousand-year-old notion that will gradually eradicate if people believe in this change. Caste system was introduced in our great land as a medium of division of labour but it has now become a division of labourers where the upper-caste dominates the socially and economically weaker. They have prohibited the Harijans from choosing a profession of their own for generations. However, things have become better today. Dr. B.R Ambedkar believed that inter-caste marriages could be a way to destroy the notion of preserving the 'purity of race and purity of blood' as this would promote a mix of genes from different social backgrounds enabling the child born to be raised without these delirious ideas. Bama also believed in the liberation of the marginalized, oppressed and weak. Upon close examination of the novel *Karukku*, we see that she has been able to show us how difficult it was for her to be a victim of '*double marginalization*' in a society that is both patriarchal and a slave of the social hierarchy. Yet, she is highly optimistic about the future prospects and is certain that "it is possible to lead a meaningful life, a life that is useful to others" [104].

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