

CASTE CONSCIOUS RELIGION AND DISCRIMINATED FAITH: A DISCOURSE OF PREJUDICED DOCTRINE CONCERNING BAMA'S KARUKKU

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Abstract:

Religion and faith are often used as homogenous terms to represent a person's spiritual beliefs. However, these two terms are dissimilar in meaning and in essence. Religion is the mainstream societal diction that labels a person's belief while faith is the unalloyed belief a person holds towards God. Unfortunately, sometimes religion becomes the manipulator in reigning a human being's faith. This paper will explore such bigotries in the name of religion that was hurled upon the subordinated Dalit community to keep the caste bifurcation alive as shown in Bama's unputdownable Dalit autobiography *Karukku*. In this paper theories of Subaltern Studies and the Marxist theory of Louis Althusser on "State Apparatuses" and more importantly Foucauldian concept of "biopower" will be used to show how religion became a weapon of the privileged class to promote caste discrimination and to keep alive the marginalisation of Dalit community.

Key words: Bama, Dalit, Caste, Discrimination, Faith, Religion

During the nineteenth century when the Oxford Movement was raging over England for the establishment of the doctrinal authority of the Church of England, Charles Kingsley, a very eminent Victorian figure, raised the most pertinent question to the contemporary,

"What is the use of preaching about heaven to hungry paupers?"

Kingsley's rhetorical question remains relevant even today as religion, often in the name of salvation, has been used as a weapon of domination by the upper caste in most cases. In the name of God and His doctrines, almost all religious sects have insinuated the social bifurcation of upper caste and lower caste where the impoverished lower caste always fended scrupulously for the luxury of the upper class. If at all anyone questioned this social dictum, the religious propagandists furtively camouflaged it as the 'Will of God', written in the scriptures. The Indian lower castes, especially the Dalit community, are the greatest examples of such manifold discrimination where even through religion they are made aware of their caste and hence caste-based lower societal position. The emergence of the word 'Dalit' itself took place in accordance with the Hindu belief of the four-fold 'varna' system from where Dalits were excluded and were considered as the occupants of the fifth *varna*, known by the name of '*Panchama*'. A mass conversion took place amongst these Dalits from Hindu to other religions like Islam and especially Christianity by which they thought they can evade the stringency of Hinduism. However, these downtrodden people encountered the same casteist treatment in other religions also. In Christianity, these newly converted Dalit people were termed "New Christians" often alluding offensively about their lower caste and hence classifying them as the "other", to be looked down upon by the higher caste Christians. The famous Tamil Dalit feminist Bama enunciates meticulously about this caste-based discrimination towards Dalits in her autobiographical novel, *Karukku* (1992). In this novel, Bama talks about her own experience in the nunnery and talks about the plights they had to face because of their caste in the name of religion. Besides the gender-based bigotry, Bama shows how the women of her caste were subjected to various other forms of prejudice because of the horrific label of 'Dalit' that the upper castes have imposed on them. In this respect, Kimberle Crenshaw's famous concept of "intersectionality" holds a precise relevance. She coined the term in her famous work '*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Colour*' to show how the combined framework of identity, colour, and social status resulted in discriminatory intolerance towards black women, thereby confining them to the lowest strata of the society. However, this same theory applies to Dalit

women also. Bama shows through her autobiography *Karukku* how she grew up in prejudice and caste discrimination where surprisingly the Church and its nunnery practiced and mobilised caste differentiation the most. In her partial autobiography, *Sangati*, she carries forward this and reveals intricately through the life stories of her fellow Dalit women what it is meant to live life as a Dalit woman. This paper, however, deals with the ground-breaking autobiography by Bama and focuses on how religion became the perpetrator of caste consciousness instead of becoming the agency of peace and equality. The Foucauldian concept of “biopower” and the Marxist concept of ideological “interpellation” are very important in this regard to understand the politics of the society in keeping the caste consciousness intact amongst its people. Both of the above concepts show how the economically and socially dominant class manipulates and perpetuate the major social institutions to remain in the dominant position and to maintain the class bifurcation. Famous Marxist critic Louis Althusser’s concept of “Ideological State Apparatus” show how society uses educational, religious, legal, and political sectors to influence the distinction between the dominant and the subordinate and how these institutions help in maintaining this distinction through “interpellation”. While going through Bama’s novels, this particular concept gets highlighted to the utmost as Bama effectively throws light on the fact that religion has become one of the most significant catalysts of contemporary times to keep alive the caste system and caste-based discrimination of the Dalits.

Karukku is considered the autobiography of Bama where the author has enunciated her growing years, her experiences in her workplace, and most importantly her discriminated life as a Dalit woman. Bama herself mentions that *Karukku* was written because it served “as a means of healing my inward wounds.” However, surprisingly, the wounds have been inflicted on the innocent soul at the most by the thing which should heal it at the best—namely, religion. A considerable portion of Bama’s life and career had been spent dreaming to work in a convent to help poor people, especially people belonging to her caste and class. Like any ordinary person, true to her faith, she also believed wholeheartedly that Church is the place where the problem of caste-based diversification ends and all are treated equally. However, she meets with an epiphany once she entered to work in the convent. In one situation, the author states out of pain,

“I don’t know what kind of magic it is that they work upon us in the convent, but during these seven or eight years, my brain has become confused and dulled. In some ways, they actually change you into a different person.” (Bama 120)

What Louis Althusser had defined as “interpellation” in his famous book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Bama’s above statement proves that. Interpellation is the process of internalisation of certain social dictums that helps in maintaining the social inequality between the Superior and the Inferior. Althusser defined it as,

“[T]he individual is interpellated as a subject in order that he can submit freely to the commandments of the Subject i.e in order that he shall accept his subjection i.e in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjections ‘all by himself.’” (Althusser 123)

In the above statement, “subject” is the subjugated whereas “Subject” is the superior class. This above-mentioned process of psychological manipulation begins from the very childhood when the Dalit children are taught their boundaries by the “State Apparatuses” chiefly the educational institutions and the Church. The author painstakingly explains that no sooner did she enter the school than her teachers started enquiring about her surname to get enlightened about her class and caste. Once it is revealed, the entire class along with her teachers would target and ignore her. So much so that one of her friends ran away from school as the discrimination was unbearable for that poor, downtrodden Dalit girl. Still, she has acknowledged in her autobiography that she had the little privilege to go to school. As for the other children of her age, they faced dire poverty which prevented them from visiting any such educational institutions. A Dalit girl-child is insinuated that she has to stay back at home to do all the household chores like taking care of the babies, gathering firewood, cooking, and cleaning. As for the boys, even though they were sent to schools, after a point

of time they drop out to help earn their daily food. Most Dalit children spend their childhood “playing in the mud and mire, indistinguishable from puppies and piglets.” Even though the Dalits work hard day and night, still they are the class who are the most impoverished. Despite their hard works, they struggle for a fully nourished meal once a day. The author indicates how the upper-class people have cleverly kept them from making any economic and social progress by abuse, marginalisation, and domination. Yet it is not the upper class alone, responsible for such discriminated conditions of the Dalits. Most of the Dalit people believe that they are destined to live in such an abominable manner owing to their caste by birth. This is where the logic of “interpellation” comes in. The continuous generation-old prejudice towards these people made them psychologically assimilate the fact that they are meant to live a life like that. This belief has been catalysed by various social institutions and dictums. Even the Church, which is supposed to maintain equality, exercises such caste-based discrimination that made these downtrodden people welcome the injustice towards them. Bama’s anger is evident when she understands the psychological manipulation of the upper class. At the same time, painfully she reveals the helpless dependency of the Dalits as she says;

“And there are many who patiently accept and endure their hard lives, consoling themselves that this was the destiny given them...We dance to someone else’s tune, even for a serving of rice. And, of course, knowing this fully well the wealthy control and crush Dalits.” (Bama 80)

The religious atrocities are intricately exposed by Bama in her autobiography. Through her childhood experiences and her first-hand experience in the nunnery, Bama reveals the hypocrisy of the advocates of faith namely the priests and the nuns. While going through her autobiography, it is understood that for Dalits, religion and religious institutions do not work as “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA) but rather as “Repressive State Apparatus” (RSA) in their physical domination. Ideological State Apparatus consists of those institutions that target and manipulate the ideology thereby maintaining class distinction. Educational institutions, religious institutions, and legal institutions fall under this category. In the case of the Repressive State Apparatus, the behaviour is enforced physically. Usually, police and military forces fall under this group. The police or the military has the legal right to enforce and physically discipline the “subjects” to imbibe a particular ideology that would maintain the class hierarchy in society. Quite contrary to what Althusser described as “Ideological State Apparatus” where without any physical domination, the psychology is manipulated, in Bama’s *Karukku* religion, which is a known ISA for Althusser, plays the role of both ISA as well as RSA. For children, it takes up the role of physical enforcement while for adults it hits the ideology. The author states that during her childhood they had to go for the early morning mass or the “pusai” as they call it. If they did not go, the next morning they would face severe physical admonishment so much so it is out of this fear of physical admonishment that they went to the morning mass. The hearts of the readers get filled with agony when Bama writes,

“If you didn’t go, the next day at assembly you were beaten by the priest or by a teacher. Nor were these ordinary blows. The cane fell on us with the sharpness of a whip. It left great weals. Enough to be reminded of those blows. Then we’d spring out of our beds at last.” (82)

In another part, she reveals how during her childhood she was forced to take part in prayers even though she felt unbearable hunger after returning from school. It was a rule in her family that no matter how hungry she was, she had to complete her prayer before eating. Bama narrates another of her childhood event where just for a mere mistake in her enunciation of a hymn she was given a terrible “knock” on her forehead by one of the Church Sisters. When Bama narrates such ramifications of religion in her childhood, her innocence and her transparency exacerbate the vilification that the Dalits faced from the point of view of religion. Crudely, religion took up the role of RSA just to keep alive the societal division of upper caste and lower caste. Bama’s innocent confession of her childish methods of resistance towards such stringent religious rules highlights the Foucauldian concept of “biopower” and “biopolitics”. When the religious atrocities towards Dalits

are starkly understood, it is also implied that religion has become the significant medium of “biopolitics” in sustaining the power and privilege of the superior class. Religion in *Karukku* is an agenda of “biopower” also through its forceful disciplining to produce “docile bodies”. In the description of physical disciplinary acts like control of hunger in the name of God, compulsorily attending morning mass even with sickness, and most importantly restrictions in the name of God including limitation of freedom of speech, touch, and faith, Bama enunciates what Foucault theorised as the creation of “docility” or “docile bodies”. The creation of such docility, in turn, gives rise to “biopower” that helps in keeping the power relation in a society, mobile and unchanged. Foucault has defined as,

“...battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage.”
(*History of Sexuality* 130)

For the upper class, the Dalits are the agency of hard physical work at the cost of which the former lead a luxurious and effortless life. Once the Dalits start protesting against such modes of physical labour, the upper class will be at a terrible problem. At the same time, their narrow orthodox mentality refuses to accept Dalits as one of them. They have themselves created the class and caste bifurcation, position themselves in the topmost position in the hierarchy of power and consider themselves as the superior “Subject” while shunning the Dalits as inferior “subject”. Yet they need the Dalits’ somatic labour for their luxurious life. For their smooth life, this power position is very important because of which they insinuate the dynamics of power through caste with the help of agencies like educational institutions and religion. “Biopower” is the manifestation of power in the most trivial mundane activities through which a person ignorantly exercises self-control and self-scrutiny. For instance, in *Karukku* when the narrator went to work in the convent, the main things that were taught to her were to have “obedience” and “faith”. Any kind of iniquity that she questioned, she was silenced in the name of obedience and was asked to perceive everything through the eyes of faith. Most of the Dalits who were shunned within the precincts of the Church in the name of caste and class, not only accepted their subjugated positions but normalised them through the exercise of “obedience” and “faith”. The narrator, despite understanding everything was forced to accept because of the interplay of “biopolitics” and “biopower” that made caste distinction even amongst her people a normative process. The Church for the Dalits exercised the power of proselytization in both religious and social ways. In the early twentieth century Southern India, especially amongst the Dalits, the Church became the megalomaniac entity that stimulated their discrimination and aided the power dynamic of the privileged class.

Another example of the religion being caste conscious is the way by which the sole representatives of Christianity have been shown to be the significant encourager of caste division and discrimination. While the Bible nurtured the thought of equality, the priests and the nuns, as shown in *Karukku*, catalysed inequality based on caste and class. Their dwellings were always in the locality of the upper class and even when they walked down the road, they maintained a considerable distance from any Dalit walking the same path. Their teachings and preaching not only juxtaposed their action but also the actual dictums of the Bible. Yet, being the most important position holders in society and the so-called agents of God, their actions were considered to be justified. The more tormenting fact is that these priests and nuns consider themselves as the spokespersons of God, thereby exploiting the innocence and faith of the Dalits. Whenever any Dalit enters the church, the entire faith and belief are directed not towards Bible or Christ but chiefly towards what the priests and nuns have to say and how they want these downtrodden people to act in society as Dalits. As a result, rather than the efforts of the upper class, the power dynamics were maintained more by the efforts of the priests and the nuns. In this context, a very famous quote from the play *The Merchant of Venice* by the renowned author William Shakespeare seems to be the most relevant,

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.

An evil soul producing holy witness,
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek;" (Shakespeare 50)

This speech belonged to Antonio, the protagonist of the play, talking about Shylock, the villain, and his feigning spiritual decorum. Just as Antonio has described Shylock as a hypocrite who justified his evil doings by citing Scripture, in the same way, the priests during Bama's time justified their discriminatory actions by veiling them as God's intentions. What is surprising is the fact even after four hundred years, religion has continued to be the subtle but despotic force in changing the ways of humanity. For the wealthy upper caste people, religion was mainly the epitome of comfort whereas for the Dalits it was nowhere related to solace but rather just the opposite. It was almost a military force that pressurised them, sometimes physically, to conform to the humiliating societal diction of caste. Religion and caste discrimination went hand in hand in taking care that the Dalits remain in the community below the poverty line and that they continue to fend for the upper castes without any protest or second thought. If any Dalit doubted this inequality, religion made sure to blackmail the most vulnerable spot of psychology namely their faith in God. Religious perpetrators namely the nuns and priests, consciously manipulated the Dalit community's faith to serve their own abominable and greedy needs, thus maintaining the social imbalance of caste and economy. Thus, Bama angrily but rightfully exposes the malpractices of the Church in her autobiography by saying,

"What kind of piety can this be? They [the nuns and priests] make themselves into gods so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone, I wonder? The so-called god walking about here are priests and nuns and their relations, no other." (108)

The readers are immediately reminded of Foucault's concept of power and knowledge by the above lines. Michel Foucault specifically mentioned that knowledge and power are not separate entities but rather they are completely interdependent. Knowledge acts only in the arena where there is a power relationship and feeds the power relationship, helping it to sustain itself. If the dynamics of the Church are observed, as has been described by Bama, it becomes very clear that the knowledge of the Bible that the priests and nuns have been utilised to sustain the power relationship of religion and resist any kind of dissent. Foucault's statement,

"There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitutes at the same time power relations." (Foucault 27)

It is their position, their occupation as well as their association with the Bible and the apparent biblical knowledge that allowed the priests and nuns to establish themselves at the uppermost level in the hierarchy of power relations thereby proving the Foucauldian concept of "power/knowledge".

Amidst all these discussions, it has to be remembered that for Dalit women, the journey was even tougher as they were subjected to oppression because of the fact of their "womanhood" thereby leading to the collective "exclusions around race, class, caste and ethnicity" (Rege). Sharmila Rege accurately states, "[t]here was thus a masculinization of dalithood and a *savarnisation* of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood." When the nuns took the vows of "poverty, chastity, and obedience" it not only showed gender biases as the priests did not have to take such strong vows always but also gave them the weapon to dominate the Dalit women. If a Dalit woman who has not taken up the Christian religion, wanted to end her marriage, she could easily do it. But once vowed to Christianity, no matter how painful the marital relationship is, they can never break and come out of it. Christianity taught Dalit women docility so that they never even think of crossing the boundaries of gender segregation and stand independent. The blessing of the priest, again a man, is considered to be the ultimate and is justified as, "the promise we make to the priest is as good as the promise we make to God" (Bama, *Sangati*). In Christianity, God is like the patriarch, the man, and the priests are the Gods whose verdicts are considered to be the ultimate. Naturally, the law is more stringent towards women because of patriarchal ideology. Thus, in the hierarchy of religion, women came after men in power relations and Dalit women came in last even though their physical labour was more important than their male counterparts. Religion, thus, not only bifurcated

society into castes but also perpetuated gender discrimination and ensured that Dalit women should be at the lowest level of society and that they should be submissive and timid. The author of *Karukku* has thus criticised religion vehemently to stress the exposure of the “localisation of Christianity and its misplaced claims of egalitarianism” (Kothari 60). Bama’s choice of the title of her autobiography is also significant and relevant. ‘Karukku’ is a type of leaf with sharp edges on both sides. This leaf is a metaphor for a Dalit woman’s existence in society as she is discriminated against and wounded in every possible way in society. Her existence is furthermore chained by the discomfort of the “traditional hierarchy of Hinduism as well as the understated hierarchy in Christianity” (Kothari 63).

Christianity is not the only religion that shackles a Dalit human being’s existence and plays with the caste-based entity. Hinduism is also equally discriminatory as can be observed from the deplorable personal experiences of famous Dalit authors like Sharan Kumar Limbale, Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Arvind Adiga, and so on. In Arvind Adiga’s famous novel *Between the Assassinations*, one of the characters named Shankara, a schoolboy from the lower caste Hoyka, is the main person behind the explosion in his school laboratory. When he was imagining the replies that he is wont to give to the police when they catch him, he thinks to himself, “I have burst a bomb to end the 5,000-year-old caste system that still operates in our country. I have burst a bomb to show that no man should be judged, as I have been, merely by the accident of birth.” (Adiga 50)

The resentment and anger could be felt in the voice of the character and what is more surprising is the fact that he is just a schoolboy and yet he has become so conscious about caste discrimination at such an early age. Religion has, with age, become the main propagandist in invigorating the caste distinction. Taking the name of God, and manipulating the faith of people, especially of the lower caste, it has made the latter believe that caste is an entity that a person is guilty of by birth and that the birth is the result of the sins in the previous birth. Taking advantage of the Dalit people’s illiteracy and poverty, the religious propagators have made them believe that it is these people’s sin of the previous birth because of which they have been born into the lower caste. As a result, their only way to cleanse their sins is through the way of penitence which religion will help them to go through. No matter which religion these poor Dalits chose, be it Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam, the main propaganda would always remain to keep the caste system alive. Penitence would be dictated by these hypocritical promoters in the name of priests, nuns, or ‘purohits’ which are not ways of salvation but rather the ways to maintain the power and economic luxury of the upper caste people which included these crusaders also. Bama’s *Karukku* is one of the many autobiographies that holds the mirror to the obnoxiously discriminatory practices that are veiled under the name of God and His wishes. Her intricate detailing, being herself in the nunnery and experiencing all sorts of prejudices, puts the readers in awe and makes them question the authenticity of religion and its promise of solace. Her distress and anger can be felt when seeing all these bigotries, she questions the very existence of God and even devises the notion that there are two kinds of Gods—one for the upper class and the other one for the lower class. However, at the end of her autobiography, she altogether rejects the notion of religion in the name of Christianity and safeguards her way of unalloyed faith in God. In whatever way she understands God, she retains that, forgetting the interference of religion and religious preachers. Her autobiography ends with her hope that her God will make life smooth for all the Dalits who are struggling for the acknowledgment of their existence. Thus, she shuns the caste-based religion and embraces the deep faith within her, thereby proving that in the discord between religion and faith, one should always prioritise one’s faith and one’s understanding of God as religion is simply the doctrine and the weapon that privileged people use to retain their dominant position in the society.

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