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Abstract

Bama's work in Tamil has for the first time brought to focus the lived experience of the Dalit Christian community that has been pushed to the margins of Indian society. Dalit Christians are doubly victimized, first because of their religion and second because of their caste, and Bama's work captures and articulates this. However, the Dalit Christian specificity of the author tends to be underplayed and her work is read unproblematically as Dalit literature. There is also a tendency among critics to introduce a split in Dalit Christian subjectivity, rendering the Dalit and Christian elements of identity as separate spheres. This paper seeks to problematize such hegemonic readings and situate Bama's work in the historical, theological, and social contexts of Dalit Christianity.

Keywords

Bama, Dalit Christian, Dalit theology, postcolonialism, church history

Introduction

Dalit¹ literature has largely come to be institutionalized through Dalit studies. The increasing visibility of B. R. Ambedkar's work since his centenary celebrations in 1994 has focused attention on Dalit literature; the translation industry has also brought visibility to some Dalit writers in *bhashas* (Indian languages). Today Dalit studies form a "respectable" part of the academe and there is a burgeoning number of programmes and scholars doing Dalit studies. However, the institutionalization of Dalit studies in a predominantly Brahmanized academe raises questions. The proliferation of Dalit studies must be seen in the context of the marginalization of the humanities in general and literary studies in particular (Fish, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010), as well as the political and

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cultural assertion of Dalits. Although Dalit literature has gained visibility in recent years, it continues to be suppressed, appropriated, and contained by hegemonic discourses.

Any discussion of Dalit literature necessarily involves interrogation of caste.² While caste is unique to Indian society, it also has a global dimension because the Indian diaspora maintains caste in its various peregrinations and ghettoizes itself on caste lines with tacit support of the multicultural policies of Western societies. In this globalized world, caste is exported out of India and there are reports by members of the Dalit diaspora about caste discrimination outside India (Dalit Solidarity Network UK Report, 2006). Caste therefore has to be seen as the dominant aspect not only of Indian society but diasporic identity as well.

However, postcolonial theory which seeks to “intervene in [...] ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic normality to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples” (Bhabha, 2004: 246), has almost entirely failed to interrogate caste. Postcolonial theorists of Indian origin and influential critics in Indian and Western academia are invariably from *dwija*, or twice-born (especially Brahman) castes, which benefited from colonialism. Their representations of India are filtered through caste. Western scholars, who rely on the Brahmanical representations, fail to comprehend the evil of the caste system. For instance, Robert Young’s encyclopedic work on postcolonialism scarcely carries any reference to the important work of Ambedkar on nationalism, modernity, and caste, while Gandhi and Tagore are invoked at length (Young, 2001). Even the Subaltern Studies project with its claims to alternative historiography has not evinced any serious engagement with caste (Anand, 2003: 59; Ilaiah, 1996: 165). Aijaz Ahmad’s important critique of the privileged sites of postcolonial theory also ignores caste in favour of scrutinizing the class constitution of postcolonial intellectuals (Ahmad, 1992: 12). Cumulatively, there appears to be an evasion of caste as a postcolonial problematic among India’s academic diasporic and postcolonial thinkers in Western academia.

One cannot but complain that Dalit literature in translation is already in danger of being contained and appropriated by Brahmanical exegesis. There are many more non-Dalit interpreters of Dalit literature in international departments of “English” studies, partly owing to academic compulsions, lucrative careers, and easy access to funding and publishing. This is a very disturbing trend, because it tends to colonize Dalit literature, subjecting it to an upper-caste gaze that seeks to define, classify, explain, and master it. Dalits who have been victims of oppressive Brahmanical structures are now subjects of Brahmanical regimes of representation. Since caste is *the* determining criterion in India, non-Dalit readings of Dalit literature are fraught with problems. As Alok Mukherjee aptly points out:

representations of Dalits by upper caste Hindu writers, rather than those created by Dalit writers themselves, [...] have been the basis for any discussion of issues of caste and casteism in literary history and theory. Thus even a radical critic such as Gayatri Spivak, for example, has based her entire exploration of the life experiences of Adivasis or aboriginal communities on the writings of the upper caste Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi [...]. She makes no use of any writing by Dalits or Adivasis themselves in her theorizing on subalternity. (2007: 9)

Ironically Mukherjee is a part of the problem that he diagnoses as he too belongs to the “upper caste”. Despite the sense of solidarity that informs the work of non-Dalit scholars

like Mukherjee, their representations are nevertheless paternalistic and tend to preempt Dalit responses. Mukherjee's important insight reminds us of Marx's statement about the French peasantry: "[t]hey cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (1907: 124).

The Dalit Christian context

The nomenclature "Dalit Christian" is of recent provenance; however, the identity of Dalits as Christians is as old as Christianity in India. Many Dalit communities in various parts of India converted to Christianity over the centuries because of the humanizing work of some missionaries. That said, most of the early missionaries sought to convert the upper castes (especially the Brahmins), because they had been misled by a theory that the conversion of India's "enlightened" caste would have a trickledown effect. Like many Western scholars, the missionaries imagined India essentially as a Sanskrit entity. This privileging of the Brahman is seen even in contemporary missiological historiography. For example, Robert Frykenberg writes:

In vast areas of northern and western India where Christian people, mostly converts from the lowest and most polluting communities, were thinly spread, these were individual converts of high visibility emerging out of a rich cultural legacy who became noteworthy. Notable "Trophies of Grace" [...] were mostly Brahman Christians and mostly Bengali or Maratha. (2008: 411)

In contrast to isolated upper-caste conversions to Christianity, most Dalit conversions occurred en masse as acts of resistance against dehumanizing Brahmanical social, economic, and spiritual oppression. There were also significant individual Dalit conversions like those of, Vedamanickam (Tamil), and V. Peraiah, and T. Rangaiah (Telugu). However, Dalit conversions whether "mass" or individual have been relegated to the margins in mainstream Church historiography.

Conversion of Dalits took place in diverse contexts, because Christianity appeared to offer liberation from social and spiritual marginalization. The egalitarianism of the Gospel preached and practised by the missionaries appealed to the Dalits as it promised liberation from structures of oppression and inequality. Baburao Bagul, the noted Marathi Dalit writer, observes that the sacred literature of the Hindus in contrast to Christianity has no room for Dalits, the oppressed:

In spite of the division between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have-nots, there is a place for the most unfortunate and the most miserable sections of the masses in Christianity and its literature. As against this, the Shudras and the Athishudras — the lowest of the castes and those who were kept totally outside the caste framework — failed to find place in the religious and secular literature of the Hindus. (Bagul, 1992: 276)

Bagul's observations on the marginalization of Dalits in Sanskrit literature are echoed by many Dalit writers and thinkers who see Christianity as essentially an egalitarian religion that acknowledges the humanity of Dalits (Ambedkar, 1936: 142; Phule, 1991).

Further, as Yagati Chinna Rao (2003) argued in his study of Dalit movements in Andhra Pradesh, the philanthropic and humanitarian work of the missionaries contributed to the

spread of Christianity among the Dalits. K. C. Suri, elaborating on the contexts of Dalit conversions, argues that missionaries were kind and helpful to the Dalits, so increasing numbers of them converted as Christianity gave them “a sense of self-respect and equality, deprived for ages by Brahmanical social order, opened avenues to secure education and employment and gave strength as members of a religious community of rulers” (2009: 176).

Dalit thinkers such as Jyothirao Phule and Ambedkar saw conversions as acts of defying Brahmanical hegemony to gain an emancipatory identity, whereas upper-caste nationalists viewed such acts with suspicion and disdain. In his analysis of Dalit conversions to Christianity in Tamil Nadu, Sathianathan Clarke makes an important observation:

Religious conversion was not merely the result of inducement and the allurements of hapless and unthinking human beings. The whole emphasis placed on such popular discourse on conversions falls into the Orientalist’s pitfall, which accentuates the agency of western agents, whether colonial or missionary, and devalues the instrumentality of the native subjects themselves in such historical events. (2003: 336)

Many postcolonial studies, as Clarke points out, see missionary intervention as an extension of colonialism and thereby fail to comprehend the agency of Dalits in the acts of conversion (Copeley, 1997).

Since Gandhi’s time, the discourse of conversion has been cast in terms of coercion, inducement, and material gain, completely ignoring the Dalit perspective. The *Hindutva* Right, drawing inspiration from none other than Gandhi, views conversions as acts of fraudulence and bribery, denying Dalits any discernment and choice in spirituality. For instance, the Niyogi Commission, set up in 1954 to investigate the role of foreign missionaries in conversions in Madhya Pradesh, subjectified (in the Foucauldian sense) Dalits as being incapable of “free will” and “spiritual discernment” (Viswanathan, 1998: xiv). The discourse of conversion invariably assumes that an upper-caste person converts out of spiritual necessity whereas a Dalit converts because of material allurements. In addition, *Hindutva* propaganda repeatedly raises the spectre of Western conspiracy in conversions. Consequently, conversions are viewed as antinational and disruptive acts, which are banned by law in some Indian states.

Christians of Dalit origin are referred to as “converted Christians” in official discourse, relegating them to the role of a passive subject, devoid of any kind of agency. Although conversion to Christianity to some extent improved Dalits’ material conditions by giving them access to education and employment, it did not make any significant changes to the social status of Dalit communities, as converts continued to be identified by their caste rather than their religion. In some parts of India, Christianity becomes a caste identity: it is seen as a religion of the untouchables. The singular example is that of the nineteenth-century American Baptist missionary J. E. Clough (1914) who worked among the *madigas* (an untouchable caste) in Ongole (Andhra Pradesh, South India). The upper castes shunned him calling him a “madiga missionary” — Christianity here became the *madiga* religion. In nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu too, Christianity was considered a “pariah religion” (*paraya* is an untouchable in the Tamil language).³

Dalit Christians occupy a highly contested space in India's social structure. In statist as well as popular discourses, the term Dalit Christian is viewed as an oxymoron. This view results from a specious logic that since Christianity is an egalitarian religion and does not recognize caste, one ceases to be Dalit after conversion to Christianity: in other words, one cannot be Dalit and Christian at the same time. Responding to the Dalit Christians' campaign for Scheduled Caste status, Justice K. G. Balakrishnan, head of the Supreme Court Bench, asked: "Would the Christians admit that they practise caste system and that Dalits (among them) face social discrimination requiring reservation to uplift their cause?" (*Times of India*, 2007: 7).

Dalit converts to Christianity are denied the positive discrimination provided by the state because their Dalit identity, from the state perspective, ceases to exist after conversion. Although Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of faith, it penalizes Dalits who leave the Hindu fold to embrace another religion, by denying them reservation and state protection under the Prevention of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Atrocities Act of 1989. The Presidential Order of 1950 which lists the Scheduled Castes reads: "notwithstanding anything contained in Para 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Castes" (Thorat, 2009: 161). The Order was amended twice in 1956 and 1990 to include Dalit Sikhs and Dalit Buddhists, but strangely Dalits professing the "non-Indian" religions of Christianity and Islam are excluded. Dalit Christians and Muslims have been agitating for inclusion in the Scheduled Castes list. The state has so far not responded positively, despite the knowledge that atrocities against Dalits are perpetrated irrespective of their faith. Various commission reports have favoured granting Dalit Christians Scheduled Caste status. Several courts, while acknowledging the prevalence of caste in Christianity, have judged that there is insufficient evidence conclusively to establish that Dalit converts continue to face the same degree of disability and discrimination as untouchable Hindus (Deshpande, 2008: 72).

The problems of Dalit Christians go unnoticed in the mainstream academic discourse of religion as well. For instance, two important anthologies on sociology of religion in India edited by T. N. Madan (1992) and T. V. Satyamurthy (1998) carry no discussion on Christianity or Dalit conversions to Christianity. Even in liberal and left discourse in India there is a tendency to downplay the Christian identity of Dalits. The most visible instance of putting Dalit Christian identity under erasure is the academic and journalistic discussion of the violence against Dalit Christians in Karamchedu and Chundur in Andhra Pradesh. The Dalits who were massacred by upper-caste landlords in Andhra Pradesh are never identified as Dalit Christians in the various reports and studies.⁴

The role of Christianity in Dalit spirituality as well as social life has been misrepresented by Brahman sociologists like M. N. Srinivas and G. S. Ghurye and Western sociologists influenced by Brahmanism, such as Louis Dumont. Nationalist narrations of Indianness in exclusively Brahmanical Hindu terms have contributed to the perception of Indian Christianity as an "alien" faith and a colonial imposition that needs to be resisted (Hassan, 2005). Even in contemporary Hindu right-wing discourse "changing religion means changing nationality" (Bauman, 2008: 2); to become a Christian (or for that matter a Muslim) is to be an outsider, a foreigner, and an anti-national. Hindu nationalist historiography as well as Brahmanical postcolonialism created an image of Indian Christianity

as a colonial implant which in turn has fed a myth in popular discourse, that Christianity was imposed by the colonial rulers and that missionary activities received support from colonial administration. Consequently, Christianity and colonialism get conflated, but Robert Frykenberg dispels this myth when he writes:

The Indian Empire was, fundamentally if not formally, a Hindu Raj. British merchants could never have established city-states at Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta without deference to local deities and rajas, as mediated through local agents and brokers (dubashis). [...] Company forces, with sometimes as many as 300,000 sardars and sepoy, came largely from caste families that ruled agrarian villages. Without cadres of Brahman, Kayastha, and other high-caste civil servants controlling vital flows of information and revenue, no Empire would have been possible. Without collaboration, modern Hinduism could not have come into being. (2008: 108)

The Brahmanical upper castes were the true beneficiaries of colonialism, appropriating all institutions of colonial rule: education, administration, law. Jyothi Rao Phule explores the nexus between colonial administration and these sections in very strong terms in his historical text *Gulamgiri* (1873). Contrary to popular perception Christian converts enjoyed no special privileges during colonial rule; in fact, they were discriminated against, as the 1833 representation of the Tinnevely Christians to the government against the company demonstrates. The representation refers to the humiliation, intimidation, and victimization of Dalit converts at the hands of upper-caste Hindus and the indifference of the Company officials to their plight (Frykenberg, 2008: 212).

The many postcolonial studies of colonial India ignore the identity of Dalits who converted to Christianity and instead tend to privilege the castes that benefited from colonial rule. To the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made by postcolonial theorists and historians to look at colonial rule in India from the point of view of Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular. Mainstream Church history which derives from nationalist historiography also marginalizes the Dalit Christian experience (Oommen and Webster, 2002). Even the Subaltern Studies group which claims to “heed the small voice of history” (Guha, 1996: 11) does not “heed” the Dalit Christian voice. It would not be an overstatement to say that a large corpus of postcolonial historiography falls within the framework of Hindu nationalism (Nanda, 2007: 7).

The problematic of Dalit Christians has come to the fore largely because of the agitation for reservations (positive discrimination by the state), the Dalit movements within the Church, and the increasing violence against Dalit and *Adivasi* (tribal) Christians. Dalit Christians today continue to face a peculiar predicament expressed in the representation of the South Indian “Depressed Classes” of Christians to the Simon Commission much earlier, in 1929:

In spite of our Christian religion, which teaches us fundamental truths, the equality of man and man before God, the necessity of charity and love for neighbors and mutual sympathy and forbearance, we, the large number of Depressed Classes converts remain in the same social condition as the Hindu Depressed Classes. Through the operation of several factors, the more important of them being the strong caste retaining Hindu mentality of the converts to Christianity, and the indifference, powerlessness and apathy of the missionaries, we remain today what we were before we became Christians – Untouchables – degraded by the laws of

social position obtaining in the land, rejected by caste Christians, despised by caste Hindus and excluded by our own Hindu depressed class brethren. (Louis, 2007: 37)

Bama and the Dalit Christian Problematic

Bama's work has brought into focus, for the first time, the complex matrix of Dalit Christian identity. However she is invariably referred to as a Dalit author and her specific Christian subjectivity is somehow considered incidental. None of the readings of Bama's work explore the specificity of Dalit Christian identity. For instance, Lakshmi Holmström, the translator of *Karukku* into English, introduces an untenable split in the identity of Bama, the Dalit and the Christian:

The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as a Dalit woman) [...] *Karukku* shares with the reader the author's predicament as Dalit and Christian directly, demystifying the theological argument, and making her choice rather, a matter of conscience. (2000: xi)⁵

Holmström seems to suggest that there cannot be a religious (Christian) Dalit female identity for Bama. The Dalit is neatly excised from the Dalit Christian lived experience, thus making it impossible for the Christian to be a Dalit and vice versa. The Dalit conscience is imagined to be possible only after a break from religious identity. Pramod K. Nayar makes a similar distinction between the Dalit and Christian in his reading of *Karukku* as a *testimonio*: "Bama is the narrative voice through which the sufferings and atrocities of two communities, Dalit and Christian, are addressed to us" (2006: 86). Yet Bama deals with the lived experience and predicament of the Dalit Christian community as a victim of caste oppression both within the Catholic Church and the society. One can discern four major concerns in her work on the Dalit Christian community: discrimination within the Church; oppression from society; discrimination by fellow Dalits; and discrimination by the State.

Bama (Faustina Fatima Mary Rani) hails from a Dalit Roman Catholic community in Tamil Nadu and is not a writer by choice. She became a nun out of a desire to do something for her people, but experienced oppressive caste discrimination in the convent too. After seven years in the convent she walked out, disillusioned with the Church, and happened to meet Father Mark Stephen who hailed from her village, Pudupatti, and had known her since her childhood. Though not a Dalit himself, Father Mark was actively involved in the Dalit Christian Movement that later became the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM). He was sympathetic to Bama's tragic story of suffering and disillusionment and encouraged her to put down her experiences in a written narrative. *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (2005) came out of that supportive encounter.

Bama's debut text, *Karukku* – considered to be the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil – is an unconventional work that defies categories. It has been variously described as a *testimonio*, confession, manifesto, and autobiography. It is important to note here that Dalit literary forms, when subjected to theoretical categories like postcolonialism and subalternity, lose their rootedness in Dalit experience and are transformed into textual objects for consumption. *Karukku* shares many things in common with Dalit autobiographies.

Although autobiography is a term used to refer to the personal narratives of Dalit writers like Omprakash Valmiki and Sharan Kumar Limbale, it does not encompass the range of concerns and strategies of these writers. Though the personal narratives are articulated by a first person narrator, they are not centred around a privileged self like that in autobiography: instead they record the pain, humiliation, and exclusion of the community to which the narrator belongs. These narratives, also called “life narratives”, are not intended to elicit pity but are designed to disturb the sensibilities and create a critical consciousness among the community of the readers. Thus they are invariably linked to the praxis of liberation and cannot be defined in terms of the hegemonic critical categories. In such narratives the personal and the communal are never kept separate and the narrator’s confessions reveal more about the community than the individual. It is not without significance that the narrator in Dalit autobiographies remains anonymous (Pandian, 1998; Racine and Racine, 2004; Rege, 2006).

Karukku can be seen as a life narrative, in which the narrator skilfully weaves the personal with the communal, not adhering to any chronology, while narrating the various events. There is a continual conflation of “I” and “we” throughout the narrative making it more a biography of the community or a “community manifesto” (Kumar, 2010: 229) than an autobiography of the narrator. The trauma experienced and articulated by the narrator is also the trauma of the Dalit Christian community. Apart from articulating the lived experience of Dalit Christians *Karukku* also narrates the spiritual turmoil and the narrator’s emergent Dalit consciousness. Bama employs various narrative strategies to bring Dalit Christian habitus to life. She uses folklore, myth, ethnography, prophetic style, and reminiscence to narrate the marginalized community that has been denied the right to narrate.

“*Karukku*” in Tamil refers to palmyra leaves that are serrated and double-edged and inflict wounds and pain. Though the word “*karukku*” does not appear in the narrative, it nevertheless inhabits it as a presence, symbolizing pain and suffering (victimhood) and also agency because “*karukku*” can be used as a weapon as well. Bama, introducing the context out of which she writes, declares:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt then; all these, taken together. (xiii)

The image of *karukku* in Bama’s usage has resonances of pain and the suffering of the community. The images of blood and chains articulate very powerfully acts of victimization as well as resistance. The individual experience is extended to encompass the community of victims as well as fellow activists when Bama asserts: “There are many Dalit hearts like mine with a passionate desire to create the new society made up of justice, equality and love. They who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *karukku*, challenging their oppressors” (xii). Bama’s use of the *karukku* image is deliberate, as she has in her mind St. Paul’s description of the word of God as a “double edged sword” in his Epistle to Hebrews:

For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow (Hebrews 4: 12)

This “powerful” and “sharp” Word of God, Bama writes in the *Preface*: “no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others” (xii). Dalits, she argues, must function as “God’s Word, piercing the very heart” (xii). In Bama’s usage, the Word of God is conflated with Dalit consciousness, suggesting that the liberating Gospel of Christ, lost in rituals and dogma, needs to be recovered and used to bring down structures of oppression. Through the image of *karukku*, Bama seems to indicate the nature of Dalit poetics as well as its praxis.

Karukku begins with a vivid poetic evocation of the village landscape: “Our village is very beautiful [...] before I come to castes and communities, I have a lot to say about the village itself” (1). The narrator’s use of “our” instead of ‘I’ at the very beginning signals the collective nature of the work. The description of the village spans four pages, ending with Bama’s reflection on nature: “To look at the light in the western sky was like looking upon a revelation of God” (4). The evocation of the beauty and bounty of nature contrasts with the description of the cruel caste-based stratification of the village that follows. The geographical space of the village is itself discursive, elaborating (in Gramsci’s usage) on caste hierarchy. As in any other Indian village, different castes live in different ghettos. They exist together but don’t live together. The *parayas* (an “untouchable” caste in Tamil Nadu) live on the fringes of the village, lest they “pollute” the entire village. The Church is not located in the space of its *paraya* flock but in the upper-caste *nadar* street. The parish priest, whose ordination vows make him the shepherd of the flock, does not live with flock. The clergy and the people of the convent reluctantly tolerate the Christian status of the *parayas*. The *parayas*’ cemetery too is isolated from the upper-caste cemetery in the *nadar* locality. The *parayas* are thus segregated in the village and also the church. Narrating the spatial dimension of exclusion, Bama says:

I don’t know how it came about that the upper caste communities and lower communities were separated like this into different parts of the village. But they kept themselves to their part of the village and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never, ever, came to our parts. The post office, the panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the church, the schools — all these stood in their streets. So why would they need to come to our area? (6)

By describing the segregation as something natural and given, the narrator in fact describes the interpellation of Dalits by Brahminical ideology (Althusser, 1971: 47-9). As a result of interpellation Dalits become complicit in their own oppression by not being able to understand the nature of the caste system.

The *parayas* are predominantly agricultural labourers working on the lands of the upper-caste *naikers*. Some *paraya* women work in the houses of the *naikers*. The author begins to become aware of caste discrimination at a very early age, although she cannot fully comprehend the evil: “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is” (11). Various experiences shape her awareness of untouchability

and caste but one incident in particular leaves a deep impression. On returning from school, Bama witnesses an “amusing” scene in which a community elder carries a packet of *vadais* (a south Indian savoury snack) by its string rather than holding the packet itself. He goes to the *naiker*, bows low and carefully allows him to take the packet. Bama does not understand the logic behind holding the packet in this peculiar manner. Her brother explains to her that the elder held the packet by the string so that he will not “pollute” its contents. He also tells her about the psychological stranglehold which makes everyone believe that *naikers* are upper-caste and therefore must not touch *parayas*. In this episode the dehumanizing and humiliating notion of pollution is brought out by the narrator through the point of view of the innocent child. Bama feels “so provoked and angry” (13) that she begins to question: “Why should we have to fetch and carry for these people [...] How was it that these fellows thought so much of themselves? [...] What did it mean when they called us “Paraya”? Had the name become that obscene?” (13). Throughout the narrative Bama uses a juridical and analytical tone while questioning injustice.

Her brother, who is a university student, stresses the importance of education for Dalits, arguing that, “if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities” (14). Bama follows her brother’s counsel and works hard. At school, however, caste hierarchies are reiterated. Whenever something happens, the teachers and the priests blame the *paraya* children and say: “It must be one of the Cheri-children who did it” (16) (*cheri* is a Tamil word for a separate Dalit settlement outside the village). The Church also distances itself from the untouchables: “despite the fact that the majority of children are from *pallar* and *paraya* castes, the priests had built the school in upper-caste Nadar Street, where the church and the priest’s house are also located” (16).

Bama describes how the Dalit students are often singled out and humiliated, not only at school but also at college. When her younger brother and sister are to make their First Communion, the Principal and the Warden refuse her permission to go home. Instead they ask her sarcastically: “What celebration can there be in your caste, for a First Communion?” (19). Despite her humiliation and financial difficulties, she finishes her college studies and obtains a teaching degree, but the search for a job takes her through yet another series of humiliations and discrimination. Her employers are not satisfied with her academic credentials, but they also brazenly enquire about caste. Caste confronts the Dalit in every situation, from finding employment to renting a house. Finally, she finds herself in a teaching job in a school. Her experiences at her workplace are bitter too. The nuns and colleagues cannot digest the fact that she is an educated *paraya*.

Bama’s growing realization that the Church goes against the liberating message of Christ prompts her to leave her job in order to become a nun and combat the “collective [...] oppress[ion] of Dalit children and teachers” (20). Much to her dismay, Bama finds caste discrimination in convents too. In her case, the discrimination takes another form, that of language. The nuns in the order are Telugus and they look down upon Tamils. “It was only after this that I began to understand, little by little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then among Tamils, Parayas were a separate category” (21). It is in the convent that Bama begins to interrogate questions of injustice and inequality. She discovers that the children and workers from Dalit communities are treated inhumanely. Convent life throws her into spiritual turmoil. She is anguished at the affluence of the convent compared to the abysmal poverty of her

community. "Is there an understanding of poverty here?" (21), she questions rhetorically. The Church, she begins to realize, has abandoned the spirit of the Gospel and instead of liberating people has become an instrument of oppression. Bama contrasts the attitude of the upper-caste nuns and priests with those of the European missionaries. She remembers a white priest who visited her school when she was studying in the second class, and was impressed by her ability to memorize the prayers: "The priest lifted me up and kissed me and gave me a five paisa piece. I was pleased first of all that the priest touched me and lifted me up. That he should have kissed me and even given me the money filled me with an incomparable joy" (71). By touching an "untouchable", the priest, like many missionaries, makes a statement acknowledging the humanity of Dalits, denied to them for ages. Bama's narrative strategy of reminiscence serves the function of capturing a moment from the past to interrupt the painful present of Dalit experience as well as enabling a critique. As John C. Webster observes, Dalit converts' fond reminiscences of the selfless humanizing work of the European missionaries in fact constitute a mode of critiquing the contemporary upper-caste church elite (Oommen and Webster, 2002: 3).

Church and caste

Karukku raises the issue of Dalits' positioning within the Roman Catholic Church. When one looks at Church history in India, one finds that the caste system was one of the most confounding and problematic realities confronted by early missionaries. Theological debates have centred around caste (Forrester, 1980: 38-42), mainly focusing on whether caste is best understood as part of the Hindu religion or as a social/cultural practice. The Protestant missions were less ambiguous towards caste than their Orthodox and Roman Catholic counterparts. Each denomination and mission responded to caste on its own terms. The earliest converts in Kerala, the Syrian Christians, who trace their origins to the time of Saint Thomas, belonged to the upper castes and strictly followed caste rituals, continuing to constitute an endogamous group (Fuller, 1976: 53-70). The Portuguese, who aggressively propagated their faith in the conquered territories, did not interfere with the indigenous caste system. The Jesuits in the south, taking their cue from Robert De Nobili, the seventeenth-century Italian missionary who Brahmanized the Gospel, did not want to disturb the caste system among new converts, despite Pope Benedict XIV's orders in 1774 disapproving of the caste system in the Indian Church (Ballhatchet, 2007: 111). The Protestant Missions in contrast did make an earnest attempt to root out caste. However, anti-caste initiatives by Bartholomäus Zigenbalg, Heinrich Plutschau, and Benjamin Schulze at Tranquebar (Tharangambadi) were met with hostility (Frykenberg, 2008: 257). The archives of missionary activities in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India provide details of caste discrimination in the native churches and the difficulties encountered by the early missionaries in removing it (Duff, 1839; Hibbert-Ware, 1912; Sharrock, 1910).

By the mid-nineteenth century, Protestant missions were able to arrive at the clear theoretical standpoint that caste was an "unmitigated evil", and began to campaign against it (Forrester, 1980: 38). The Roman Catholic Church, in contrast, did little to oppose caste, and the Vatican's emphasis on the indigenization of churches led to the assimilation of native elements including caste, resulting in strong caste discrimination

and oppression among Catholics. Consequently, Dalits, who constitute the majority in the Church, are denied equality. In the Brahmanized Church Dalits are subjected to the same forms of discrimination that they encounter in the society: key ecclesiastical positions are occupied by the upper castes. The appointment of priests is also made on caste lines and Dalit priests are seldom appointed to upper-caste parishes. Dalits have segregated places during the service, and are even buried in segregated cemeteries. Dalit children are seldom made altar boys and are not included in the choir. Non-Dalits do not even partake in the Holy Eucharist with Dalits. The position of Dalits in Protestant churches in South India is altogether different. Since the congregations are invariably Dalit, caste discrimination within the Protestant Church is confined to those denominations where the upper castes are a majority, although it is not unusual to find intra-Dalit rivalries. In episcopal denominations like the CSI (Church of South India) and Methodism, many Dalit clergy are elevated to bishoprics. Thus caste has a different dynamic in the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Since Bama belongs to the Roman Catholic Dalit community, she has great scope to explore and critique caste oppression within the Church.

Bama and Dalit theology

There is a tendency to look at Bama's candid articulation of her spiritual crisis as an indictment of Christianity. It is true that she is pained at the hypocrisy of the Church, but is also convinced by the liberating message of the prophets and the Gospel. In fact, it is her understanding of the Bible that makes her critique of the Church possible. Bama begins to realize that she can speak directly to God without the intervention of the priests and saints. She turns away from the ritualistic religion of rosaries, novenas, and confessions to explore the meaning that the Gospel holds for Dalits. Bama's scathing critique of the Church brings us to the question of Dalit theology. Dalit theology is a counter-theology that takes the Dalit experience as its starting point and is opposed to mainstream Indian Christian theology that interprets Christianity in Brahmanical terms. The term was coined by Rev. A. P. Nirmal of United Theological College, Bangalore, who saw the need for a Sudra theology that rejects Brahmanical categories. While Dalit theology is to some extent inspired by Latin American liberation theology, it replaces the latter's emphasis on economics with caste.

The Christology of Dalit theology sees Christ as a Dalit, drawing on Prophet Isaiah's image of a "suffering servant". It looks at the ministry of Christ among the outcasts of the society – lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans, tax collectors, the poor, and the illiterate – as signifying the Dalitness of Christ. According to Nirmal, the theological concept of *pathos* (divine suffering) as opposed to *apathos* (impassibility of God) has great meaning for Dalits. It makes them see that God is not above or distant from suffering but participates in their pain and suffering, manifested in Christ's Passion and crucifixion. *Pathos* is therefore an epistemological starting point for Dalit theology that leads to the praxis of liberation (Nirmal, 1991: 141).

Elaborating on the significance of Dalit theology, K. C. Abraham writes:

The primary objective of theological reflection [...] is to help people in their struggle for justice and freedom. It is not enough to understand and interpret God's act, that is, to give reason for

their faith, but also to help change their situation in accordance with the utopia of the vision of the Gospel. (1995: 207)

The ideas of justice and liberation so central to the Old Testament prophets as well as to the Gospel are underscored in Dalit theology to deflect the Gospel from its otherworldly interpretations to the temporal realm of Dalit experience. As Lakshmi Holmström points out, Bama may not have had access to Latin American or Black liberation theologians (2000: ix), but as a Dalit she looks at the Christian Gospel from the perspective of the oppressed.

According to the African American liberation theologian James H. Cohn, one need not consciously “do” liberation theology (or for that matter Dalit theology), since Christian theology cannot be anything other than liberationist (1970: 11). Cohn argues that White society uses Christianity as an instrument of oppression by silencing the liberating message of Christ. The Gospels show Jesus ministering to and among the poor. He always associated himself with the outcasts of the society – Samaritans, tax-collectors, lepers, abused women – and spoke against riches and comfort. But this fact of Galilean ministry has been obscured since Christianity became a state religion in the West after Constantine’s fateful conversion. The history of Christianity has unfortunately been tied up with the history of the West, ignoring the fact that Christianity in the East charted a quite different course and the Christian religion exists in different parts of the world in diverse forms, and diverse contexts. For instance the Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian Orthodox, and Indian traditions are so old and different from the Western church tradition that they do not fit into the church–state paradigm of Western historiography. To conflate Christianity and the West by excluding the “other” traditions is to privilege, in an Orientalist fashion, the West.

Bama’s critique of the Brahmanical structures within the Church is enabled by her re-reading of the Bible. *Karukku* records the trajectory of her faith from its childhood simplicity to a mature understanding. Her childhood was steeped in religion. Convent piety, confessions, ritualistic prayers, fear of hell instilled by the nuns: all filled her mind. But in the convent she discovers a new meaning in her faith when she starts reading the prophets and the Gospels:

And Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody has ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices, opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. The oppressed are not taught about him, but rather, are taught in an empty and meaningless way about humility, obedience, patience, gentleness. (90)

Bama through her reading reclaims the revolutionary ideas of God’s justice, anger and compassion that are eclipsed by the market-driven forms of new Christian spirituality and the ‘Gospel of prosperity’ proclaimed by televangelists (Thomas, 2008).

Bama further observes that although Christ was born into a poor family, lived among the poor and died poor, the Church fails to treat the poor kindly. She likens the clergy to the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees whom Jesus compared to “whitened sepulchres”.

She realizes that God has disappeared from the Church that is steeped in riches and rituals and that the Gospel of the poor and the wretched has been turned into the Gospel of affluence. The Church does not minister to the poor and the lowly but to the rich and powerful. The schools run by it have been transformed into symbols of elitism. Bama comes to realize that Dalits can no longer be fooled by rituals and sermons which rendered them docile and passive: “[t]hey 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 mankind” (94). Bama, like the Dalit theologians, explores the meaning of Christ’s message in terms of what P. J. Rufus Rajkumar (2007) called *Dalithos* (the ethos of Dalit community). After seven years of convent life Bama walked out, not rejecting God but rejecting the institutions that have corrupted the Gospel. She begins to believe in an alternative Dalit Christian spirituality, which is about caring and loving, dismantling structures of inequality and injustice.

Dalit Christians in society

Apart from depicting caste discrimination within the Church, the convent and its institutions, Bama focuses on the discrimination that Dalit Christians face in society. Chapter Three of *Karukku* shows the divisive nature of caste and the victimization experienced by Dalit Christians. A conflict breaks out between the *parayas* and the *chaalyars* (a weaver caste that is “touchable”), because the latter claim rights to the land where the *parayas*’ cemetery is located. Bribing the police, the wealthier *chaalyars* fabricate a complaint against the *parayas*, which their victims do not have the means to challenge (31). Bama presents a moving portrayal of victimization of the *parayas* by the police. Men, women, children, young and old are beaten mercilessly, one man dying in police custody. Having arrested as many men as they can catch, the police vent their frustration and anger on the women: “the police behaved deplorably towards the women as they went from house to house. They used obscene language and swore at them that since their husbands were away they should be ready to entertain the police at night, winked at them and shoved their guns against their bodies” (35). Despite the police brutality and repression, the women keep things going; they manage to take care of their families while their men are in hiding and even take food surreptitiously to escaped men in the woods. The resilience and resourcefulness of the women in distress is vividly articulated. Some of the men hiding in the belfry of the church are betrayed by the priest who was actually supposed to have protected them. The Church too abandons the *parayas*.

Because the *parayas* are Christians they are denied the positive discrimination accorded by the Constitution of India to the Hindu Dalits. The Presidential order of 1950, as mentioned earlier, discriminates against Dalits who convert to Christianity, preventing them from belonging to the Scheduled Castes. However, eventually the verdict on the cemetery is in favour of the *parayas*. This is attributed to the intervention of the saints:

“It’s that St Anthony who brought us victory”.

“They thought our Paraya boys would be easy game. But Our Lady exposed that thought for sham it is, dint she?”

“We must have a sung Mass, a Pusai in gratitude next Sunday”.

“Why must there be sung pusai di? Did this priest ever help us, even with the dust of his feet? When our men who were hiding in the church were caught and taken away, this priest was sitting at ease in his bungalow, his legs crossed, smoking his cigarette happily and watching it all”. (38)

Bama presents Christian faith as it is lived by the Dalits. On one hand there is hope, an acceptance of belief (for example, in the miracles of the saints); on the other there is dejection and also a questioning of the oppression and discrimination within the faith.

The role of Christianity in shaping Dalit subjectivity is not addressed by many readings of Bama (Pandian, 1998; Prasad, 2008; Srilata and Geetha, 2007). The references to Christianity are limited to external aspects of religion and the institutions of the Church. Each reading of *Karukku* invariably refers to Bama’s critique of the Church but does not explore the ways in which Christianity shapes Dalit converts’ lived experience. Such readings are problematic because they assume that Christianity is only an external aspect of Dalit life – something that is only skin deep; they also deflect the specificity of the Dalit Christian lived experience into a general narrative of victimhood and “caste conflict”. It is necessary to contest such strategies of hermeneutical containment and instead explore Dalit negotiations with Christianity; the ways in which Christianity impacts Dalit habitus and its role in their empowerment.

Karukku powerfully critiques the divisive nature of caste. As Ambedkar, in his seminal essay “The Annihilation of Caste” argues: “Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of laborers” (1937: 47). In the “ladder-like system” of caste, each grouping is inferior to the one above it, and simultaneously superior to castes below it, making it almost impossible for anyone to disturb or challenge the system (Balagopal, 2009: 193).

Bama shows that the caste system works effectively not only in keeping communities apart, but also in pitting one against the other. The *pallars* and *parayas*, the two dominant Dalit communities, are locked in a cycle of violence. The *parayas*, who are predominantly Christian, are seen as the “other” of Hindu society; the *pallars*, on the other hand, imagine themselves to be part of Hindu society and see in the *parayas* an enemy. Bama writes of this internecine conflict:

They fight to the death one moment: then next moment they join together again. Suddenly for no reason at all they’ll be fighting and wrestling with each other [...] shameless fellows. Of course the upper caste men will laugh at them. Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end? (41)

Bama elaborates on this theme of internal conflict among Dalit communities in her novel *Vanmam* (2005), which is about the cycle of violence involving two Dalit communities, the *parayas* and *pallars*. As Gail Omvedt (2008) rightly points out, intra-Dalit conflict, involving two dominant Dalit communities, is a pan-Indian phenomenon. The *parayas* in the novel are Christians, whereas the *pallars* are Hindu. The local landlords, or *naikers*, stoke the hatred between the communities to keep them under their control. The

educated youth of the *parayas*, inspired by the Christian values and Ambedkarism, initiate a process of change in the village. Emergent Dalit consciousness makes them see through the *naikers'* ploys. Eventually, both communities come together and defeat the *nayakars* in the local elections, thus rejecting the Brahmanical social structures that divide people.

In *Sangati (Events)* which is celebrated as a Dalit feminist text (Holmström, 2005; Likhari, 2007), Bama deals with patriarchal oppression faced by Dalit Christian women. The contexts of oppression here are gender, caste, and religion:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment. (2005: 35)

Dalit Christian women face a peculiar predicament since their religious context complicates the nature of oppression. The secondary role given to women in the Roman Catholic Church condemns them to servitude and bondage. The Catholic Church's position on divorce makes it impossible for Dalit women to walk out of oppressive marital relations. Bama contrasts the position of Dalit Christian women with that of Hindu Dalit women who have the advantage of divorce. *Sangati* also engages with the role of conversion from the perspective of Dalit women. Bama remarks that although the *parayas* converted hoping for a better life, they gained little: "Why on earth Parayas became Christians, I don't know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever" (2005: 5). Commenting on the predicament of Dalit Christian women, Bama writes: "Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we're all in the same position" (2005: 97).

Thus Bama's work brings to focus the predicament of the Dalit Christian community that has been relegated to the margins of Indian society. It also vividly articulates the lived experience and way of life of this community. Bama is not interested in painting idyllic images of the Dalit Christian ethos; instead she explores the complex identity of the community which is mediated by caste religion and gender, from a critical perspective. Bama identifies caste as the determining marker in Indian society and shows how an apparently egalitarian religion like Christianity is affected by it. Bama's work also shows how Dalit Christians are doubly victimized because of their religion and caste. However, she does not essentialize Dalit Christian subjectivity because that would only "elaborate" the oppressive Brahmanical hierarchy which sets one caste against the other. While affirming the humanity of Dalits, Bama appeals to Dalit critical consciousness to forge solidarity against the divisive and exploitative caste system.

Notes

1. The term Dalit has its origins in the usage of Mahatma Jyothirao Phule (1827-1890), the well-known revolutionary social reformer and writer from Maharashtra. The term is of relatively recent origin in public discourse. It has been used in rejection of the paternalistic

- Gandhism “*Harijan*” (Children of God) and other negative terms such as “untouchables” and *Chandalas*. The term derives from the Sanskrit root *dal* implying to crack, split and open. It also means, broken, destroyed, scattered and torn asunder. *Dala* also means unfolding. The term Dalit connotes not only that which is broken, scattered, crushed (victimized and oppressed), but also that which is emerging or unfolding (suggesting critical consciousness). Thus it encompasses the twin meanings of oppression and assertion. The Dalit Panthers of the 1970s popularized the term. In contemporary usage, the term refers not only to the “untouchables” but also to those who are victims of caste and religious oppression.
2. Caste originates from the Brahmanical *varna* system that divides people into a graded hierarchy of inequality on the basis of birth (*varna* in Sanskrit means colour). The *varna* system incorporated four *varnas*: the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, said to have emerged from the head, arms, thighs, and feet of *purusa* (the primordial man or God) respectively. Textually there are only four *varnas* (*chaturvarna*), but in actuality there are thousands of castes. The Dalits are not a part of the *varna* system, because they are not regarded as humans in the first place. Caste is not “difference”, but institutionalized oppression and inequality based on birth. Western sociologists of caste, notably Louis Dumont, theorize caste from a privileged Brahmanical perspective, defining it as a harmonious functional social system and masking its exploitative and oppressive reality. Some postcolonial historians even see it as a creation of colonial rule (see Ambedkar, 1946; Dumont, 1981; Phule, 1873; Thorat, 2009).
 3. J.E. Clough’s mission in Ongole is a telling example of the stranglehold of caste in Indian society. During the great famine of 1876, Clough obtained a relief contract of a three-mile segment of Buckingham Canal to provide work for the *madigas*, who were denied work because of their untouchability. The events are fictionally represented by G. Kalyana Rao (a noted revolutionary writer in Telugu) in his novel *Antaraani Vasantham* (Untouchable Spring) (2000).
 4. In July 1985, *madigas* (an untouchable caste in Andhra Pradesh) were attacked by upper-caste *kammās* in Karamchedu. Six men were killed, three girls were raped and several were seriously wounded. In a parallel incident in 1991, *malas* (another untouchable caste) were massacred by *reddys* (a land-owning upper-caste community) in Chundur (Andhra Pradesh). The accused were not charged under SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 initially as the victims were Christians. It was only during the later stage of the trial that the Act was invoked under pressure from Dalit organizations especially the *Dalita Mahasabha* (see Balagopal, 1987, 1991; Kannabiran, 2003).
 5. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the text.

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