

# Rhetoric Versus Reality: Christianity Exposed In Bama's Karukku And Sangati

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The caste system is a form of social stratification unique in Hindu society of India. It privileges the upper class and condemns the lower class, otherwise known as marginalized by creating a gap between them. To escape this oppression, some communities have got themselves converted to Christianity. In Karukku, it is evident that the community of parayas got converted to Christians but they are still subjected to caste-based discrimination. The paper titled "Rhetoric versus Reality: Christianity Exposed in Bama's Works" attempts to prove that the institution of Christianity failed in rescuing the dalits from caste based discrimination. The paper further probed how Bama feels discriminated even inside the convent.

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The Christianity has believed to struck root in India when Saint Thomas landed in Kerala in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The Christian missionaries preached that within the Christian fold every individual is treated well with love and respect. But the untouchables in India, who comes under Hindu fold who suffered from untouchability for centuries and finds it an outlet to get converted to Christianity. The humanitarian doctrines of Christianity motivated the dalit communities to get converted to Christianity hoping for a better life. Missionary Robert Caldwell said that, "the lower castes initially came to Christianity for protection and material help" (qtd. in Dirks 134).

Karukku, the first and autobiographical novel in genre depicts the developing consciousness of a Dalit activist with her dismissal of exclusionary rehearses, which mixed a debate in scholarly circles by virtue of its uninhibited language and strong jargon. It records all details in the life of Bama as well as her community. "Karukku" signifies palmyra leaves, which, with their serrated edges on the two sides, are like blades that cut both ways. In her Prelude Bama reveals, "There are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life" (xiii). The title symbolizes the hurtful events of her life in its different stages that cut her like "Karukku" and made her bleed. Sangati is about her local area's personality

and not about her singular self. In this book, she says why the entire paraya community got themselves converted to Christianity. Christian priests have assured them that they would provide education free of cost (S 5).

These dalit communities had been deprived by the upper castes every kind of opportunity which could lead them to a better and dignified life. The upper castes availed education and got respectful jobs, the dalits were condemned to several caste based jobs only. Their financial conditions remained poor and hence the food and free education provided by the Christian missionaries helped them to attain social advancements. Bama compares the status of Pallars and Parayars. The Parayars take the land of the Naickers on lease and toil hard in the agricultural fields compared to ancient times, the Parayars has been indulged in the lowest works of the landowners houses, “. . . clearing cow dung” and “whatever lowly job they were asked to do and brought home only stale Kanji and Pickle to stay alive” (V 6). The status of Pallars in the village, Kandampatti is not satisfactorily and considerably improving; amidst all kinds of threats from the wild animals they still guard the orchards which the Naickers are reluctant to lease out to the Parayars, because of their envy on the development of the status of Parayars. The upper caste people always want to subjugate and subordinate the Dalits; they never like the Dalits’ socio-economic emancipation as they think that socio-economic emancipation may bring the Dalits on par with the upper caste people. Consequently, Naickers change the agricultural land into orchards and Pallars fall as prey to the wishes of Naickers, and the Naickers “sit comfortably in their homes and enjoy the harvest” (V 7). Parayars being emancipated to some extent are not fully dependent on the Naickers as Pallars do.

This enmity is further insinuated by the upper caste people who consider the unity of the Pallars and Parayars may ruin their glorious state of living. Many educated Dalits yearn for the unity of Pallars and Parayars. This existential agony is brought through the words of Mekkalamma who expresses her anguish as, “I don’t know how many lifetimes it will take for our two castes to come together as friends. The way things are going, it looks like it can never happen” (V 12). Dalits ignorance is nurtured by the upper castes to restrain their unity. Bama reveals says that dalit children has separate school and churches and low-class priest to preach them. So Bama learns that Christian priests have never attempted to eradicate caste distinction from church premises.

Bama suggests that this discrimination starts from the very beginning of their life and continues through their childhood and adulthood. Even from the simplest acts of children’s game to the serious issues of marriage, education, labour, the double standards of the patriarchal society is visible. The division of a village into upper caste settlement and lower caste settlement is once and for all, one cannot change the street for anything. Bama opines, “the post-office, the panchayat board, the milk depot, the big shops, the church, the schools all these stood in their streets” (K 6). The narrator becomes aware of the demeaning presence of untouchability among Dalits through the spectacle of an elder Paraya carrying a bundle of ‘vadai ’ by its string and presenting it to a Naicker. Her ruminations show her deep pain at this inhuman practice: “How could they believe that it was disgusting if a Paraya held that package in his hands, even though the vadai had been wrapped first in a banana leaf, and then parceled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais

myself, straightaway” (K 13). The practice of handing over the leftovers or pouring water in the cupped hands without touching them give the writer further glimpse into this callous practice of untouchability. This angers the author but as child she is powerless to resist or question its implications then. Yet she asks her patti about the incident.

The Naicker’s housewife would throw the leftovers, the stale curry and rice consumed by the family the previous day or before into these utensils. The narrator feels outraged at this spectacle as she witnessed it. She narrates it painfully but the grandmother perceives this as part of society's tradition. “They give us food. Without them, how could we survive? After all they are upper castes. We are low born,” she reasons (K 13). The Naicker women thus assert their caste superiority over Dalit women workers and are totally oblivious to the plight of women. Dalit children face discriminations in every field. Whenever something wrong happened in the school, the Dalit children were invariably blamed for it. The writer too had a bitter experience of it when she was accused of stealing a coconut and all her protests fall on deaf ears.

While studying in her seventh standard, Bama recalls how the headmaster of her school humiliated her at the assembly as a thief and a Paraichi (a girl born in the Parai caste). The first account is actually fabricated and the second one is a sociological fact. The headmaster confounds both and insults the child before the other school children and her teachers. While the narrator and her friends are playing in the school yard after school hours, a coconut falls down from the branches of a tree, the one they are swinging upon. The girls run away in fear. The following day, the headmaster reprimands her for having stolen coconuts by climbing trees in the-yard! What is worse, he admonishes her that her action has shown up her caste. “Paraijathibudhi” (the mind of a Pariah born) (K 15). She is threatened with rustication and is sent to the parish priest (the school is funded by the church) for a letter confirming her readmission. She narrates a truthful account to the priest and requests for the letter. The priest makes her wait for a considerable time and issues an authoritative comment, “Quite possible, quite possible. You would have done so. Don’t you live in the cheritherul (street where Dalits live) Such girls can be expected to do such things” (K 15-16). A priest who is supposed to be considerate, kind and impartial shows himself to be biased favouring the rich and being averse and detrimental to the poor Dalits.

Walking home from school one day, Bama saw an elderly man of her community holding a small packet of “vadai” or “bajji” by a string. He went to the upper caste landlord Naicker bowing low and handed the packet, holding the string. The scene entertained her from the get go however she was incited to outrage when her sibling Raj Gautaman made sense of why the dish must be conveyed immaculate by the hands of a socially rejected man. Different encounters caused her to comprehend the embarrassment of being a Dalit. It implied her old grandma referring to the little child of the Naicker as “ayya” and complying with his orders. It implied that the Naicker ladies would pour drinking water from a level of around four feet into their measured hands. It implied eating the extra food. It implied being provoked at school, on the transport and in the city as a Harijan. At the point when she was in standard seven she was embarrassed openly and humiliated for the burglary of a coconut with which she had basically nothing to do as a have any significance of reality.

She recalls in Karukku, “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). However, braving the onslaughts of poverty and untouchability, she successfully completed her school education securing the first rank among her classmates and graduated at St. Mary’s College, Thoothukudi. About her gradual drift towards the world of letters Bama says, “My first few writings were poetic in nature”. She feels, “They were not poems in their true sense. I will not call them that. They were lyrical. But I didn’t concentrate on that form because they were impressionist outlets of my thoughts and were much too personal” (“Recognition,” Dalit E-Forum). While functioning as an educator in a school show to the Roman Catholic nuns, Bama truly wanted to turn into a pious devotee to serve her local area with commitment. Thus at the age of twenty-six she took the shroud. Her folks, her ward minister and direct relations attempted to discourage her from turning into a religious recluse on the grounds that the promise of compliance in the convent would not be pleasant to her self-assured and firm nature. Yet, she adhered to her choice and entered the community. There the dissimilarity among statute and practice unnerved her and the predominance of casteist pride and bias tormented her past perseverance.

So she surrendered her life in the convent in 1992 in her seventh year. She understood that the Roman Catholic Church was “as casteist and as discriminatory as the world she had left behind,” as K. Srilata comments (“Palmyra Leaf That Sears Us,” *The Hindu*onnet). Bama learned at one point that nuns and priests treated dalits contemptuously. She learned that marginalisation crept inside the nunnery. She realized what she sees from outside is not true about nunnery. Bama says, “Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty, But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty” (K 66). At the point when Bama left the convent she felt like she had become outsider to herself and her local area. It was a time of confinement, dismissal and powerlessness when she was with no work and pay. Empowered by her tutor, Fr. Mark Stephen, she began keeping in touch with her writing and what emerged was her works.

Bama realises that after reading The Holy Bible that God has not desired His followers to discriminate between human beings. In the Bible, it is declared that God has always associated himself with the poor and the oppresses (K 90). Being devotees of Christ, it is the duty of nuns to help the downtrodden and to aid the economically weak. But Churches cater to the upper class and prioritized material gains. She affirms, “the Word of God... no longer stir the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others” (K xiii). The change in religion did not always succeed in eliminating caste discrimination. Thus, the paraya community, despite getting converted to Christianity, have not escaped caste discrimination.

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