

**BAMA’S SANGATI: AN ILLUSTRATED PICTURE OF THE LIVES OF
DALIT MARGINALIZED, DISCRIMINATED, ISOLATED AND
HUMILIATED WOMEN**

Dr Adi Ramesh Babu
Asst. Professor of English,
Government Degree College,
Satavahana University,
Jammikunta, Telangana,
India

Abstract

Tamil Dalit Christian writer Bama’s *Sangati* is a bitter critique on the society. It is about the problems, attitudes and language of Dalits. It discusses their thoughts, their culture and traditions and reveals a consciousness long suppressed women. It was written after *Karukku*, an autobiography of Bama. It shows the lives of Dalits. Bama’s grandmother tells about the incidents and stories that happened in her life in a sequential order and how they are treated as Dalits under the hand of upper caste people. Bama records the struggles, tribulations, frustrations as well as the triumphs, joys and survival of Dalit women. The paper deals with Bama’s *Sangati*. It is illustrated picture of the lives of Dalit marginalized, discriminated, isolated and humiliated women.

Key Words: Discrimination, marginalisation, humiliation

“My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them....about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.”

-Bama

Bama, one of the pioneers of Dalit feminist literature, is a significant regional voice among the subcontinent women. *Karukku* is her autobiography whereas *Sangati* is an autobiography of her community. It was written in Tamil by Bama and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Bama says: “After a gap of nearly ten years, the chance to read *Sangati* in English has arrived. The first edition of *Sangati* in Tamil appeared in 1994 and the second edition followed in 1995” (vii). Regarding the book and its theme, she in her foreword says that “oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live.” (vii) The entire women writers wrote on the path created by male writers. Bama observes: “until recently women writers in

Tamil have moulded their writing on the male literary tradition” (Kanal, 2001: 30) A Dalit woman has been suppressed and oppressed two times. One is as a Dalit and second one is as a woman. Bama belongs to the group of marginalized section. The story deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the Dalit women. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her introduction to the text, “*Sangati* flouts received notions of what a novel should be....It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. ‘*Sangati*’ means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes...These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person... (xvi) Bama traces how Dalit women are dehumanized under the patriarchal power. She brings the inequality between the labour of men and women. Bama’s grandmother, Paatti surmises the situation of women in a subaltern community when she explains to a query from Bama as to their plight, we have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel” (Bama, 2005: 6-7)

Bama learnt that girls should not play with boys. Girls should bow their heads when they walk on the roads. They must not speak out about any controversial things. She tells that the system gives importance to boys, not girls. It encourages the male dominated society. Boys will take full meal in house whereas girls are restricted to take half meal. After men took meal, the left-over of others are women’s feast. Even the quality of food served to the girls is much poorer than the kind of which is served to boys. All the household works such as cleaning, cooking, laundry, toilet cleaning are done by the girls. From early morning, they set to work both in their homes and also in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. They have to do uncountable things in their daily life. “Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed.” (Bama, 2005: 59) About the difference in treating boy and girl, her grandmother said, “When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast feeding longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boy catches the illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it’s a girl, they’ll do it half-heartedly.” (Bama, 2005: 7) On the other hand, boys enjoy playing games and chatting with others. Nobody dares to ask all these. Even in education, women are not sent out from their villages whereas men were sent for good schools and good education. Whatever men say is bound to be right while whatever women say is to be always wrong. “Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right.” (Bama, 2005: 29) The writer angrily continues, “I’m not talking about kanji. Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs or lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our goes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings.” (Bama, 2005: 29)

The Dalit women are disgraced even in the games also. Paatti says that “when we played ‘mothers and fathers’, we always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, ‘What sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!’ In those days, we used to accept those pretences blows, and think it was all good fun.” (Bama, 2005: 31) They are treated as dogs by their husbands and the society. They must satisfy their husbands in the nights. The one who does not have mental strength and physical strength for sex will be dragged in the society. They must be moulded their bodies and ideas whatever men ordered. They are beaten by their husbands who think that beating their wives is the right of them. Bama requests them that Dalit women must be united otherwise they will be oppressed again. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (Bama, 2005: 59)

All the men are slaves to women at the time of sex. All the women are slave to men except sexual time. “It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (Bama, 2005: 65). Of course, there is less violence on women in upper caste houses. Upper-caste women give the superficial impression that they never quarrel amongst themselves or with their husbands. They claim that it is only in our streets that there are fights vulgar quarrels all the time. It is only when you go inside their homes that the real truth is revealed. (Bama, 2005: 67) The position of Dalit women is both pitiful and humiliation. 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 husband’s torment. (Bama, 2005: 35)

Although there are many good singers in Dalit community, nobody would get offers to sing or dance in front of people. During festival times, people in the village used to sing over the mike. “Even then it was the men who sang and beat the rhythm. There were so many amongst us women who could sing really beautifully. But never to this day has a single one of us been allowed to sing in public. We certainly have not been invited. When I was a little girl, during festival times, women used to gather together at night to sing and to dance the *kunni*. Now, even that has stopped.” (Bama, 2005: 35) Dalit women will not be given preference even in seminars and workshops. People think that what Dalits know and say that after all a girl is giving speech. They don’t credit her with any kind of achievement, “a girl who has a little education and has progressed somewhat, is not allowed to seek a like-minded man, and certainly not marry anyone of her choice” (Bama, 2005: 109). Bama realizes that she is rather proud to belong to her caste and that lack of education has actually perpetrated their slave like situation. She sums up their situation thus: Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated....because we haven’t been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes (Bama, 2005: 118)

Women are habituated to be bitten because they think that it is common. Similarly Dalits are being punished because they are Dalits. Women should speak and cry about their problems otherwise nobody will come forward to change their condition. When they do all miscellaneous jobs at home, they should have asked their men to do or help them. Instead of asking it, women work as machines. “It’s the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else. Yet how many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops! Even machines can’t do as much” (Bama, 2005: 78) Marriage must provide happiness for both. Unfortunately because of it boys are happy and girls became sad. We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate. We must change this attitude that if married life turns out to be a perpetual hell, we must still grit our teeth and endure it for a lifetime. We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults.” (Bama, 2005: 122-123) We must give freedom to boys and girls equally. Women explain it to their men and nurture girls by saying that she can do all the things what a boy can do. Bama (2005: 123) also expects that “Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that ‘women can make and women can break’. I am hopeful that such a time will come soon.”

Bama’s *Sangati* is about the feminine ideas of fear, shyness, simplicity and independence. Indeed, the Hindu Dalits are suppressed in the male dominated society whereas the Christian Dalits are far from the Hindu poor Dalits. They have good awareness about the society and politicisation. In these days, they are questioning on their problems. Bama is a criticiser of casteism within the church and church rules. She argues that slavery must be eradicated when there is slavery, there will not be education. It takes people far from development when there Dalits are uneducated. They won’t come to know the society and how they are discriminated, humiliated and marginalised. Ambedkar (1989: 17) says that “In slavery there is no room for education, virtue, happiness, culture or wealth. In untouchability there is none.” As a radical feminist, she explores the psychological stresses and strains which become a reason for the women’s belief in their being possessed by spirits. She wanted to make other Dalit women overcome from their sufferings and problems.

References:

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. Government of Maharashtra, Vol. 5 (1989): 17. Print.
- Bama. *Sangati*: Events. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New Delhi: OUP, 2005. Print.
- Bama. *Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Ed. Mini Krishnan. Chennai: Macmillan, 2000. Print.
- Imayam, “The Rattle and the Cow that Changed Hands.” Trans. M. Vijayalakshmi. *Indian Literature*. 42 (1999): 37.
- Aruna, Marie Josephine. “The Subaltern ‘Can’ Speak: Bama’s *Sangati* as a Narrative of Resistance.” *Muse India*. 2014. 1-3.