



## PERILS AND PREDICAMENT OF DALIT COMMUNITY IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is a study or analysis of Dalit marginalization discrimination, isolation and humiliation from common tradition of life especially the tragic condition of Dalit women in Indian society. Sangati is based on the community's identity's it is primarily about a community's identity; not about the single self. It gives an account of Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender and caste. In Bama's opinion, education is the only way to eradicate the casteism and poverty. It is appreciable that now Dalit are awakened and enlightened through education and they are aware of their responsibilities.

### **Perils and Predicament of Dalit community in Bama's Sangati:**

The world which shows signs of positive, phenomenal and unprecedented growth in the fields of science and technology on one side has the other side which shows the decay in terms of human values. The darkness therein grows in density and magnitude because of the gradual disappearance, – of positive values of life. In the globalized context, the problems of the marginalized which adversely affect their social, ethnic, economic and cultural conditions have to be addressed. The major threat, is exploitation and oppression which is the perennial source of creation and sustenance of their untold misery. The marginalized people like the Dalits in India have been suffering for ages from economic, social and political inequality which, in turn, isolates them from the main stream. Their marginality may vary in degree, extent or intensity. But it remains an irrefutable fact that most countries and cultures have at once empowered groups at one pole and destitute groups at the other.

On the contrary the privileged are blessed with greater degree of freedom, social status and security of life; the poor seem to have been cursed with fear, insecurity and injustice. The form and nature of suppression depends upon the degree of impoverishment in social, economic and cultural spheres. Marginality, a by-product of caste, creed, religion and race leads to inequality which, in turn, breeds insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Condemned sections of society are generally beyond the tale of the dominant culture. Their existence is, by and large, peripheral. All cultures and societies have power centres in their corpus. The marginalized groups are consciously or unconsciously distanced from the power centres. They are scattered here and there and lack cohesiveness and strength.

Deprived of economic, political or religious power they grope about in darkness for survival. They are forced to live in physical or psychological ghettos, as the social organization in which they are imprisoned by man-made custom and tradition builds unbreakable walls of segregation around them. Nevertheless, they struggle for emancipation and the times are changing. Democracy all over the world has given all such marginal groups an opportunity to share freedom with their compatriots and enlightened them on their human rights and civil liberties. They enjoy the right of franchise which is a political weapon. In fact, education and freedom of expression give voice to the hitherto unvoiced.

The disappearance of colonialism has given birth to political awareness and freedom creating thereby aspirations in the minds of the people for attaining equal status and dignity, but it remains a mirage for the marginalized. Hence they began to record in writing what they could not speak. The questions such as, 'Who are we?', 'What is our future?', 'What is our status?' and 'What is our role?' which speak volumes of their pathetic plight haunt their minds and these questions are generally contextualized in their writings. The main thrust is the quest for their identity and their dreams are shattered by nightmares. 'More in sorrow than anger' they recall the bitter past, and they counter their sour present but beneath their sorrow and anger runs a ray of hope which foretells that a sweet future awaits them.

According to "Varnashram" some people are purer than others. The highest caste namely the Brahmins are the purest of the pure as they are born of the head of the Brahma and the other three castes have gradations of purity, as they are born of chest, thigh and feet of Brahma respectively. The untouchables are wholly impure and cannot even be allowed to come into contact with caste people.

Dalit literature is instrumental in extinguishing the technique of meta-narratives and its main aim was to legitimize the illusion of a universal human history. The living world of dalit oppression is found in different *bhasa* literatures but the similarity of themes gives them an inner bond. This kinship related theme and synthesis of common experiences establishes the need for having a dialogic relationship among the literatures of different regions. Dalit creativity has blossomed through all recognized forms of literature such as poetry, auto biographies, novels, short stories, critical essays, dramas and street plays.

The present voices of dalit writers are not passive but as vibrant and powerful as to attract one's attention as they are made to establish their self-identity and self-esteem. They are however forging their identity in the crucibles of their plays, poems, short stories and novels. Bama's *Sangati* is the collective voice of Dalit women who raise their voice in anger or in pain against their oppressors. In this novel Bama boldly says that the oppressors of women are not only the men of upper-caste but also those of their own community. Besides, the prevailing superstitious beliefs within the Dalit community also obstruct their liberation. Moreover *Sangati* deals with several generations of women and they reach downward to the author, herself.

*Sangati* is a faithful record of different incidents and events in the lives of different women of different generations as discussed by the narrator and her grandmother, Paati which, the narrator tries to develop, on the one hand, "a critique of Dalit patriarchy" and "a positive cultural identity as Dalit and a woman" (Holmstrom xviii). On the other, however, if one feels that she is telling stories about women who are only victims of patriarchy, one is wrong. Her women are witty, humorous, wife and also sassy, breaking the stereotypical notion of Dalit women being either totally subjugated or violent.

*Sangati* also speaks of various cultural aspects of Dalit life through the songs sung by women on various occasions from birth to death or the known stories of the people of the community which gives norm to the novelist to strike the cord of Dalit feminism in the very opening of the novel: "My mother told me that in our village, they did not make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls. She said that's why boys went about bossing over everyone" (1).

Though the tales of many Dalit women of her village, Bama not only describes the patriarchy prevailing in the Dalit society but also exposes the prevailing socio-political and economical domains of India which mercilessly ignore the welfare of the Dalits. She recalls the nightmarish pregnancy and ensuring delivery as "in those days, there was no hospital anything in our village... confinement and childbirth were always at home" (*Sangati* 3). It is her grandmother who usually acts as gynecologist, midwife and so on in helping in the child birth of a pregnant woman. Her grandmother's ability in handling the most difficult cases in deliveries is a matter of surprise for young Bama. "How did Paatti learn to deliver babies? She had never been inside a school, not even to shelter from the rain" (3). It is all the more surprising that such a Herculean job was rendered free of cost. Sometimes she may get betel leaves and nuts as token. Such a free social service naturally makes narrator's Paatti a popular person in the Pedrumaalpatti village. The people of the village call her by her name, Vellaiyamma Kizhavi though she has been doing the job of a gynecologist. Vellaiyamma was deserted by her husband, Govindan after the narrator's mother's birth. The narrator's Paatti tells her one day that "she had become a corpse without a husband, and struggled single-handedly to care for her two children" (*Sangati* 5). Such was the agony of many Dalit women in India fifty years ago.

The mother of the narrator, as fatherless, suffered a lot in her young days. When the Christian mission came to the village and offered them free education on condition that the Dalits should convert into Christianity, many Parayars joined, while, the other scheduled castes like Pallar, Kuravar and Chakkiliyar did not. Even though education was provided as promised by the Christian priests the children of the Paraya community, "refused to go to school. They all went off and took up any small job they could get" (5). The narrator, Bama is at once worried and angry at her community for letting the opportunity slip through fingers. They were doubly affected. First they themselves shoot the avenues of education and secondly lost getting their privilege from the government of India because of their conversion. She comments on the fate of her poor Dalit community: Why on earth Paraiyas alone 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 (*Sangati* 5).

Bama is, however, never tired of boasting of the capabilities of women of her community, their endurance and resoluteness both physically and morally, according to her, women are strong than that of their male counterparts. They work throughout the day in the fields with men not only to feed their children but also to the cows and cattle that they rear at home. But instead of peace and pleasure, agony and torture await them at night when their men under toxic effect beat them and children and their denial to give money for the families to survive adds insult to injury. Hence the duty of taking care of the families falls on the women folk. They play the dual role of a father and mother in supporting the families economically and morally.

The narrator's Paatti works as an in-charge (Kottachi) of collecting many women from her community to work as coolies in the fields of upper caste men. In fact, she behaves as if she were the care-taker of all womenfolk of her community. Her experience as a leader of Dalit women has given her awareness of everything going around her. She warns her fellow women to be cautious of upper-caste men who are hypocrites.

Bama simply but strongly depicts the conditions of Dalit women who need to war against the triple oppressions namely the blues of their low-birth order, their poor economic conditions and the sexual abuse. She warns her fellow women about the sexual abuse by the upper-caste men.

The narrator's Paatti recollects her own bitter experience of her marriage as her husband deserted her, and her daughter's suffering of all sorts of ill-treatment at her husband's hand:

I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your Periappan actually beat her to death... 'she is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want'... (*Sangati* 10-11).

The Dalit men and women are always exploited as laborers to do hard works such as digging well, laying roads and railway lines, building houses, and so on. Despite such exploitation and oppression there are Dalits men and women who fought against the odds of life role to very great heights. The upper caste people subjugate the Dalits mainly for the purpose of doing hard labour in the fields or factories. Besides, the Dalit women are given less wages than the Dalit men – yet another humiliation on Dalit women. Naturally this kind of age-old discrimination makes Dalits generates and sustains inferiority complex in them.

In fact, they do the menial labour given to them in order to earn money for their daily bread: “So they got the bigger wages. The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than the men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less...” (18). The pathos is that “one day Mariamma was carrying a basket of rubble like this when her foot slipped and she fell all the way down” (17). The owners of the farm or her own Dalit community however did not pity on her. If the owners were blinged by their wealth the people kept mum because they are accustomed to such happenings. Thus, “Mariamma lay in her hospital bed, helpless, and suffering for seven or eight months, then at last she came home” (19). The pathetic life of Mariamma grew worse day by day because she is a Dalit woman. The upper caste hypocritical men cunningly play the trick of safeguard themselves from the offence. One day Mariammafell a victim of abortive rape-attempt of Kumarasamy Ayya. In fact Mariamma is not only victim of this kind but almost all the women in Dalit community are placed in such precarious conditions. Bama painfully records her own people silenced the victim.

Bama strongly portrays the Dalit women with dynamic energy and their will power to face any problems in life. Still they lack the courage to raise voice against their men or the upper caste men as the stereotyped socio-cultural order of Indian society never allows them to raise their voice against the patriarchy. On the other hand, the Dalit men often give importance to their casual pleasure. They indulge in alcoholism, gambling and even extra marital sex which makes them ignore their families. It is only Dalit women who take all the responsibilities of the families. The parents of Dalit women never consider the character or background of Dalit grooms for they are bent upon fulfilling their duty and their responsibility of marrying off their daughters.

The plight of a girl as the first child in a Dalit family is even more pathetic. Seyarani is one such girl but she is better known as Maikkanni, a nickname given to her in acknowledgement of her beautiful dark eyes supposed to have been beautified by 'kajal' However her “real name is Seyarani” (69). Maikkanni's father and mother had a cordial life until the birth of Maikkanni. After that they started quarrelling as Maikkanni's father has illicit intimacy with another woman. Yet he never failed to impregnate to Maikkanni's mother every year. His total neglect of the family inevitably resulted in the entire responsibilities falling on her mother. While her mother goes to work as a coolie, Maikkanni does all household works such as cooking, cleaning the vessels, washing clothes, fetching water, brooming and taking care of her young brothers and sisters.

The irony is that Maikkannai, herself is too young to do all these household works. Besides, whenever her mother is at the ripe pregnancy, Maikkanni goes to the nearby town to work in a factory. In the words of Bama, Maikkanni's pathetic plight runs like this: “At an age when she should have been running about her own will like a little calf, and playing games, here she was, putting up with all this” (73).

Bama's novels open up new perspective of Dalit woman. She weaves an oppressed and subjugated image of a Dalit woman but at the same time brings to fore the innate and inherent capability of the helpless Dalit women to raise by tracing thier journey from 'subjugation', to 'celebration' of their life. The truth is that a Dalit woman's problems are diverse and multifarious when compared to other caste women which necessitated the need to articulate their plight. The Dalit women, according to Bama, do certainly possess greater mental energy and stronger will-power than their men as they leave no stone unturned in their efforts to challenge and overcome the double humiliation imposed on them by their birth and gender. In addition they indulge in hard labour to look after her family, and to overcome the economical difficulties, where also they are subjected to exploitation and humiliation and sexual harassment by the upper caste men.

*Sangati*, as a chronicle of Dalit women is of course, a feminist novel which presents a positive image of a Dalit woman with a positive identity who has so long been negated and discarded by the male-dominant society. The events described in *Sangati* will go to rebuild the tarnished image of a Dalit and the attempt to carve out a purified change would certainly motivate and inspire those for and about whom speaks the novel. It is a journey for a Dalit towards re-building their self-esteem, from feeling a sense of shame at having been born a Paraya to a sense of pride and confidence in their breed. It has succeeded in highlighting their inner-self so long suppressed.

Every burden overweighs the shoulder of a Dalit woman. But Bama through her narrative expresses her surprise at the survival capability of the Dalit woman to live through these horrid experiences. Above all it is not the moaning and suffering Dalit women that stays in the readers' mind but as remarked by B. Mangalam “a

lively vibrant, earthy, witty hard-working women who have inner strength to face crisis and work tirelessly at home and outside” (32). It does call for the re-visiting and re-questioning of the mainstream feminism to assimilate the questions of Dalit women more meaningfully. As for the Dalit women, the book, *Sangati* definitely calls for a revolution and the need for empowerment through education.

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