

# Growing Discontent among Dalits for Church Order: Reading Bama's Karukku

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## Abstract

The Dalit Christian endures the same discrimination in social, educational and economic sphere like the Dalits of other religion. The conversion doesn't warrant any significant change in their status. It is obvious in Bama's Karukku that Dalit Christian suffers the same atrocities, humiliation and violence. Faustina Bama is a Tamil Dalit Christian woman and one of the most influential Dalit voices in contemporary Dalit literature. Her autobiography 'Karukku' is entailed with the issues of caste discrimination within the Christian religion and in its institutions as well. This work grows out after a personal crisis and watershed in Bama's life as a Christian and as a Dalit. She has penned about the caste and gender discrimination with Dalits even if they succeed to attain well education. This paper will focus on the thinking, courage and boldness of a Christian Dalit woman who retaliated against the discrimination within the church order and her strong will power to work for her people. With the power of pen, she resists against the exploitation that Dalits have been tolerating since ages.

**Keywords:** bama, dalit, christianity, discrimination, conversion, resistance

"The conversion movement made an immense appeal to the Dalits, though its benefits are mostly limited." (Sharma, 68)

Bama family adopted Christianity and she used to attend all the ceremonies or activities of church from her childhood. She had a strong liking towards the Christian preaching about love, humanity and equality. For this reason she decides to join nunnery so that she could do more useful work as a nun for the poor and helpless children because she was unhappy with nuns who collectively ill-treat Dalit children. She thought that

"Why should I not become a nun too and truly help these people who are humiliated so much and kept under such strict control?" (Bama 23)

Before entering that order she studied about the great woman who established that distinct order for the sake of downtrodden and poor people. Bama also wants to live her life for the lowly and poor. But once she entered the convent she was deeply troubled when she witnessed the humiliation of Dalit based on their caste in convent. She thought within herself that,

"What a nuisance this is turning out to be; thus far they made us hang our heads in humiliation because of

our caste; in this order being a Tamil seems to be equivalent to being a Paraya." (Bama 24)

Bama realized that she has taken a wrong choice. Very soon, she decides to give up her urge to become a nun. Through these experiences of Bama, one can clearly understand that caste prejudices hold a major role even in these religious institutions Whom Dalits trust highly pious.

Bama has seen bitter incidents on caste exploitation at her native place. She always wants to do some valuable work for the dalit and wants to join a place which would give her freedom and chance to prove her identity. She has a deep love for Holy Bible and its preaching which tell about love and sacrifice. After completing her education she joins as a teacher in a Christian school. She worked there with full spirit and guts and most of the students were dalits themselves. But when she noticed the behavior of other nuns and teachers with dalit children, she gets exasperated and keeps arguing with authorities for this kind of discrimination. These experiences impel her for becoming a nun. She thought that in that way she can work for those people who are humiliated on behalf of their caste and kept under very strict control?

*"The thought kept returning every day, however hard I pushed it away. So at last I resigned the teaching post that I held, and went and entered a religious order." (Bama23)*

All the friends and the family were not in support of joining convent by her. They advised her to stay away because caste differences work in a great deal within these religious institutions. But she could not accept it. She understood all these state of affairs only after joining this order, when one of the sisters told her that in some certain order convent would not welcome Harijan women as forthcoming nun. There was separate system for dalit women somewhere to join as nuns. Bama was completely despaired at heart after knowing this bitter truth,

*"I lamented inwardly that there was no place that free of caste. And so at last I became a nun and was sent to a convent elsewhere." (Bama25)*

And that convent too was not beyond cast biasedness. Schools only care for students from very wealthy families. Children of her community were there only for the demeaning works like sweeping, swabbing and cleaning the lavatories. All the teachers and upper caste students behaved very insultingly with lower caste students. They did not consider them as human beings. Bama could not say anything in fear of exposing her own cast but she battled with herself dying several deaths everyday while listening and living in that suffocating environment of oppression. She realized one thing that

*"In this society, if you are born into a low-caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death caste-difference does not disappear." (Bama 26)*

In *Karukku*, the major philosophy of human life is disclosed. It does not matter in which way the person is grown the only thing that matter is the religion the person is born. People screw up their faces and stare with disgust at Dalits, the moment they get to know their caste. They all were filled with caste hatred. Being a Christian Dalit woman, she has joined the church and learnt the Gospel since her childhood, and wishes to help the deprived people because she has learnt that Jesus himself took birth in cattle-shed and sacrificed his life for poor, ugly sinners. It is surprising to know through Bama that

*"Even the nuns and priests, who claim that their hearts are set upon service to God, certainly discriminate according to caste. (Bama, 27)*

As though these people are not human beings and don't have common sense. It is difficult to find out that actually what do they lack? These people seem to conspire against Dalit to keep them at the lowest place,

*"To think that we who have worked throughout history like beasts should live and die like that; we should never move on or go forward." (Bama 28)*

Bama took birth in a community where the only struggle of people is to fill their bellies. She has a strong desire to serve her community by becoming a nun in convent, where she could help other children to better themselves. But what she analyzed that they don't care for poor students, and only serve and care for wealthy children. They treat poor and wealthy students in different ways. Nuns at joining take a vow that they will serve everyone in equal way, will live in poverty. "But that is just a sham." These Institutes doesn't know anything about poverty. They all lives a life with full of comforts and convenience. (Bama 77)

The more Bama watched this type of nonsense behavior, the more she frustrated.

*"At last I asked myself, is this life for me?"(Bama, 78)*

Her mind was disturbed and bruised. At last she decided to quit the convent with a very heavy heart and dispirited. When she was a child, her family taught her about the devotion to God and she believed entirely in that system. She prayed and attended all the catechism classes with full devotion. But before quitting the convent job she has realized that the belief she had in Christianity has vanished completely. Now she is not a believer of this system and condemns it surprisingly. Now there were two Gods in front of her one that she knew after reading Old and New Testament of Bible is full of compassion for oppressed associated with the poor, just, righteous and angered by injustices. Other is kind, loving, and gentle, patient, obedient and humble and forgives sinners. Nobody is interested to tell them that God opposes falsehood and inequality because injustice dances like a demon in these institutions. There are lots of differences between these two Jesus who is made to know us by their priests and

nuns, Bama was questioning herself why people believe one thing and do another.

*"We should speak up about we believe and act according to that."* (Bama 105)

In the name of God these people humiliate and rob the poor who are struggling hard to get freedom from this slavery. At present, she perceives church as an order full of priests and nuns from wealthy upper caste who held power position. Majority of Christian people are lowly and dalits but still few rich upper caste hold power control over the poor by thrusting some blind beliefs and turned dalits into slaves in God's name. Chinnappa, an Archbishop said, "Dalit is a dalit whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Christian. Even as members of various Christian communities, Christian Dalits suffer the same ancient segregation, oppression and unjust discrimination, the same social, educational and economic disabilities, now at the hands of their fellow Christians of the upper castes. Conversion into the new faith has not redeemed them from the stigma of untouchability." (Chinnappa)

If someone tries to oppose the system in convents it was end for him or her. Authorities start to criticize their upbringing and childhood for that. In the period of British colonization, Christian missionaries came to help poor and downtrodden people through charities and prayers after watching dalit community's suffering. That told people about Jesus (a person who gives eternal peace) and Christianity. Because of their preaching of Jesus many Dalits have adopted Christianity in a belief that Jesus and the preaching of Holy Bible will save them from this slavery and discrimination. But the reality is not same as per their expectations.

As Teltumbde writes,

*"While converting to Christianity, Dalits were not driven by any spiritual thrust but their material needs like food, shelter, employment, treatment in sickness and of course protection from caste oppression."*(Teltumbde 38)

But in India, Christianity was inept to part itself from the Brahmanical traditions and ideology because cultural context meant adjustment to the ruling ethos and even to such structure as caste. Christianity thinking engrossed itself with the notions of evolution, poverty or the poor, liberation and such as. But no one contended itself to the

realities of the Dalits or aboriginal peoples, women, and other degraded groups.

Nuns and priests who claimed themselves as the follower of God don't possess the same good qualities. Before entering in convent, Bama has got the freedom to speak up about her likes and dislikes openly and to raise her voice against anything bad happening. Everything has turned pathetically and she has become a slave of that system by losing all her wishes and rights. She was forced to shut her mouth. Indian church remained insensitive to the Dalit conditions and abandoned them to remain in marginalization. Church repudiates opportunities and fails to provide the resources to Dalits.

Bama aim to serve the lowly people in school has become a nightmare. She found the truth that there is no goodness but worldliness. Honor is only for upper caste wealthy. She felt shameful to be a part of that order and decides to leave. Her religiosity taught her a bitter and unforgettable experience. Religiosity is gentle love, humanity, kindness, equality and true devotion but here she spotted the negative form of religiosity which pronounces about greediness, discrimination, inequality, biasedness, selfishness and enslavement.

Every coin has two sides. She could not digest the other side of it and do not want to continue with wrong nature in the sight of Jesus Christ. She finished her journey as a nun and speak,

*"Today I realize what an extremely foolish thing I did. But at that time I did not understand in the least what I was doing. I was like one who was falling into a well blindfolded."* (Bama, 105)

### Conclusion

A person who with lots of dreams joins the church order with full vigor, the same person quit this job sadly and shamefully by realizing her failure to change the system and to serve the dalit students in convent. But she doesn't lose her confidence and strong will to serve people. The beliefs that Bama has about religiosity gives her some everlasting scars of desperation in her heart. People think that a religious person should have all the good qualities, righteousness and good attitude. But in reality, things got change, everyone have their own selfish motives behind every action. If any organization is being setup or working

for the welfare of others, it is mandatory for all the members belong to that organization to follow the rules by themselves first and to live a life according to the conviction which they teach veraciously otherwise they will push the innocent people to redundant sufferings. Bama confirms through her action of leaving convent that Christianity is not to prosper it is to serve the weak and unfortunate. It is not the process to gain but to give. She "*leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another) as Dalit woman.*" (Holstrom 2000: ix)

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