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THE CONVERTS: DALIT CHRISTIANS IN KARUKKU

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Abstract

In the year 1956, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with thousands of his followers. Throughout his life, he felt uncomfortable being called a Hindu and he always wanted not to die as a Hindu. He was born into a Mahar caste, an untouchable, therefore, he never received the privileges as the rest of the Hindus. The untouchables were discriminated against, their touch or even the touch of their shadow was looked upon as defiling. Bhimayana the graphic novel by Navayana publishers records the ordeals that Dr. Ambedkar had to undergo through the prototype of Bhim. Dr. Ambedkar's qualifications, position and status did not change his identity as an untouchable. He was a Dalit and there was no way he must have felt he could change other than by converting to Buddhism. Dr. Ambedkar's death a few months later after mass conversion could not supply us with information about if his position as a Dalit changed after conversion or not. The text considered for this paper is Bama's Karukku which speaks of a community that faces discrimination despite being converted Dalits. This book leads us to question the idea that how far the situation changes for an untouchable after converting to a different religion which apparently does not have a caste system. .

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Untouchability, Conversion, Christianity

THE CONVERTS: DALIT CHRISTIANS IN *KARUKKU*

- Roshni Subba

K*arukku* is an autobiographical novel about a woman who experiences caste oppression despite adopting different means to attain respect and integrity as a human. It shows us the life of Dalit Christians and the struggles that they face even post-conversion. In *Karukku*, a Tamil Dalit Christian woman recounts her childhood experiences which were marred by unpleasant moments because she was constantly reminded of her caste. She tried different ways to overcome the trauma and humiliation, educated herself, became a teacher and finally, joined a convent but nothing could change her position as a Dalit Christian. My paper would attempt to understand *Karukku* as more than just a story of a woman and a Dalit but a story of a Dalit Christian woman who always remained a Dalit for the upper castes despite getting herself an education, a job and a new religion.

Bama Faustina Mary was born a Christian at Puthupatty near Madurai in 1958. Her autobiographical novel *Karukku* in Tamil published in the year 1992 shows the everyday struggle of a Dalit and more importantly of a Christian who is a Dalit woman. *Karukku* according to Bama is written in a different language from the language of the “pundits of literature”. During an interview with Manoj Nair for the award-winning moment she mentions how their language “was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, was not included in the norms of Tamil Literature... she was proud of being instrumental in bringing about this change in Tamil Literature” (Nair 3). It was not only Bama who experienced this but most of the Dalit writers faced similar problems, Kancha Ilaiah in *Why I am not a Hindu* writes about the difficulties they faced in schools because of the difference in the language spoken at home and used in schools. With *Karukku* she feels satisfied and happy because the novel in a way gave recognition to their language, to the language of the oppressed.

“*Karukku* is a powerful critique of Indian civil society itself: the educational system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India “ (Nayar 84). The woman narrator in *Karukku* was discriminated against not only by the upper castes in society but in the school by the teachers, by priests in the church and later on also in the convent by nuns. The extracts from *Karukku* reflect and narrate the childhood as well as adult experiences of the author and her realization about the fact that she remains a Dalit first. She was very young when she experienced untouchability for the first time in her life and could not even understand the scene which unfolded in front of her. She saw an elderly person from her community bring a package of vadas held by a string and hand it over to Naicker, who was apparently considered an upper caste. As a child, she could not understand why the package had to be offered that way and even found it funny. Her brother informed her how everybody considered the Naickers as upper castes and Parayas as lower castes and the Parayas should not touch Naickers lest they pollute them. She was angry to hear this and could not see any logic behind it——

When I heard this, I didn't want to laugh anymore, and I felt terribly sad. 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 parcelled in paper? I felt so provoked and angry that I wanted to go and touch those wretched vadais myself, straightaway. (Bama 15)

This is how it began, her first encounter with untouchability and the realisation of the position of a few castes who were rendered as untouchables by the upper castes. She felt anguished and she wanted to rebel by doing those same things which were forbidden for an untouchable. Her reaction at this time was naive because she was a young girl but we see her taking up different steps to fight untouchability as she grows up.

The protagonist belonged to a lower caste, a Christian by birth. As a Dalit Christian, she should have been free from the clutches of the Hindu caste system but for a few upper-caste Hindus who had converted to Christianity the position of the Dalits never changed.

Many Dalits felt positive about conversion, and they took up religions other than Hinduism or a sect of Hinduism to receive the respect they deserved as humans. But their aspirations were stalled because of these few converted people who followed the same rules for a Dalit and a Dalit convert. K.W. Christopher mentions the anguish felt by a noted Dalit writer like Baburao Bagul on Hinduism and the literature of Hindus. According to Baburao Bagul, the holy text of other religions like Christianity had sympathies for the unfortunate masses but the lower caste Hindus were always excluded from mainstream religious texts. (Christopher) They were always identified as Parayas, as outcastes and the prejudices related to their caste remained in the newly converted religion too. In *Karukku*, we see Dalit Christians rejoicing on the eve of Christmas, they cook good food, come together to celebrate and eat beef; they could spend on good food for only that one day. We notice first and foremost that the caste follows the protagonist and all her community members who converted to Christianity everywhere. A character called Michael-amma complains “So many people buy and eat beef on the quiet these days, it’s getting more and more difficult for us to get any meat. All of them eat their fill but see, it’s only we people who are called low-caste.” (Bama 64) P.N. Chopra also writes about the Mahars, one of the lower caste people and the cause for their being called one. The Mahars had consumed beef during the Mahadurga famine and for this reason, they were degraded and treated as a low caste (Chopra 145). It is sad to see that even on the occasion of a festival they were reminded of their being untouchables. They were surprised to learn that only they were called low-caste people because they consumed meat when there were others too who consumed the meat and still not called low-caste.

Although the “Untouchability Offences Act” was passed in the year 1955 the caste discrimination against the Dalits never stopped. The process of conversion too did not bring respect for the Dalits, they were still discriminated against and dehumanised. *Karukku* speaks of the gap between Christian beliefs and practices. The priests and the nuns ill-treated the Christian Dalits and looked at them in no better way than the upper-caste Hindus did. They stereotyped Dalit Christian children and had no empathy for them. One day, all the children in the school were playing with the coconut growing in the school compound. It fell on the ground when the protagonist touched it, they left it there and went

home but the next morning, the headmaster accused her of stealing the coconut and insulted her for being a Paraya. The teacher who lived in her neighbourhood advised her to go to the priest and bring a letter from him to the headmaster. The priest's response was very insensitive, he told her that since she belonged to the Cheri she must have done it and gave her a letter after making her wait for a long time. Another incident from the novel again directs our attention towards the humiliation the Parayas faced as Dalit Christians. On Christmas, they would go to see the priest and Reverend Mother with gifts and request a picture of Jesus or a religious token. But Reverend Mother would chase them away and tell them—"Have you given me some money to buy you holy pictures? Very well, now, you may all go home quickly without leaning on the walls or touching anything." (Bama 67) So, we can see the untouchables were disregarded not only by the Hindus but also by those people who converted them on the promise of a casteless system. Their touch which was looked upon as defiling by the upper-caste Hindus was also avoided by those who preached about being kind and gentle.

As the protagonist grows up, she develops an awareness of the blind faith they are made to follow. She remembers how as a child they were told stories to terrify them about punishments that God would give for committing sins. It was only when she joined the convent boarding school after finishing her schooling in the village that she gave up on her fear of God and developed love instead. As kids, they were told about a devil who would keep an account of their sins in his notebook and report to God. And when that notebook would get filled, they were told that the devil would peel the skin off their backs and write down their sins there. They were always scared and as young children, they always believed in what they were told and followed all the rituals and prayers sincerely. There was no love but only fear that she felt toward God when young. Another incident she speaks about is when they were told to not bite the hosts received during communion-

The sisters had told us over and over again that Jesus was inside the host, we should not bite Him, nor should we touch the host with our sinful hands... . They had said that if I touched it, blood would flow down my hand. (Bama 85)

But it was difficult to swallow the hosts because sometimes, it would stick on the palate. One day, she used her hands to push the host from her palate and she was surprised to see that nothing similar to what the nuns had said happened. She wanted to tell the truth to everyone but resisted telling it but came to realize that it was just an empty threat.

So, not only were these empty threats creating fear among the followers but were also disillusioning them. *Karukku* relates the Christmas celebrations carried out by the Dalit Christians, for them it was not the day that they remembered as Christ's birthday but as a day when they attained freedom. Freedom for them could be freedom from a biased Hindu society or being free from work that one day to get together as a community. For them, Bama writes, "At Christmas, Easter, and New Year's day, people hang up posters of Rajnikant and Kamalhasan here and there. Nobody seems to know what the festival is really about, or what it is celebrating." (Bama 70) The Dalit Christians were kept ignorant, no one was interested in helping them to improve their lives, they were poor and low caste so even the priests and nuns were aversive towards the community. The novel relates the protagonist's transformation and about her awareness to help people from her community. After becoming a teacher, she learnt how the Dalit children were ill-treated in the convents too. She wanted to eradicate the social malaise so she thought, becoming a nun would help her to effect more changes but she felt helpless there as well. She leaves the convent and comes back home to the same drudgery after experiencing injustice while being in the Order.

With the formation of DCLM (Dalit Christian Liberation Movement) in Tamil Nadu, the Dalit Christians' fight for equality and justice could be seen as a reality. Some of the points submitted in the manifesto of DCLM at the Tamil Nadu Bishop's Conference are:

- Untouchability should not be practised in the church
- Authority structure should be de-centralised for the inclusion of Dalits as clergies and nuns
- Social justice in the form of equal sharing of power

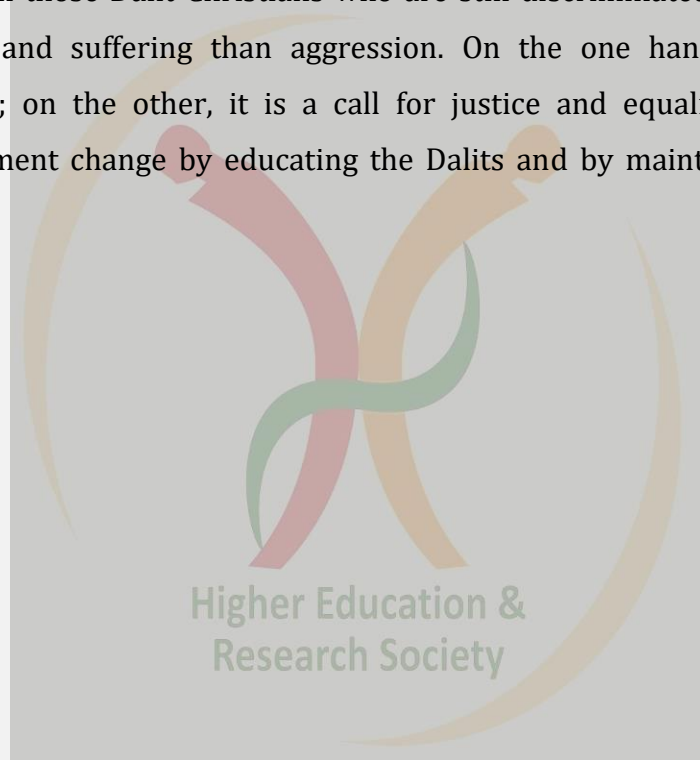
-Dalit Christians who work for the cause of the Dalits should not be penalised.

When Bama walked out of the convent disillusioned, she met Father Mark, a member of DCLM and was encouraged to write down her experiences. *Karukku* was the outcome; it was also the first autobiography by a Dalit woman where one can see the predicaments of Dalit Christians. It is a recollection of a Dalit Christian woman of social and institutional betrayal. Bama also feels that any step taken to include the Dalit Christians in the list of reservations for the Scheduled Castes for improving the social position of the Dalit Christians should not be encouraged because reservation further dehumanizes the lower castes. She finds the term 'scheduled caste' more derogatory and prefers being called a Dalit to the former. Dalit literature is an outcome of changing social consciousness and is also a symbol of revolt against the hierarchical regime which suppresses the rights and freedom of the Dalits. Dalits were not treated as human beings, called untouchables and were always the victims of social, economic and cultural injustice.

In the nineteenth century, the Dalits who were illiterate started educating themselves through colonial patrons. The opening of colleges like Siddhartha College in Mumbai, in 1946, and Milind College in Aurangabad, in 1947, by Babasaheb Ambedkar helped educate and bring change among the Dalit youth without relying on the colonial forces. After independence, Dalits hoped for their freedom along with the country's freedom. They sought to bring about reforms in the hierarchical Hindu society and it was through education that they fought for their emancipation. In *Karukku* too, we can see how Bama's brother emphasized the role of education in uplifting the Dalits. He said, "Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities." (Bama 17-18) But we can see that the struggle for a Dalit does not end easily, being educated or getting oneself converted to another religion or placing oneself in a good position professionally does not end all their woes. They still struggle every day to earn respect and dignity as a human in a society which is so entrenched in the caste system.

Bama's novel like M.B Manoj's poem "Children of the Woods Conversing with Christ" asserts that conversion was not an escape from reality. The reality could be changed only

with a change in the mentality of the people. The Dalit Christians were regarded as Dalits even after adopting the new religion. They converted themselves to find solace and equal treatment in Christianity and desired freedom from the religious hierarchy but little did they know that they would be bounded to caste. About Bama's perspective on Christianity, Indu B.C. writes, "Bama has an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. Bama insists that she doesn't wish to imprison Christ in religion." (B.C. 3) Although she went out of the convent, she never left Christ but she left the institution and the people who were corrupting the words of Christ. Bama's *Karukku* is a microcosm of all Dalits' experiences and especially of all those Dalit Christians who are still discriminated against. *Karukku* is more about pain and suffering than aggression. On the one hand, it challenges the hegemonic society; on the other, it is a call for justice and equality. Bama's *Karukku* attempts to implement change by educating the Dalits and by maintaining peace among themselves.



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