



Dichotomous Nature of Christianity in the Novel Karukku

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Abstract: Christianity came to India in 52 AD with the mission of spreading the Word God. India that the missionaries walked into was burdened under the yoke of caste system. The lower class people had no social mobility and hence the possibility of an improvement in their condition was near impossible. Conversion to Christianity was a means of escape from discrimination. They believed Christianity offered them solace from their oppressors. Christianity was considered egalitarian as it promised to be a caste-free society. Unfortunately, even after conversion many of the Dalits were discriminated due to the residual leftover practice of caste system from their previous traditions. Bama's Karukku is a novel written in a confessional mode. It speaks of the conflict between the Church and the Dalit Christians. The Church ordered and influenced the lives of the Dalits. However, discrimination by the clergy was horrifying. Religious celebrations had lost its spiritual value and it was more materialistic. Bama decided to join the religious order to help the poor school children of her community as education was the key to their emancipation. But on joining a nunnery she realized that life in a convent was one of luxury and they served the rich. She discovered that the outlook of the convent and the Church are different from hers and there is a rift between the two. This paper attempts to unveil the crippling effect of caste system in an apparently caste-free religion like Christianity.

Index Terms - Christianity, caste system, discrimination, in persona Christi, marginalization

About the Novelist

Faustina Mary Fatima Rani, who writes with the pen name Bama, is a Dalit Christian, from Puthupatti in Tamil Nadu. Their family status did not change much even after the conversion and they remained as the landless labourers. She is a teacher by profession, a novelist by passion and an activist by nature. She became a nun at the age of 26 in order to educate very poor Dalit girls. But after seven years she walked out of the convent because of her initial hopes and later disillusionment with the caste system in Church and other Christian institutions.

Bama has three published works in her credit - Karukku (her autobiography) got published in 1992, Sangati (novel) 1994 and Kusumbukkaran (collection of short stories) 1996. Karukku was translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom in the year 2000 and it won the Crossword Award for the best fiction in Indian Languages available in English translation in the year 2001. She rose to fame as the first ever Dalit woman writer in Tamil with her book 'Karukku', which in Tamil means Palmyra leaves with serrated edges on both sides.

Caste system in India

Caste system in India is the world's oldest forms of surviving social stratification, which can be traced back to the times when Aryans invaded India around 1500BC. The division is based on karma (work) and dharma (religion). Manusmriti acknowledges and justifies caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society. Caste system divides Hindus into four main groups - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. Many people believe that these four groups are originated from Brahma. Brahmins, the top in the hierarchy, are mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to come from Brahma's head. Kshatriyas, the second in the hierarchy, are warriors and rulers and are supposed to come from the arms. The next in the hierarchy is Vaishyas and they are created from the Lord's thighs. Shudras are said to be born from Brahma's feet and are meant for all menial jobs. There is an additional outcaste group, which falls outside these four, which includes the tribal people and the Dalits. The caste system which has divided the Hindus started spilling over to other religions in India, with Christians, Muslims, all employing similar forms of social stratification.

Essence of Christianity

Christianity from the beginning focuses on the importance of service. It is said in the Gospel of Matthew 20:28 *"Like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life to redeem many people."* Jesus washing the feet of his disciples sends a strong message of the underlying essence of Christianity that service to man is service to God. The Bible very clearly says that on the final judgement day God the King will separate the good from the bad and to the good He will say, *'Come, you that are blessed by my Father! ...I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me I was in prison and you visited me.'* Then the righteous will answer him, *'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will reply them, 'I will tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important members of my family you did it for me.'* (Mathew 25:34-40)

Introduction

India has been plagued by the curse of caste system that gives demeaning titles to certain groups of people. The caste system that we see today is transmogrification of the Varna system that was introduced in the Vedic period to sustain prosperity and order. The rights of each Varna system are equated with their individual responsibilities. This classification was expected to maintain order and prosperity in the society. Over time this system ossified and now has become a smoldering issue. The group most affected by this stratification are the lowest class people known as the 'outcastes' or the 'Dalits' meaning the 'oppressed'. Their silent suffering and humiliation appear to be irredeemable until the advent of Christianity in India.

Christianity came to India as part of the colonization process. Christianity offered to redress the problem of caste system. Christianity professed itself to be a caste-free religion. It emphasized on love and compassion for the poor. It was one of those religions that promised the Dalits social equality. Hence many of them readily accepted Christianity. Accepting Christianity can also be seen as a form of social protest denouncing the centuries old religion. However, being a Dalit Christian was double alienation. They were alienated within the society and within the church too. Christianity could not remove this scourge.

Vestiges of Caste system in Christianity

The autobiography *Karukku* narrates the poignant story of a Dalit Christian Bama Faustina Soosairaj. The narrative begins with a description of her village and the caste system that is an integral part of the social geography of the place. The social norm insured that they never get into each other's lane, except when needed. Even the schools and church in the village was situated in the locality of the upper class people suggesting prominence to them and marginalization of the community living on the fringes of the society.

Bama says that children of the lower caste face discrimination and humiliation in different ways. She soon realized the education was the key to her liberation. She understood that she can gain love and respect from students and teachers by studying well. She completed her B.Ed. and decided to work in a convent school to help Dalit children. However, she found that most of the nuns disdained her. In spite of the behaviour of the nuns, she decided to join the religious order. She felt that she would be able to better serve the poor and downtrodden being a nun. She had immense faith in God and the teachings of the Bible which emphasized the importance of an inclusive and non-discriminative society. As a true Christian she was filled with compassion and desired to do whatever she could for the upliftment of the poor.

Joining the religious order brought her face to face with another harsh reality - the disjunct between herself and the religious order. She realized that the nuns looked down upon the Tamilians and the Tamil prayer were doubly discriminated as the lowest of low. Another rude shock that awaited her was that the religious order also catered to the rich and preferences were given to them. The Dalits were expected to perform the menial tasks only. Bama, being bound by the religious oath of obedience couldn't say anything. She was filled with anguish when she realized that the Christian religious orders are institutions that crush and oppress the poor. The very essence of Christianity is missing in religious order. The hand that should reach out to the outcaste was actually the very hand that crushed them.

Discrimination of the Parayars from the rest of the Christian community could be seen as even in death. The upper class people had separate cemeteries for them. The Chaaliyar - a caste above the Parayars and the Parayars often fought for the land used as a cemetery by the latter as it was near the Chaaliyar community school. These skirmishes often turned violent leading to murder and court cases. In such situations, the Priests took sides of the Chaaliyars leaving the Parayars lamenting on their fate. The church that is responsible to keep its flock together was now dividing it in the name of caste. The paradoxical nature of the Christian church highlights the hopelessness and misery of the Dalits.

The discriminative approach of the church towards the Dalits, alienated them from the church. Initially it was a physical alienation in the form of separate rows for communion and seating and this gradually led to a spiritual alienation from the Church. The Church appeared to be more materialistic than spiritual. The clergy had to be offered expensive fruits as gifts in order to obtain blessings from them - the sign of the cross drawn on their forehead. Eventually people began to stray away from the church. They preferred to watch movies than to go to church. The attitude of the clergy made the Parayars realize the hollowness and materialistic view of Christianity. The church was bereft of the values and love that Christ had for the poor and oppressed. Another important aspect Bama speaks about is the portrayal of the God. She remembers how when as a child, she was told by her Catechism teacher that God keeps an account of all our sins and how one would be mercilessly punished. They were always given the impression that God is one who is to be feared thereby revered. They were never taught about the love and compassion of God. The fear of God made Bama very obedient. Prayers and sacraments became absurd. All religious celebrations were manifested in wearing new clothes and feasting on good food. Devotion was something done merely out of the duty as a Christian.

As Bama grew up, her faith transformed from fear of God to the love of God. She was able to re-read and re-interpret the Gospel. She experienced the love of God and realized that God does not exist in empty meaningless rituals performed in the church. Her earlier belief that the God could be attained only with the help of the clergy was replaced by the realization that the love of God is a deep personal spiritual experience. This realization dissuaded her from joining a nunnery.

Bama began her career as a teacher. She taught in a school for the destitute run by the nuns. She was filled with anguish when she saw the way these children were educated. She felt that the nuns never prepared them to fight for their rights; instead they made them understand that their plight is irrevocable. This forced the children to accept their predicament as fate. On seeing this, Bama, once again decided to join the religious order so that she may be able to bring a difference in the lives of the Parayar children.

Her life as a novitiate strengthened her desire to alleviate the suffering of the poor. She understood that service to the poor and oppressed, was pleasing to God than beautifully worded prayers. However, on the contrary the Church hardly practiced any of the preaching or tenets of Christ. The all-encompassing love and forgiveness of God was completely missing. There was only injustice and punishment for those who disagreed with the clergy. Among the three vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience, the vow of poverty was hardly adhered to. Bama harshly critiques the religious order calling them hypocrites "so habituated to the act of play-acting that they can no longer distinguish between role and reality." The clergy was lost in the material world. They robbed the poor in the name of God. The Parayar members of the church were like a flock without a good shepherd.

On completion of her novitiate, Bama desired to serve the poor underprivileged children, but unfortunately she was sent to a prestigious school to serve the rich. She soon realized that the vow of poverty that every nun is expected to abide by was a farce. The life in the convent was a life of luxury and comfort. The religious orders had drifted away from the true spirit of Christianity. Jesus' life was defined by detachment from worldly possessions and pleasures. All catholic religious orders are bound to follow Christ's path or earthly detachment. Bama soon realized that there was a huge chasm between what was believed and what was practiced. Life in the convent was all about opulence and not service to the poor and the needy.

The vow of poverty in a religious order ensures equality among its members. Dismally, discrimination based on family background and status existed. The schools attached to the convents catered to the rich. Every year four or five poor students would be admitted and they always faced the brunt of discrimination. Bama felt that the religious vows were tools of control and enslavement. In a short span of three years in the convent, Bama realized that the doctrines of the Church were hollow. The training to become a member of the religious order had no connection to the lived reality in India. The religious doctrines formulated in the West never addressed the caste issues in India. The caste system is so ingrained in the Indian thought process that whichever religious order one follows, the subtle elements of caste discrimination do surface.

Conclusion

Christian missionaries in India especially Tamil Nadu, found it easier to proselytize the Dalits as they were facing the scourge of caste discrimination. Christianity promised a caste-free society. However, any Hindu converts of the upper classes retained the practices of their caste due to the involuntary nature of mass conversions. This led to a lack of conscientious belief in Christian practices which perpetuated the existence of social stratification.

In Roman Catholicism the concept of "in persona Christi" is important. An ordained priest is "in persona Christi" because he acts as Christ and as God. Hence it is deemed that priests rise above such demeaning and discriminative practices and see the suffering of the poor through the eyes of Jesus Christ. Priests should

alleviate the suffering of the marginalized and work towards their upliftment. All men are equal in the eyes of God and let not the Church see differently.

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