CHAPTER – I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 - THE JOURNEY SO FAR

Fiction by Dalits emerged as a distinct literary trend in Tamil in the 1990s. There has been a tradition of literary writing categorised as 'committed' literature in Tamil Nadu since late nineteenth century. Social reform movements and nationalist struggle for independence from colonial rule were steered in such a way that it was constantly pointed out that social reform and political self-determination cannot be and ought not to be made mutually exclusive. Women's education, widow re-marriage, abolition of caste inequalities, protest against Sanskritisation of Dravidian culture, formulation of Tamil identity and the need to establish a just society guaranteeing social and economic power to the underprivileged were some of the issues that were taken up by Tamil writers right from 1880s onwards.

The struggle against the structure of Varna and Brahminical hegemony in social and political systems gained an ideological and organisational support in the early decades of the twentieth century by the Self-Respect movement spearheaded by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (hereafter to be referred as Periyar). The Self-Respect League was formed in 1926 and its first conference which was held in 1929, left a lasting impact on Tamil culture and politics for decades to come. Periyar's Justice Party led, what has been variously perceived as, a Dravidian movement, a rationalist movement and more succinctly as an anti-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu.
Brahminical hegemony in social, economic and political structures of power was so well entrenched in Tamil Nadu that Periyar's fight against *Varna-dharma* and in particular Brahminism resulted in an immediate bonding of non-Brahminical castes marginalized from public office and deprived of educational and employment opportunities offered by the British. The fact that despite being a numerical minority (the Brahmins constituted "only about three per cent of the total presidency populations"), Brahmins retained a monopoly in educational and job sectors was strongly resented by non-Brahmin Hindus in Tamil Nadu who formed nearly 86 per cent of the Presidency population in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Justice Party which ushered in the Dravidian movement and merged with the *Khazhagam* politics in the forties played a significant role in bringing together non-Brahmin castes under one umbrella and provided them an ideological, organisational and political platform to wage a struggle against caste inequalities.

The movement greatly influenced literary trends in Tamil in the first five decades of the century. Novels, plays and movie scripts ably reflected, openly propagated and borrowed Periyar's ideology as well as his political rhetoric concerning a society based on social justice. Bharati Dasan's poetry and Karunanidhi's film scripts bear testimony to this literary trend. Dravida movement's impact on Tamil literature helped focus on the need to strive against Brahminical monopoly and gave a militant thrust to the move against Sanskritisation of Dravida culture. It also helped in bringing to mainstream literary space characters from backward castes and issues related to their aspirations and privileges. However, a closer look at the composition of the backward castes that spearheaded the non-Brahmin movement reveals that almost all of them were drawn from the middle castes and belonged to what could be termed within the Indian social parameters, as landed gentry. They were landed, upper, non-Brahminical castes who tried to subsume the real backward castes, the socially most oppressed castes into their political rhetoric.
In fact, these castes that formed the backbone of the Dravida movement were upper castes in their own right -- Veilalas, Reddys, Kammas, Velamas, Odaiyars, Goundars, etc. They had internalized caste prejudices and were subjecting the lower castes, categorised as Harijans in Gandhian discourse, to economic and cultural oppression.

Resenting Brahminical monopoly in government jobs, Periyar's movement in a way crystallized into a narrow, political gain in terms of bargaining for a larger share in government jobs and public offices for 'backward' castes. The invasion of clericaldom by non-Brahmin upper class backward castes, ultimately did not bring forth any relief to the Harijans. The movement succeeded in bargaining for a greater visibility in the corridors of power for certain backward castes without offering any challenge to structural composition of Hindu society. The merger of the movement with the mechanism of Kazhagam politics led to a steady disillusionment of the Harijans from the movement. Their state had remained unaltered socially and politically.

The recognition that the reservation benefits granted by the constitution following Independence did not actually filter down to the lower castes gained ground in the 1950s and 60s. These castes turned away from the non-Brahmin movement of Periyar and his political allies. Their voice had remained unheard and unrepresented in Tamil fiction.

In the period from 1950s to 1970s a significant shift took place in Tamil fiction. Representation of social inequalities in Tamil literature both in terms of issues and characters moved away from Periyar-inspired ideology. In its place, a distinct, young group of writers emerged who wrote on social injustice and hierarchical structures and the oppression of landless workers, urban poor and the migrant labour. These writers derived their ideological inputs from Marxist thought. The Harijan was subsumed within the category of the oppressed
worker. The oppression of lower castes was represented primarily in terms of oppression of the working class. The writer, Sundara Ramasamy recounts that his translation of Thagazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s novel Thotiyin Magan (Scavenger’s Son) faced immense resistance from publishers in Tamil. At one point his friend from the Communist Party reasoned with the publisher/ senior comrade that the scavenger too is a worker, "he too is a comrade."³

The oppressed caste, once again, gained no voice in the literary domain. Marxist writers and critics like Jayakantan, Poomani or Idayavendan gave primacy only to class conflicts. They failed to reckon with specific, distinct modes of oppression against lower castes. Their belief that if control over means of production were to change hands (from the capitalist to the worker), all kinds of oppression would be removed, was proved to be far from the ground reality. Erasure of economic disparities would not automatically result in erasure of cultural disparities. Even economically empowered Dalits faced social ostracisation and discrimination. The well-known Kannada writer and academic Aravinda Malagathy recounts in his autobiography, Government Brahmanan, that he continued to face casteist prejudices and discrimination at his workplace (University of Karnataka) as well as at homes of his Marxist friends even after attaining academic and material success⁴. This was also the time (seventies) when the term Harijan began to be substituted by the term Dalit carrying with it political signification. This phenomenon became manifest in different regions / languages across India.

Marxist writers failed to examine the Dalits’ position in society from the experiential ground. In the eighties, representation of Dalits was undertaken to depict how the Dalit as a member of the working class manages to carry on his traditional duties and remains faithful to the rural landscape as well as to the panchayat and its unyielding dictat concerning casteist segregation of communities. Poomani’s novels, Piragu (1979) and Vekkai (1982) bear this out.
Although a Dalit, Poomani works within the paradigms of Marxist writers' trodden path.

1.2 - EARLY VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Poomani's novel *Vekkai* (1982) examines a Dalit's counter violence against power structures in rural society. But it fails to explore the Dalit consciousness, his perception of his marginal position in the changing social structure from feudal to capitalist mode of production. Poomani restricts it to an analysis of violence arising out of contested land between a rich landlord and a Dalit factory worker owning a small piece of land. The land signifies emotional pride for the Dalit worker's family, it is not a gainful source of income for him. The contested space remains largely delimited by class rather than caste. Further, the novel portrays the young protagonist, 15-year-old Chidambaram as a courageous lad who settles scores with the adversary who had got his (Chidambaram's) elder brother murdered. His travails are restricted to cooking meals for himself and his father in the forest or at dilapidated ruins while on the run from the law. He finally decides to surrender at the court. The trauma, agony and the awakening of a Dalit protagonist as portrayed later by Sivakami, Unjai Rajan or Markku is totally absent in Poomani's novel. In his earlier novel *Piragu*, Poomani, while capturing the impoverished lives of Chakkilyar community effortlessly and with a dash of wry humour, presents an uncritical picture of upper caste characters like Kandaiya Naicker, Chakaralingam Pillai who are liberal humanists with a patronising attitude towards Dalits like Azhagiri Pagadai and Karuppan. Karrupan's subversive humour lays bare a Dalit's coping mechanism with an oppressive, casteist social structure. The novel's easy endorsement of essentialist values and conservative liberalism renders it less radical than Sivakami's *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* (1989) or Unjai Rajan's *Egiru* (1996). The Sri Lankan Tamil novelist Daniel's novels like *Panchamar* (1982) *Kanal* (1986), *Adimaigal* (1987), often citied as precursor to
Dalit fiction of the nineties (like Poomani’s novels) represent the lives of Dalit farm labourers who migrated to Sri Lanka from Tamil Nadu. They are oppressed by upper caste landlords who exploit their labour. Daniel’s novels examine the social stratification primarily from a Marxist perspective often subsuming caste oppression into what he considers a more pervasive class conflict. Daniel’s Panchamar like Poomani’s Piragu presents an upper caste Marxist, liberal humanist Aiyannan along with a militant Marxist activist Kumaravelan (an illegitimate son of an upper caste, landowning woman and a Dalit male worker) as leaders of the oppressed Dalit farmhands. It can be said that the novels of late seventies and early eighties did not take an unambiguous, ideological position regarding Dalit subjectivity.

The linking of class and caste oppression or the failure to critique the continued oppression of lower castes despite class mobility disillusioned the Dalits from such a literature that stood committed but not committed enough towards their cause. While Poomani and Daniel paved the way for later Dalit fiction, their novels continued the Dravidian and Marxist literary tradition of subsuming caste within class. Dalits felt let down once more. Neither Periyar nor Marx could liberate the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Literature inspired by either of them did not represent the Dalit voice or foreground their oppressed state in Tamil fiction. The reformist, compassionate discourse towards Dalits in the writings of Pudumai Pittan, Jayakantan or Rajaji did not present an authentic picture of Dalit sensibility or their angst.

1.3 - AN AWAKENING AMONG DALITS

In the late 80s and 90s the alienation of Dalits from mainstream political and cultural (including literary) movements/trends was a stark fact. They found themselves unrepresented, unheard and systematically marginalized from Tamil
literary world. At this juncture, two significant events left a deep impact on Tamil literary discourse:

a) Fall of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union and the subsequent dissolution of erstwhile USSR (1989).


Following the fall of Soviet regime, a critiquing of Marxism and an introspective enquiry into Marxist thought was initiated. This led to a foregrounding of Dalit issues that encouraged a sharper focus on caste inequalities and casteist oppression that had hitherto remained subsumed within larger areas of agitational struggle related to class or language or Dravidian identity. Dalits distanced themselves from Marxist writing and began to write of their experiences as 'subjects' rather than remain passive as objects of aesthetic or ideological or spiritual endorsements.

The publication of the corpus of Ambedkar's writings and speeches in English by the government of Maharashtra in 1990, to coincide with Ambedkar centenary celebrations, was a significant turning point in the history of Dalit consciousness in Tamil Nadu. The works were soon enough made available in Tamil as well by the Ambedkar Foundation. The spread of Ambedkarite vision of society, his focused foregrounding of Dalit experience, aspirations, cultural deprivations and political marginalisation gave a tremendous boost to Tamil fiction.

Dalit literature in Tamil brought together Ambedkarite thought and forged it with social research as practised by Tamil Marxist writers and further interlinked it with Periyar's articulation of self-respect. Equipped with such an ideological base, Dalit fiction, autobiography and poetry formulated a distinct and enduring space in the literary domain of Tamil. The emergence of Dalit literature in Tamil, albeit delayed (as compared to its counterpart in Marathi or Kannada),
marks an important moment in Indian political and literary history. The notion of distributive justice to combat historically accumulated disabilities was thrown open to public debate and enquiry by Tamil Dalit writers writing in the early nineties.

This period (1989-1999) marks the cultural awakening of the Dalits that paved the way for an organized protest against dominant structures in cultural, political and literary space of Tamil Nadu. Dalit literature is thus closely interlinked to social, political movements and is primarily subversive in intent as well as in content. The emergence of Dalit literature parallels the shift in cultural, political identity of the oppressed, lower castes. The shift in identity from Harijan to Dalit, the shift from Dravidian to Adi Dravidian resulted in a significant shift in literary representation of their subjectivity and their position in our society. It moved away from their earlier silence to articulation of their culture, affirmation of their social vision and offering their experiential interventions in the world of literary writing.

The publication of Sivakami's novels, Pazhiyana Kazhidalum (1989), Aanandayee (1992), Bama's autobiographical narrative Karukku (1992), her feminist Dalit study Sangati (1994), Markku's Yathirai (1993), Imaiyam's Koveru Kazhudaigal (1994) and Arumugam (1999) are significant milestones in Tamil Dalit fiction. Add to this, a string of articulate poets, playwrights and critics have enabled Dalit literature in Tamil to earn a space in academic and literary domain.

1.4 - RECEPTION TO DALIT FICTION

It is, however, by no means, an uncontested space. Reception to Dalit literature in Tamil has been rather guarded or downright condescending. Either it is ridiculed as loud, unaesthetic, abusive in its vocabulary and unmindful of
literary traditions and grammar or it is rejected outright as not worth a serious
discussion. A critic like Venkat Swaminathan is hesitant even to admit Dalit
fiction as literature. When he edited an issue of Sahitya Akademi's journal
Indian Literature (No. 193, September-October '99) he included short stories,
theses and poems by major Dalit writers in Tamil but put them down as "Facets
Of Dalit Life In Recent Tamil Writings". Not only does Swaminathan adopt a
patronising attitude towards Dalit literature, he offers a biased reading of trends
in political and literary movements. He argues that right from the eighth
century, Saint poets have been representing the sufferings of "untouchables"
and that literary history of the Tamils always focused on injustices and
discriminatory practices "built into the whole structured society...and that did
not exclude the Dalits." At best naïve, and at worst, rather inane,
Swaminathan's assessment merely concedes: "One can see a stir and a
churning going on." Jayamohan in his book, Naveena Tamil Ilakiya Arimugam
(An Introduction To Modern Tamil Literature) is dismissive of Dalit literature on
aesthetic grounds. He also refuses to take Dalit critic Raj Gautaman's critical
work with any degree of academic seriousness.

Although Dalit writing has found wide publication in Tamil since early nineties,
critical discourse on Dalit literature has been rather sketchy and unstimulating.
Much of critical energy has been spent on deciding who is a Dalit writer and
who is not. No consensus has emerged in critical circles as yet. On the other
hand there have been critical estimates of Dalit fiction and poetry that valorise
Dalit writing solely on account of the writer's Dalit identity and has paid no
critical attention to its literary input. Such estimates resort to rhetoric and are
ungrounded on any ideological or theoretical base.

Commentators like Chandrabose and Tirumavalavan confound protest culture
(Kalaga Panpadu) with regressive culture when they advocate that Dalit lifestyle
could be represented as protest against dominant culture. They posit
alcoholism, street brawls, eating of dead animals, etc., as discourse of protest. This is a self-defeating argument that fails to take into account the oppressive socio-economic structure that pushes Dalits into such a life-style. Rajendrachozhan in his book *Dalitiyam* (1997) points out that Dalits cannot isolate themselves and fight for their rights. They would have to root their struggle on an ideological base. He believes that Dalits would gain a strong ally in Marxist thought. He dismisses the argument that Dalits could attain deliverance from oppression on their own. The oppressed, he believes, have "to be problem solvers as well. Mere experience of oppression won't help them gain empowerment."

Raj Gautaman has written extensively on Dalit culture and literature. Gautaman's writing reflects a rare combination of scholarship, ideological conviction, experiential perception and a theoretical orientation. Gautaman's study of Tamil epic *Periyapuranam* offers a fresh reading that foregrounds the subaltern voice in the reception of a canonised text. His essays in journals, monographs and book reviews reveal how critical theory can be effectively used to assess writing emerging from marginalized groups. He sees close links between women's writing, blacks' writing and Dalit literature. However, Gautaman's criticism often remains embroiled in the rhetoric of anti-Brahminism and arbitrarily grants or denies 'Dalit' status to a text. He has not, as yet, published a full length critical study on Dalit fiction. Gautaman's *Dalit Panpadu* (Dalit Culture) (1993) and *Poi + Abatham > Unmai* (Lie + Absurdity > Truth) (1995) are milestones in Dalit literary criticism.

1.5 - DALIT FICTION IN TAMIL: ISSUES AND DEBATES

The debate over Dalit aesthetics and the issue regarding who is a Dalit writer have remained unresolved in Tamil literary discourse. It is worth pointing out that for the Dalit, writing is a political exercise as well. The Dalit writer
deliberately subverts dominant literary discourse or accepted notions regarding aesthetics or use of codified grammar. A Dalit writer's language affirms his social identity and positioning in the society. It foregrounds the uniqueness of Dalit culture; its specific non-literary traditions that have evolved from its proximity to oral traditions and enforced illiteracy. The Dalit writer draws upon his lived experience in his writings. It would be an act of bad faith on the Dalit writer's part if he sanitises the Dalit experience/language in order to accommodate the aesthetic norms evolved by dominant groups.

Dalit literature in Tamil has carved a distinct space within contemporary Tamil literature. It has brought into focus hitherto uncharted areas of experience, reformulated genres, subjected literary stereotypes and aesthetic paradigms to interrogation. Dalit fiction is steadily moving away from largely documentative or enumerative writing to an introspective, self-reflexive, non-monologic and interrogative discourse. It would be interesting to study how Dalit fiction, especially written by Dalit women writers, has successfully resisted the constraints imposed by existing hegemonic discourse and has created through positive subversions, a distinct space for itself.

Dalit fiction shares ideological affinities with feminist writing. Women and Dalits are both oppressed groups oppressed on account of their birth, for biological or sociological reasons. Dalit writing has immensely gained from feminist thought and modes of resistance. Both groups also believe that they have to fight their battles themselves. The fact of intersectionality between caste and gender has of late begun to receive attention although not to the extent that the issue merits. How caste impinges on women's lives has been studied by sociologists, notably by Leela Dube. The hierarchical structure that delimits caste principles are, of course, more complex and multi-layered than the hierarchical principles defining gender. However, one articulates the other, one impinges on the
other. The writings of Dalit women explore this relationship with admirable clarity.

The interface between caste and gender discourse is articulated in the representations of Dalit women in Dalit fiction. Women and Dalits have been targets of violence instituted and practised by upper castes and patriarchal structures. How do these institutions operate against Dalit women - a category of persons who are victims of violence in a more intense way. Any violation of hierarchy by Dalits or women is handled only by resorting to violence by the dominant structures of power. An inquiry into the modes of violence against Dalit women as represented by Dalit writers would bring to focus the complex intersection of caste and gender principles as they operate in our society.

1.6 - DESTABILIZING HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE

The works of Bama, Sivakami, Imaiyan and others examine the multiple structures of oppression against Dalit women. Sivakami’s novels, Pazhiyana Kazhidum and Aanandayee and Bama’s autobiographical works Karukku and Sangati examine how violence against Dalit women is legitimised and institutionalised by State, church, family and upper caste communities. Dalit women toil and get exploited at home and outside, are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. The gender as well as caste identities of these writers help formulate a disturbing discourse that resists oppression of Dalits by upper castes as well as masculinist discourse within the Dalit community.

This aspect of Dalit fiction has remained largely unrecognised so far. Why so? One reason could be that criticism and theorization on Dalit literature has been dominated by men who are unwilling to reckon with the self-reflexivity of women Dalit writers. Dalit women writers’ resistance from within, their efforts
at interrogating Dalit internalisation of dominant power structures marks the
gendering of Dalit literary discourse. Their input in this area merits a critical
scrutiny. A reading of Imaiyam’s novels offers a differing perspective. Although
Dalit women characters occupy central space in both his novels, they are
represented from a patriarchal perspective. They are constrained by patriarchal
codes pertaining to women’s sexuality. Ideals of sexual morality, concepts of
chastity, marital fidelity, excessive outrage over rape on account of moral
scruples get reflected in Dalit fiction written by men. The rape of a Dalit woman
by an upper caste male or enforced sex with a Dalit woman by her husband are
viewed in radically different terms by Sivakami and Imaiyam, a woman and a
man.

The interrogation of Dalit identity as embedded in patriarchal ideology would
help us examine the course of Dalit empowerment in the cultural arena. While
Bama and Sivakami contextualise Dalit women’s sexual conduct within the
socially, materially and politically unjust system, Imaiyam’s fiction moves closer
to a valorization and plea for emulation of masculinist and elitist sexual ideas/
codes. Violence against Dalit women as represented in the fiction of these
writers requires a close study of cultural and ideological modes of perception
underlying them.

Another important institution that discriminates against Dalits, denies them the
self-esteem that they strive for and fixes them in cultural stereotypes is the
church. Conversion to Christianity has not enabled the Dalit to attain a liberated
and spiritually dignified self that she aspired for. Bama’s Karukku can be read
as a neo conversion narrative that lays bare a tortured sensibility, outraged by
the humiliation and discrimination meted out to Dalit Kanyastrees by the
church. Besides Karukku, Markku’s Yathirai and Imaiyam’s Koveru Kazhudaigal
underline casteist hierarchical equations as practised by the church in the
context of Dalit Christians.
Dalits are not allowed to sing in the choir or share the space for worship with upper caste Christians or participate in festivals and processions. They are not even allowed to share a common cemetery. The Dalit dream of finding social respectability, brotherhood and equality in the new community remains elusive. At the same time Dalit Christians are also deprived of constitutional privileges granted to non-Christian Dalits. The marginalisation of Dalits in the cultural, political space is further delimited by institutionalised religion. The church propagates pity, humility and forgiveness to Dalits while the Dalit writers foreground the figure of Jesus as a defender of the oppressed.

Dalit fiction thus seeks to destabilize hegemonic literary discourse. It foregrounds an area of experience that had been until recently kept out of literary writing. It shows how in the context of Dalits, violence is legitimised by patriarchal, state and religious authorities. State collusion with elitist, social, political and religious structures of power has made containment of Dalit mobility possible. Collusion among hegemonic social structures/agencies has also helped in reinforcing caricatured types in literary space. Dalit fiction ruptures such a discourse both in terms of content and craft. Their negation of literary traditions, standardised grammar or vocabulary and accepted genres of writing give rise to an alternative literary practice that is grounded in protest and ideological conviction. This protest aesthetics or aesthetics of protest is embedded in violence— in terms of linguistic, aesthetic, generic and narrative strategies. This violence evolved through writing counters the multiple modes of violent oppression that the Dalits are subjected to in their quotidian life. What is mundane and quotidian for the non-Dalit (writer) forms the site of social change for the Dalit (writer).
1.7 - CO-RELATION BETWEEN FACTS AND REPRESENTATION

The proposed study will examine literary representations of Dalit women in fiction by Bama, Sivakami and Imaiyam to examine the writers' implication of dominant ideology and its impact on cohabitation of communities divided on grounds of gender and caste inequalities. The significance of gender as an entry point to Dalit life has not received serious critical attention. Although feminist thought has been recognised as an able tool for analysing Dalit experience, a systematic, theoretical critique of Dalit literary writing in Tamil has not been undertaken. Women Dalit writers have offered an intensely self-reflexive critique of patriarchal and caste structures of power and have depicted how violence has been used traditionally as well as in contemporary times against the Dalit community, in particular against Dalit women. A study of representations of Dalit women in Dalit fiction would allow for a critical examination of how the Dalit woman's life is embedded in caste and gender violence. The following analysis would bear out how Dalit fiction in Tamil mirrors the position of Dalits in society as borne out by facts. There indeed exists a close co-relation between historical, contemporary documentation of Dalits' lives and representation of Dalits in Tamil fiction.

Dalits are perceived primarily as a marginalized segment of our society. As a result, the fact of their numerical strength hardly influences the general attitude of scholars and commoners alike. Writers like Bama and Gunasekaran in Tamil, Suraj Pal Chauhan. Om Prakash Valmiki, Mohan Das Naimisharay, Kausalya Baisantri in Hindi, Urmila Pawar in Marathi have drawn our attention to the paradox of numerical strength of Dalit population being subjected to an alienated, marginal position in our society. Statistics provided by census corroborate the writers' assessment. According to the 1961 census, the Dalits numbered 64 million out of a total population of 439 million. In the 1971 census they numbered 80 million out of total population of 548 million. According to the
census of 1991, the Dalits numbered 138 million in a total population of 846 million.\textsuperscript{13}

A subtext within the above figure reveals the partial truth embedded in the official assessment. As Clarke points out, Dalits among the Hindus alone are accounted for in the official figures. Dalits who converted to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Sikhism are not "considered a part of this social category since these religions claim to be casteless".\textsuperscript{14} While neo-Buddhists and converted Sikhs of Dalit origin have been recently granted scheduled caste status, Christian Dalits are yet to receive such recognition. This discrepancy assumes significance in the context of Tamil Nadu in particular, in the light of the following facts:

1. According to 1991 census of Tamil Nadu records, Dalits constitute 19.18\% of total population of Tamil Nadu, while the Dalits of Tamil Nadu represent only about 8\% of the total Dalit population of India.

2. Of the total population of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, between 50 and 70 percent of them are Christians, of which Paraiyars account for 59 percent of the Dalit population in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{15}

The novelists under study, Sivakami, Bama and Imaiyam represent Paraiyars in their novels who could be, in all fairness, considered as typical representatives of Dalits of Tamil Nadu. In terms of numerical strength, educational qualification, political awareness and organized intervention in the cause of their rights and representation, Paraiyars override other Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. The ensuing chapters would offer a detailed analysis of how each of the three writers under discussion represent Paraiyars in their novels. Suffice it to say at this juncture that while Sivakami underlines the need for Paraiyar youth to organize and resist better the complacent mimicry of dominant
ideology by empowered Paraiyars, Bama depicts the resilience and humor of Paraiyars as well as discrimination against Christian Paraiyars within and outside the church. Imaiyam, however, offers a dissonant voice as his novels depict how the Paraiyar community oppresses Dalit communities positioned beneath :t. Nonetheless, even Imaiyam concurs with Bama and Sivakami in his representation of Dalit Christians as most oppressed among Dalits in Tamil Nadu. This is corroborated by sociologists and historians as well, as seen below.

J. Tharamangalam observes that "in Tamil Nadu Dalits form 63 percent of all Catholics but represent only 3.09 percent of priests and even these are excluded from positions of power such as principals of schools and colleges...
The Dalit priests are only put in charge of parishes that have exclusively Dalit members".16 Catholic priests in Tamil Nadu hardly account for a meager 3 percent out of the 70 percent Dalit Christians in India.

In Tamil Nadu Dalit Christians are "segregated inside the church during worship, are discouraged from serving at worship or be part of the church choir. Their dead cannot be buried in common cemeteries. Dalits have little participation in the decision-making processes in parish committees. Church properties like lands and groves, are given on lease (only) to the upper-caste Christians... Dalits are discriminated in their recruitment to the clergy".17 Bama's *Karukku* and Imaiyam's *Koveru Kazhudaigal* depict moving accounts of blatant discrimination against Dalit Christians as meted out to be them by the priests, church officials and upper caste Christians. Markku's novel *Yathirai* (1993) depicts in great detail the rigid stratification based on caste in the day to day functioning of the church.

Unlike conversions among upper castes, Dalits do not convert to Christianity in their individual capacity. They convert as an entire community, as a caste, as the inhabitants of a Cheri. Hence they are taken in as a caste in actual practice.
While Christianity may propound egalitarianism, Christians incorporate caste in their life style. The ambivalence (or is it dualism) between scriptural injunction and devout’s profession is not, however, unique to Christianity.

Continued discrimination against Dalits within the church has given rise to disillusionment, resistance to authority, founding of alternative (exclusively Dalit) church, re-conversion to Hinduism or abandonment of faith. Bama walked out of a nunnery of which she had been a part of for seven years when she could no longer endure the anti-Dalit practices of the institution (Karukku). Raj Gautaman’s novel, Siluvairaj Charitiram (2002) shows how Dalit youth unable to get employment decide to reconvert to Hinduism to avail of reservation benefits allocated to Hindu Dalits. This exercise is underlined as a subversive act to counter State discrimination against Dalit Christians.18

There is strong emerging movement of Dalit Christians within the church who are inspired by liberation ideology in the late nineties and early part of the first decade of the 21st century. These Dalit Christians perceive Christianity as a religion of the downtrodden and Jesus as a radical defender of social justice. In Karukku, Bama laments that the church seeks to present Jesus as meek and humble, never as just and radical. To Bama, “Jesus is a revolutionary...in his own time he was a radical in many ways...but people generally prefer to see Jesus as a soft and gentle forgiving Jesus. When you talk to them about this other side of Jesus, the one who fought against the system they do not like it...the priests only have stereotypical sermons. If they were to teach people the other aspect of Jesus, the people would rise up against them and then these priests and nuns would lose all their power and position.”19

Dalits face discrimination in aspects of secular life as well. It is worth noting that wherever their visibility is dense, discrimination and oppression exist as a matter of rule. Robert Deliege comments, “Untouchables provide the bulk of
agricultural labour and agricultural work in the broad sense, is an essential feature of untouchability. Dalits in Tamil Nadu -- men and women -- work as underpaid farmhands who are exploited by Nadars, Goundars, Odaiyars and Naidus. They aren't paid due wages. Their huts are burnt down. Young daughters and wives are routinely molested in the fields and the men are implicated in false cases.

The police and the panchayat are won over by the landowning upper caste and hence the Dalits find the panchayat unwilling to redress their grievances, while they live in constant fear of violence and custodial torture at the hands of the police. The writers under study emphasise that Dalits should empower themselves through education to counter acts of discrimination at the hands of elected body and executive authority.

According to Census of India 1981, literacy rate among Dalits in Tamil Nadu was 14.66% in 1961 and 29.67% in 1981. Dalits' poor literacy rate is a major factor in aggravating their oppression in society. Despite the reservations policy, one often comes across Dalit students opting out of professional courses or higher education due to their economic backwardness. The suicide of a Dalit engineering girl student Rajani S. Anand triggered wide spread violence in Kerala. Unable to pay her education bills, Rajani, the daughter of a daily wage labourer, Sivanandan, ended her life when she was forced to discontinue her studies. Her father had approached nationalized banks, the panchayat, the Scheduled Caste Development Board, religious institutions and politicians for financial aid but "all turned me away." Dalits face tremendous odds in the struggle to overcome their social and economic disadvantage.

Discrimination against Dalits prevails as a multi-layered phenomenon. This is borne out in Bama's Karukku in Tamil, Kausalya Baisantri's Dohra Abhishap in Hindi, Urmila Pawar's Amhihi Ithihas Ghadawala in Marathi and numerous other
narratives of Dalit suffering. The State too participates or condones in this unfair system. Even a phenomenal crisis like the recent Tsunami could not wash away the hatred for Dalits. Newspapers widely reported how relief aid was denied to Dalits. They were shunted out of relief camps. Young Dalit girls were not allowed to use toilets set up by NGOs. Dalit Women and children had to sleep at night in the open as more empowered castes -- in this case, Meenavars listed as most backward class -- drove Dalits out of relief camps and diverted relief aid and prevented Dalits from drinking water from taps/plastic tanks provided by Unicef as they considered Dalits "untouchables" who would "pollute" water. Dalit fishermen at NagaPaattinam, Tamil Nadu were nudged out of relief and compensation queues. A Dalit survivor Saravanan recounts, "Whenever officials and trucks come to give food we are left out because nobody allows us to get near the trucks. Some men form a ring around us and prevent us from moving ahead in the queue." 22

Dalit fiction records and narrates sufferings of a community through autobiographical and experiential narratives. Dalit subjectivity, in a way, is community-derived. Emergence of selfhood among Dalits is largely community-oriented rather than an individually evolved construct. Dalit writers use their acquired education to address issues faced by Dalits in their fiction. Their target readers are both Dalit and non-Dalit readers. Literacy rate being very low among Dalits (as per the Census of India 1981, if it is 40.65% among male Dalits it is an abysmal 18.47% among women Dalits in Tamil Nadu even as the state's sex ratio for Dalits stands at 980 females per 1000 males), writers target non-Dalit readers, writers and critics in order to implicate them as well as arouse them to interventionist action in the context of Dalit lives. Bama's writing, in fact, reached her villagers through oral reproductions through reading sessions of her fiction under a tree for the largely illiterate Dalit villagers whom she has represented in her work. 23
It is such a context that gives rise to what Prof R.S. Khare, director at the Center for Critical Human Survival Issues, department of anthropology, Virginia University, claims regarding Dalit literature. Prof Khare contends that Dalit literature is not always representative of Dalit society at large. He contends: "It is only an aspectual representation. Perhaps only one percent of Dalits actually read Dalit literature. So it is important to examine who it is meant for. What is interesting is that the main focus of the literature is usually either to ridicule the Hindu way or put forward a protagonist who is an angry Dalit." 24

However, this observation is debatable. Dalit writers target non-Dalit readers as well as illiterate but receptive Dalits to initiate a debate and intervention on Dalit centric problems and concerns. At this juncture, I would like to record what Bama observes in her Acknowledgements to English translation of her work Sangati: "Sangati grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society." (OUP, 2005, p. IX) The following chapters of this thesis would further amply disprove Khare's reading of Dalit literature and its zone of representation.

1.8 - ANOMALIES AND SELF-CONTRADICTIONS

No community is entirely free from inner contradictions, anomalies in precepts and practice. A literature derived from/inspired by community experience is likely/bound to reflect such anomalies and contradictions. While Dalits agitate for an egalitarian social structure and affirm their humanity in an unjust world, the community is not yet ready to affirm gender equality. Dalit women are oppressed not only by a casteist structure or state machinery but also by Dalit males at home and outside. Dalit women thus suffer on account of their caste as well as gender identity. The novels under study delineate how Dalit women are exploited, attacked by upper caste landlords, religious institutions, the
police, the panchayat, and Dalit men at home -- fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, male in-laws. Often, the panchayat functions as an extension of a patriarchal family.

Caste and gender hierarchies outside and inside the home render the woman an outcaste in her community. The intersection of caste and gender in Dalit discourse has been less recognized by critics and majority of writers. Dalit women as well as Dalit women's writings are subsumed under the umbrella of Dalits and Dalit literature. The gaps and caveats enunciated by Dalit women's discourse/ writing is thus brushed aside as unnecessarily divisive and unproductive for Dalit cause.25

Devi Barathi's short story *Bali* (1983) has been hailed as a milestone in Tamil Dalit literature. No critical survey of Dalit short stories in Tamil is complete without valorizing this particular work both in terms of craft and its narrative. Raj Gautaman, noted Dalit critic holds *Bali* as a good example of Dalit short story in his book *Dalit Panpadu.* (1993, 102) The story presents an encounter between a Dalit male customer and a Brahmin prostitute. The man's ancestors had been the traditional carriers of night soil of the latter's. He had fled the village to escape casteist oppression and the young impoverished girl has landed up at the brothel. On learning of her ancestry, the man recounts the countless instances of humiliation and repression that his community had to face - carrying a spittoon around one's neck, women enforced to walk without an upper garment, to collect left over food, to abide by the Shastras framed by her ancestors. He sees his meeting with her as an apt opportunity to settle scores. He rapes her using enormous violence, gagging her, subjecting her to cigarette burns inflicting pain on each part of her body. He spits into her mouth by way of kissing her, he renders her body as abominable as the shit pot that his ancestors had to clean up at her grandfather's mansion. The girl is shown to
shed silent tears in response to the atrocities his community had to endure and receive his violence on her body helplessly.

The girl initially doesn't resist his violence because she is a prostitute: "Naan vesi" (I am a prostitute). Slowly, she is shown to accept his physical torture of her body as a "just " punishment for her ancestors' oppression against his ancestors. The male writer here postulates: (a) a prostitute has no caste or subjectivity, she is only a body; (b) it is only a Brahmin woman who can offer penance, "Prayachitant", offer redressal to Dalits' age-old oppression. She or rather her body has to pay the price, willingly, without protest, "without opposition" (Edirpu inri). The Dalit male hollers, "Where is the compensation? Whither justice?" The Brahmin prostitute sheds tears in answer, as an answer, in fact. The narrator reports, "She wept for all those tortures inflicted on him and his ancestors, inflicted by her grandfather and her ancestors. As a penance for the past, her entire body had turned black, burnt by his cigarette butts. She looked like a sacrifice, offered to him, without a protest.... n26

This story by a male Dalit writer fails to see the woman as a victim of patriarchy. A woman's rape, violent violation of a woman's body is sought to be represented as a compensation for an entire community's age-old oppression. The narratorial assertion that she was a willing martyr can be condoned perhaps only if we view it as a marker of a male fantasy. Such ideological resolutions are valorised by critics and academics. Such a critical discourse however stands seriously undermined by fiction written by Bama and Sivakami.

1.9 - OBJECTIVES

Women Dalit writers destabilise patriarchal control over Dalit discourse and thereby problematise gender as embedded in Dalit lives. My thesis would foreground this aspect of Dalit fiction in Tamil and explore how Dalit women are
represented in Tamil Dalit fiction. Although feminist and Marxist readings of works by Bama, Sivakami and Imaiyam would be undertaken, the argument of this thesis stands delimited by the limitations of mainstream feminism and Marxist theory in the context of Dalit life and Indian social context. While women and Dalits are both oppressed groups, women are not a homogenous group as feminists traditionally liked to believe. Upper caste women, middle class women, women in urban/metropolitan areas are not always free from class/caste consciousness. It would be unfair to Dalits if women as a category are treated as though bereft of a caste sensibility.

Caste system places women on a lower scale in hierarchy, yet upper caste women are given certain privileges over Dalits. Similarly, Dalits as a category are outside the four designated varnas but Dalit men enjoy privileges over Dalit women, who are not recognized as a category in themselves. Urmila Pawar, a Marathi Dalit woman novelist comments, "Dalit men fight for humanity but what is humanity even they do not know, because they do not have humanity towards their wives." Non-Dalit women and Dalit women are oppressed by patriarchal structure but Dalit women are subjected to caste oppressions much more rigorously even while upper caste women do not entirely escape stricture of caste.

Bama asserts, "I would rather prefer to be called a Dalit feminist." Sivakami states categorically that feminists "foreground women's sexuality much more vigorously rather than focus on absence of any freedom whatsoever to downtrodden women -- their freedom to life and liberty...the overt emphasis on sexual freedom for women by feminists detracts their attention from issues like need for equal opportunities for women in spheres other than sexual, opposition to caste oppressions on women...we need to focus on women's freedom in its entirety -- for all women, in all aspects of life."
Imaiyam, the only male Dalit writer under study, states, "Literature doesn't have a specific goal. It is only a beginning of a long journey...I do not believe in any ideology." Imaiyam claims to resist feminism, Marxism and Dalitiyam. The following chapters would undertake an exploration of representation of Dalit women in the novels of Bama, Sivakami and Imaiyam. They would also probe the implications of the writers' statements on the traffic between ideology and writing in the context of their own representation of Dalit women in their fiction.

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a Marathi Dalit writer, activist and critic points out, "A Dalit writer cannot be neutral when injustice is being done...I am not going to remain silent...in literature too...the writer can be neutral only when there is no relationship between him and experience...In Dalit literature, writers are narrating their own experiences, they are writing about their own society. Whatever is in this literature, it is theirs, they cannot remain neutral...They have to take sides. They will not fulfill their artistic responsibility by simply recording or reporting...When we expel the activist from the writer, he is no longer a Dalit writer." Limbale's comments help us to interrogate Imaiyam's simultaneous claim of writing from one's experience and denial of activist/ ideological bearings. Imaiyam's attention to form, craft and aesthetic pleasure for readers detracts him from imparting a Dalit vision to his work or underscore an interventionist reading. Instead, he posits his subject matter and represents his characters as an aesthetic spectacle.

Inquilab, Tamil novelist, playwright and poet comments that those who refute the need for a separate entity or categorization for 'Dalit literature', actually, are unable to overcome their own caste consciousness or accept Dalit
presence/ movement for a Dalit identity. He views Dalit writing as "a writing about writing a struggle."

Dalit women writers are engaged in writing about this struggle and presenting a subtext often neglected in the recordings of the larger collective of 'Dalit literature', namely, the twice cursed lives of women Dalits. Swarupa Rani, a Telugu Dalit woman poet writes:

If male arrogance at home
   gives a resounding slap on one cheek
   caste dominance outside
   thrashes my other cheek
When I went into the fields to earn money by labour
   when the landlord there
   lay in wait
   to rob
   me as well as my sweat
   I wanted to bury myself in the earth like a seed.  

Raj Gautaman notes that it is women who are likely to struggle longer for their liberation and face setbacks in their struggle for equality far more intensely than workers or Dalits. The argument of this thesis foregrounds this intense struggle for women-Dalits as represented by Tamil Dalit writers like Bama, Sivakami and Imaiyam. It would be interesting to study in fiction what Leela Dube holds in her research paper, Caste and Women: "Caste is not dead. Gender is a live issue. The principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in (Hindu) society; the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender."  

Dalit women writers like Sivakami and Bama foreground specific forms of oppression faced by Dalit women - their twice cursed/ oppressed lives - in order
to prevent theoretical erasure of Dalit women in Dalit literary discourse. Their fiction indicates theoretical limitations of feminism as well as *Dalitiyam* and underscore efforts to broaden their frames of reference. Dominant conceptions of discrimination against Dalits could lead to a viewing of subordination of Dalit women on account of their gender as secondary enough to merit erasure. Women Dalit writers highlight identification and remediation of caste and gender in any inquiry into oppression of Dalits. Dalit men's oppression cannot be steadily privileged as "the experience of Dalits". Oppression/discrimination practised against Dalit women is to be viewed as a complex phenomenon even while taking care as not to dilute the import of Dalit discourse. The chapters that follow propose to study the nuancing of Dalit discourse in Tamil fiction as reflected in the novels of Sivakami, Bama and Imaiym. What Kimberle Crenshaw observes in the context of black women holds true for Dalit women as well: "Any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which black (in my argument, Dalit) women are subordinated."\(^{36}\)

The following chapters would offer a critical reading of the novels of Sivakami, Bama and Imaiym. In chapter II, novels and a few short stories of Sivakami are studied to foreground gender oppression of Dalit women within domestic space. In Sivakami's fiction, women are shown to attain dignity only when they transgress social stereotypes and role-playing. Dalit women's struggle to attain selfhood culminates in evolving a socially transgressive identity, often in a public domain. Education, work, ideological consciousness, participation in collective, organized, socially committed movements - these are some of the positive strategies outlined by Sivakami for Dalit women to combat patriarchal and caste oppression.

Chapter III deals with the works of Bama to show how the writer works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If *Karukku* upholds education
for Dalits, *Sangati* foregrounds need for organized agitation, while *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. Bama’s use of language, innovative forms of narration and subversive humour are highlighted as Dalit writer’s strategies to subvert mainstream literary discourse. The problems of Dalit Christians are looked into at length as Bama’s experience of working in a nunnery for seven years and her later quitting her post and distancing from institutionalized Christianity shape her narratives to a significant extent.

Chapter IV takes up the novels of Imaiyam to unravel how they pave the way for gendering of Dalit discourse in Tamil. Imaiyam raises important questions regarding role of political activism in the arena of Dalit and women empowerment. Imaiyam’s attention to craft and language and his concern for recovery of an imagined past where Dalits cohabited harmoniously with other castes while discharging their traditional occupations is critically examined. This has been further juxtaposed to his representation of Dalit women enmeshed in a struggle for social mobility even as they stand trapped by the rigors of female sexuality.

Chapter V offers a formal conclusion to the argument of this thesis regarding gendered representation of Dalit women in the novels of Sivakami, Bama and Imaiyam. It addresses this issue on an ideological plane. Texts of Dalit poets, short story writers, playwrights, critics and recorders of Dalit oral arts are examined to strengthen the central argument of the thesis regarding representation of twice cursed lives of Dalit women in Tamil fiction.

**1.10 - TO SUM UP**

Dalit fiction in Tamil emerged as a distinct literary trend in the 1990s. Dalits, disillusioned by the Dravidian movement, Marxist literary interventions or early literary voices emerging from the Dalit community, took to writing their lived
experiences in radically innovative form and language. Dalit literature in Tamil has brought into focus uncharted areas of experience, reformulated genres and is largely a non-monologic and interrogative discourse. Its affinity with feminist or Marxist discourse is qualified by an awareness of their limitations in the context of their own lives. Dalit fiction in Tamil foregrounds the gender inequality within the Dalit social context which makes it self-reflexive and interrogative. This thesis aims to explain this in all its complexity. The novels of Sivakami, Bama and Imaiyam written / published between 1989 and 2002 have been closely studied to explore gender – caste intersections in the lives of Dalits. This thesis attempts a critical examination of representation of Dalit women and the novelists’ handling of gender – caste traffic in the lives of Dalits in Tamil Nadu.
NOTES


Madavaiyya, Padmavati Charitiram, 1890; (Chennai: New Century Book House, 1994).


3. Sundara Ramasamy, “Thoti Tamilku Vanda Kathai” (The story of how the scavenger found an entry in Tamil) in Thotiyin Magan (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2000) 9. Sundara Ramasamy had completed his translation of Tagazhi’s novel in 1951-51 but could find a willing publisher only in March 2000. In his introduction, he observes, “Now times have changed. Dalit literature has made a mark in Tamil. It has also found a sizeable readership.” And therefore hopes that this novel would be received well in Tamil. (p.10, translation mine).


12. The references pertain to:
Omprakash Valmiki *Jhutan* (New Delhi: Radakrishna Prakashan, 1997).


elephonic conversation with me, March 2003.


s Fernando: 261.


yam, "Down Memory Lane" (Ninavilirundu Konjam) in _Kalachuvadu, _October 2004: 39, translation mine.


ab in his preface to Unjairajan’s _Egiru_ (Chennai: Bahruli, 1996) 7.

34. See Raj Gautaman, “Kudumbam, Penniyam” (Family, Feminism) in Dalitiyam Vimarsana Kalturaigal (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2003) 56, translation mine.
