CHAPTER – III

STRUGGLE FOR EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF BAMA’S KARUKKU, SANGATI AND VANMAM

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Writing from the margin, Bama’s literary writing is a path-breaking intervention in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama, a Dalit woman, a former *Kanyastree* (Christian nun) and a school teacher writes about her experiences locating them within the contexts that circumscribe her personal and professional life. Her identity as a Dalit, her marginalized position in the society is further shown to be accentuated by her gender, class and religious location. From such a position, she explores the multiple structures of oppression that operate in the lives of Dalits, and more specifically in the lives of Paraiyar women of Tamil Nadu. While writing from the margins and writing about the marginalized, Bama seeks to explore modes of empowerment for her people. Her novels *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994) are autobiographical literary narratives which imaginatively conflate her lived experience with that of the experiences of the larger groups pertaining to her caste and gender. This aspect is explored further in an objective, social milieu in her third work *Vanmam* (2002) where she analyses the intra-community conflicts, caste hatred and resulting violence and mayhem among Dalit communities.

The confessional, conversational mode of writing adopted by Bama in *Karukku* and *Sangati* is a significant milestone in Tamil Dalit fiction. It departs from the literary, invariably refined and therefore elitist vocabulary of literary discourse that stands alienated from the marginalized subjects. Bama employs the vocabulary and spoken idiom of the marginalized in her literary works thereby
underlining the ideological underpinning that regulates the matrix of identity, self-articulation and literary discourse in Dalit writing. She writes about those hitherto marginalized in literary discourse in a language that has been held unliterary. She at once interrogates dominant literary practice and articulates the experiences of the oppressed in the language of the oppressed.

Bama writes about Dalit women in her novels in her capacity as a Dalit woman herself. She thereby makes it evident that writing from the margin – the act of writing for a Dalit woman – is a political act. She seeks to subvert dominant perception, representation and articulation of Dalit women’s lives. In our analysis of Bama’s writing, we shall trace the close link between education, writing and empowerment that Bama posits as tools that could liberate women of her caste from leading a degraded, repressed existence perennially.

Dalit literary writing is a mode of activism that seeks to free Dalits from the clutches of dominant ideology and casteist oppression. Bama’s fiction, as we shall discuss below, argues for an activist intervention in the context of Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu. She believes that “Reading and writing are political practice”, for a Dalit. She likes to foreground Dalits’ resistance to oppression rather than merely record their victimisation on account of their caste.

A Dalit is kept away from formal education due to social, economic and ideological paradigms. Manusmriti forbade a Dalit any kind of access to Vedas, srutis and other shastras. The Sanskritic tradition was totally unaccessible to a Dalit. Things have hardly changed over the ages for Dalits in the Indian social milieu. In modern India, social prejudice and economic deprivation largely account for lack of educational opportunities for Dalits. In post-independence India, the situation has not improved much indeed.
Barna belongs to the class of first generation learners in her community and has found a place in academic circles by virtue of being a school teacher and more significantly as a writer. She lays great emphasis on education as a means of social empowerment. As an activist writer, she forges close ideological affinity with feminist thought. Women and Dalits are both oppressed groups, oppressed on account of their birth. Barna foregrounds the affinity between the two groups and uses feminist strategies of representation, rereading and historicizing the oppression of Dalits in her narrativisation of Dalit experience. She repeatedly points out in her writing that Dalits would have to help themselves and assert their difference from the dominant castes as a strategy of self-affirmation. She also consciously writes about the Dalit in the Dalits’ own vocabulary refusing to follow traditional notions of form, style, aesthetic paradigms or acceptable forms of diction and grammar. She seeks to represent women by tracing gaps in literary history, emphasising difference as a principle of affirmation even if it is located as a social disadvantage to the group. Barna aggressively affirms her Dalit identity and refuses to be accommodated into mainstream literary circles. Dalit writing in Tamil, and Barna’s in particular employs feminist thought and modes of resistance. Her works adopt a more militant framework as they break free from the shackles of upper middle class matrix that often invade literary discourse.

In Karukku and Sangati, Barna foregrounds multi-layered oppression against Dalit women. She focuses on the ‘work’ that is routinely done by Dalit women both at home and outside. She explores how violence against Dalit women is legitimised and institutionalised by state, family, church and upper caste communities. Her fiction documents how 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. In her representation of Dalit women, Barna presents Dalit women primarily as workers who join the work force right from girlhood and toil through
adolescence, womanhood, middle age and old age almost until their last breath. Their work goes unrecognised by their community as well as by the society at large and they are exploited at every conceivable turn. Bama’s representation of Dalit women’s life span mirrors the Dalit community’s struggle for empowerment and realisation of a dignified existence. Her fiction, through a detailed account of Dalit women’s trials and tribulations, triumphs and aspirations, thus, documents the Dalit struggle for social, economic and political empowerment.

In this chapter we shall explore Bama’s varied representations of Dalit women in Karukku, Sangati and Vanmam with a view to underline the interface between gender and caste significations in Dalit fiction. Bama’s intervention in Dalit literary discourse in the early 1990s made a significant contribution in the arena of gender-caste intersections in the lives of Dalits. Her works foreground the twice cursed lives of Dalit women, oppressed on account of their caste as well as gender, at home and outside, by upper caste men and Dalit men, by the state machinery as well as the family.

While it is tempting to place Bama’s works in a feminist tradition, Bama herself defies this tendency. She is quick to point out the limitations of aligning with a feminism that carries with it an academic, West-inspired theorisation. Instead, Bama posits what could be termed as ‘Dalit Feminism’ which would enable her to foreground caste identity that is inherent in a gendered hierarchical social structure. As Sharmila Rege argues,

The Dalit Feminist standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste – class identities, or at other times differences ignored for ‘the feminist cause’.5

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Barna’s writing alerts us to the untenability of maintaining homogenous notion of gender or assume absence of power imbalances or social inequalities among women. While Barna writes, first and foremost, as a Dalit, her identity as a woman renders her Dalit identity a more textured experience even as her Dalit identity impinges upon her position as a woman in society at large. Owing to the ground realities, socio-political conditions that prevail in India, Barna’s feminist perspective on Dalits cannot be directly linked to Gynocritics or French feminist theorists even if a certain affinity is recognisable in their respective approaches to the woman question.⁶

In this chapter, it would be pertinent to explore to what an extent does gender accentuate casteist oppression. How far is it justifiable to denote Dalit women as a distinct category within the Dalit community? Would such a perception strike at the cause of Dalit liberation movements? Or, on the contrary, would it pave way for a more equitable share in power? These questions are central to an analysis of Bama’s works. We shall also study how caste impinges on gender oppression. For instance, while child labour is rampant in India and girl children are particularly vulnerable to various forms of deprivation, how different is the exploitation of Dalit girls? How does one assess domestic violence in Dalit homes? Does gender override caste or does caste define gender relations? In the lives of Dalit women? Let’s probe Bama’s analysis of these issues.

3.2 GIRL CHILD IN DALIT HOMES: EARLY TO WORK; EARLY TO WITHER

A girl child in Dalit community is perceived as a potential source of cheap, unpaid labour. She is a surrogate mother to her siblings, thereby coming to the rescue of her mother who can take up her heavy workload at the farm outside and leave the domestic responsibilities to her daughter. A Dalit girl’s chores largely include fetching firewood, cooking, feeding, washing and taking care of
younger siblings or even older brothers, working at the farm in the afternoons in return for a couple of handfuls of gram or peas, running errands, working at factories or at farms during sowing/ harvesting time and handing over the wages to a bullying brother or a drunk father. This emerges as a typical profile of a girl child aged between four and fourteen.  

The girl child, of course, gets discriminated against right from birth. Especially if she is dark complexioned. In Sangati, the narrator observes, “The fact that I was dark skinned unlike my elder siblings was a source of disappointment to everyone at home.” She further recalls that it is a norm in her neighbourhood that a male infant is never allowed to even whimper while the female baby is left unattended for long hours. Even in matters of weaning, the male child enjoys breast feeding for a longer period compared to his female counterpart.

While a girl child stays at home and takes over a horde of hard tasks: “Fetching water, firewood, mopping and washing, doing the dishes and numerous never ending tasks,” boys are allowed to eat their fill and play outside. (6) A girl child can step out of the home only when she picks up her younger sibling and takes him out for play. Thus her stepping out too is work-related. It is a task that is ordained upon her on account of her gender. Similarly, the games that children play are codified on gender lines. As the narrator recalls in Sangati, “Boys do not let girls play their games. Girls could only play at cooking a meal, play at being married off” or even play at getting beaten up by husbands! (6)

In Karukku, the narrator gives an elaborate sketch of the games played by children in a Pariayar village. The boys of the colony play act as Naickers (upper caste landlords) and the girls follow suit as Pannaiyaals (farmhands). Alternately the boys would pretend to keep shop and the girls would 'buy' grocery from them; the boys would pose as priests, the girls would submit as sisters; the boys would act as drunken husbands returning home and the girls
as wailing wives receiving the blows. Thus, even at play, Dalit girls are located in a subordinate position. In relation to the Dalit boys, the girls are placed as victims, as passive receivers who could be counted upon to legitimise the male authority (as husband, as landlord or as priest). 

Girls in Dalit homes are left to fend for themselves. Poverty pushes them to unprotected spaces, often in search of food. The narrator in Karukku recalls that children roam around in the streets, in the fields or go fishing in rain filled ponds. They dig up earthworms or net small fishes which they roast over a fire kindled out of trash and rags. While they rejoice over this rare picnic, they are always under constant fear of being caught and roughed up by the upper caste guard lurking around the pond. The guard would not only snatch away their catch but also break their fishing rods. Boys and girls would roam the streets together at a younger age. But boys had greater share of the fun. They are allowed to play in the pond, ride on buffaloes' backs or hunt water snakes.

Schooling for Dalit children is located within the context of their survival tactics. It is a paradox that poverty deprives them of their right to education in a sustained, continued form. Yet it is also poverty that pushes them towards the school premises. As soon as the clock strikes twelve (the church bell at noon cannot be missed), Dalit children race towards the school to get their share of mid-day meal. The girl child in Dalit homes gets an assured meal once a day only in such a context. A meal that would enable her to struggle, fight and make a great effort to fill a pitcher of water at the village hand pump site in the evenings.

Dalit girls who are lucky to attend school regularly – for instance Bama – are subjected to casteist discrimination at various points in their school life. Bama recounts vividly in Karukku that she came to "realise, recognize and felt humiliated" about being born in an untouchable caste when she was studying in
The trip back home from school was always an enjoyable one for Bama and her friends. They could saunter through the bazaar, watch various forms of typical rural diversions like monkey dance, snake charmer’s skill, smell the aroma emanating from the various eating stalls, interact with gypsies selling beads and strings. They could also witness on occasion, magic shows, Therukootu, puppet shows or hear party workers holding forth their leader’s virtues and glory and so on. Such a funfilled trip littered with innocent joys, probably typical in any rural child’s routine, however, is punctuated by dominant caste’s practice of untouchability that leaves a lasting scar on these Dalit girls.

The narrator witnesses the spectacle of an adult Dalit male from her street carrying a packet of Pakoras for his Naicker boss. The snack wrapped in a banana leaf, is further rolled in a newspaper. The Dalit worker holds this packet from the tip of the long string in which it is tied up. He delivers it to the Naicker landlord with visible signs of humility – a bent back and lowered voice. The girl child finds this experience an amusing spectacle but is informed by her college-going elder brother that this is how Dalits are expected to behave towards the upper castes because their touch/contact is believed to contaminate everything (person as well as objects). The young girl is both angry and anguished. She wishes to hold that snack in her bare hands to protest against such inhuman, offensive behaviour. She demands to know why Dalits should agree to run such errands at all. She questions the very assumption of superiority held by Naickers and other upper castes. Is it derived from their money power? Does wealth warrant inhuman conduct, she flares up. “What if born a Paraîyan? Is that so despicable? Aren’t we human beings? Our men should not run errands for those fellows. We should simply collect our wages for our labour rendered in their fields and go our ways,” she observes. (12)
This is the earliest instance of protest or anger against casteist bias in the narrative. The fact that this is voiced by a young Dalit girl studying in third standard brings to the fore the positive link between education and Dalit consciousness. The brother imparts his critical awareness to the young sister. The quality of anger, the effort at critiquing and more significantly the questioning of traditional, casteist practice is engendered by access to education. The first dictum of Ambedkar’s message to Dalits: “Educate, organise, unite” is validated in this instance of a young Dalit girl’s initiation into Dalit consciousness whereby she is empowered to analyse and critique unjust social practice. This enabling awareness is, of course, denied to those Dalit girls who are detained at home to take care of their younger siblings. Bama’s emphasis on education as a possible tool for Dalit empowerment is reiterated in the narrative most forcefully.

In this context, it would be revealing to look at a short story written by another Dalit writer, Abimani. The story, Pazh (Ruin), depicts the aspiration, perseverance and hardship of a Dalit girl in her pursuit of formal education. The girl, Malati studies in fifth standard and stands first in her class. She is cited as a role model to her upper caste class mates by her teachers. She even helps her classmates in their studies. For the past one year, her academic record has suffered a little owing to the birth of a baby brother. Malati is expected to tend to her brother when her mother goes out to work in the landlord’s fields. At times, she has to accompany her mother with the infant to the fields so that her mother could nurse him periodically. She is often forced to absent herself at school on this account and put up with her teacher’s caning the following day. She feels anguished at the prospect of losing her first position in the class. One day before her final exam, her mother, a casual labourer, gets a call from the landlord to pick groundnuts in his field. Malati manages the cranky infant, feeds him, washes him, plays with him and also learns and revises her lessons for the examination. When the brother wouldn’t stop crying, she carries him on her
tender shoulders, walks nearly a kilometre to the landlord’s field so that he could be breast fed by her mother. The Dalit girl child is shown in this story to be a bright, intelligent, hardworking student. Her potential for excellence and capability is reflected in her teachers’ appreciation of her work as well as her popularity among her peers.

Malati’s burden of tending to her younger sibling gets complicated owing to her sibling’s gender. As this is a male child, her parents brook no compromise in attention towards him. Malati, in fact, rocks the cradle more often than open up her books. It is to her credit that she still manages to be a rank holder in the class. The male infant is almost obscenely over-fed. He is a one year old baby but is fed constantly by his family. His mother continues to suckle him. Malati is ordered to feed him two idlis and two boiled eggs when he wakes up. He finishes half of that portion when Malati takes him to the fields so that his mother might nurse him. Her mother reminds her to feed the remaining idlis and eggs when he reaches home. Malati gets nothing more than a cupful of Kanji. She is not expected/allowed to eat even the left over idlis. Thus, gender discrimination operates insidiously in the lives of Dalit girls both within and outside the family. Malati, at the end of the story, is not allowed to take the examination as her mother has to work in the fields the following day as well. She shudders at the prospect of being detained in her class as she cannot appear for her examination. Clearly, priority for a Dalit girl’s education is of marginal consideration. Her responsibility of baby-sitting overrides her right to education. The writer Abimani, while highlighting discrimination against the girl child also manages to indicate that the mother is also placed in a disadvantaged position. Her back-breaking work at the fields (the avaricious landlord employs one labourer for a task that requires more than three labourers) is interspersed with nursing the baby, cooking at home, working on a near empty stomach and getting bullied by the upper caste landlord. She is not paid the day’s wages on the same day and hence has to report for work the following day in order to
get paid for work already rendered. Her final question to Malati brings out the crucial structure of class and gender disadvantages that their caste location puts them in. She asks Malati (when she protests that her examination is crucial to her), "What shall I do? Shall I worry about your examination or look to the needs of our (family’s) belly?" 83. The lamūr’s money power, his caste bias, the disdain/indifference in which education for girls is held are located within the specific context of their identity as Dalits. If poverty is shown to be the norm in narratives about Dalits, gender bias is shown to be inextricably linked to such a context. The writer is conscious of this conflated structure in this story as is Bama in Karukku.

While the chance of attending school is a rare privilege for Dalit girls, those girls who do attend are subjected to numerous forms of harassment. Their poverty is mocked at every now and then. But that apart, Dalit students are especially targeted for ridicule, condemnation and public humiliation on account of their caste. To be born a Paraiyan or Paraichi is held to be worth every form of denunciation and dismissal by the upper castes. Every minor lapse by a Dalit child at school is punished and condemned not in order of the seriousness of the lapse but on account of it being committed by a Dalit born.

While studying in her seventh standard Bama recalls how the headmaster of her school humiliated her at the assembly as a thief and a Paraichi (a girl born in the Parai caste). The first count is actually fabricated and the second one is a sociological fact. The headmaster confounds both and insults the child before the other school children and her teachers. While the narrator and her friends are playing in the school yard after school hours a coconut falls down from the branches of a tree (the one they are swinging upon). The girls run away in fear. The following day, the headmaster reprimands her for having stolen coconuts by climbing trees in the yard! What is worse, he admonishes her that her action has shown up her caste: "Parai jati budhi" (the mind of a Pariah born) (15). She
is threatened with rustication and is sent to the parish priest (the school is funded by the church) for a letter confirming her readmission. She narrates a truthful account to the priest and requests for the letter. The priest makes her wait for a considerable time and issues an authoritative comment, "Quite possible, quite possible. You would have done so. Don't you live in the cherithuru? (street where Dalits live) Such girls can be expected to do such things". (15-16)

We can see, here, how a Dalit is punished or condemned not so much for a wrongful act (imagined or real) but rather for being a Dalit, for her very social presence. The brutal dismissal of the girl student both by the upper caste headmaster and the unsympathetic, unkind priest (a non-Dalit) brings out the systematic, sustained hatred for Dalits that has been built into the social structure and cultural ethos of our society. This, in fact, is better illustrated in the location of Dalit habitation in the village. They are spatially marginalized to signify their cultural (dis) location in the society. Their Cheri (slum cluster) is located almost at the outskirts of the village, near the graveyard. Paraiyars are located at the far end of the Dalit clusters bordering the cemetery. There is no social interaction with the other castes except in the form of hiring of Dalit labour. All the civic amenities, state institutions are outside the bounds of Dalit community. Dalit children have to walk for miles to reach a school located at the other end of the village, inhabited by the dominant castes.(5-6)

It is in such a context of socially constructed marginality, that a Dalit's aspiration for empowerment is to be viewed. Their only hope to find a place of social respectability is rooted in education. The narrator's brother (a postgraduate) reiterates unambiguously: "As we are born in Parai jati, we are not entitled to any form of respect, prestige or esteem in society. But if we study well, we can come up in life and refute all this filth." He advises the young Dalit girl, "Study well. If you are good at studies, everyone would befriend you. So
work hard.” (14) This becomes the cardinal principle that the girl follows in her life. She also concedes that though a Paraichi, she had numerous friends at school because she did well academically. In fact Bama’s writings repeatedly invoke this faith in education as a strategy for Dalit empowerment.

Although majority of students in her school were drawn from Pallar or Paraiyar castes, the school was located near the Nadars’ street. So was the church and the residence of the priest. This spatial location brings out the power dynamic that operates in this society. The priest is nominated and controlled by the Nadars, an upper caste. The church and the school cater to their whims (as seen above in the instance of “coconut theft”). This is further reflected in the way Dalit girls are employed (unofficially) by the school and church authorities. Only Dalit girls among the students are ordered to fetch water for the priest’s domestic needs. They are also used to maintain the teacher’s garden, fill up his water tank and clean up the school. While they are denied access to the village tank or the school’s coconut grove, it is the Dalit’s labour that maintains and attends to the upkeep of upper caste’s bourgeois notions of cleanliness, social prestige and aesthetic pretensions.

Bama moves to a high school in the nearby town and stays in the school hostel after passing her eighth standard. There she is shocked to find the flashy clothes and easy money sported by her classmates. The warden at the hostel (a nun) is shown to shower abuses at Dalit girls unceasingly. When they return to school after a vacation at home, the sister unfailingly abuses them, citing their poverty and caste. She taunts them that the girls get to eat good food at the hostel, hence they fatten up here only to return as skinny sticks from their homes. Every occasion is used to humiliate Dalit girls or insinuate that they hail from and habitate in filth. It is worth mentioning that the Dalit students also pay for the mess. But they are not spared taunts or insults. Once again, we can identify, caste prejudices as the real issue at hand rather than any specific
inadequacies on the part of Dalits. For instance, upper caste men and women refuse to share a seat in buses with Dalit girls / boys on their way to school.

The narrator recalls numerous and unfailing reminders, embarrassing instances where her caste is held up disparagingly either by her teachers, class-mates or the administration. In this context, even the reservation policy enshrined in the constitution is used to undermine the self-esteem of Dalit students. Without prior intimation, every now and then, Dalit students are lined up in the class room as ‘Harijans’ qualifying for certain benefits (extra coaching hours, fee concession, etc.). Thus even privileges guaranteed to protect their interests stigmatise them socially.(17) This stigma is considerably lightened, when Bama excels in her SSLC examination, securing the first position in the district among “Harijan students”. (17) For the first time, she does not feel embarrassed to own up that she is a Dalit. Her success reinforces a Dalit’s ability to rise up in life by virtue of merit. She observes, “why can’t harijan girls study well? we too can study and excel and come up in life. I gained confidence to achieve more in life”. (17) Thus, Bama’s Karukku argues that education alone guarantees social respectability for Dalits.

A central section of the narrative in Karukku is presented through the eyes of a Dalit girl child where the author/narrator recounts her experiences as an eleven-year-old girl. In this section, the girl gives testimony to the caste-strife that jolts her quotidian life and initiates her into a critical awareness concerning oppression against Dalits as a systematised, state co-ordinated one.

The young girl narrator is a witness to a caste-riot wherein the police openly acts on behalf of the aggressor and unleashes a reign of terror on Dalits. The girl narrator is left at home to take care of her younger sister as her mother and grandma take her other siblings (twins) to a dispensary in the town nearby. A riot breaks out between Saliyar and Paraiyar community following the murder
of a Paraiyan at the hands of the Saliyars. The cemetery where Dalit-Christians bury their dead is claimed by the Saliyars as their land as it is adjacent to a school building managed by them. It is worth noting that non-Dalit Christians have a different cemetery exclusively for their use. Clearly caste follows a person even beyond one’s life. The Saliyar’s attempt to claim the land as theirs is an unambiguous case of land-grabbing. Traditionally, Dalits have been using the disputed place as their burial ground. The Saliyars are using their caste hegemony to grab this land to extend their school building. They resort to violence, corruption and money power to take over the land in possession with the Paraiyars. Saliyars intimidate Paraiyars, harass young Paraiyar girls on their way to school and also buy up the police by offering lavish hospitality.

The young girl narrator is a witness to a reign of terror unleashed by the police. The police beats up Dalit men, young and old, terrorise young girls, molest Dalit women. Almost every Dalit adult and adolescent male is taken into custody. This experience is an eye-opener for the girl narrator as she is able to sift truth from rumour, analyse, critique and judge the issues pertaining to Dalit existence, identity and position in a casteist society. This is also the time when the girl learns about the twin burden of caste and gender as it operates in the lives of Dalit women. She lives in an all-women household with her sisters, mother and grandmother. Her father is posted with the army and her brother is at a hostel. She observes how Dalit women work from break of dawn to dusk and beyond, how they manage the household and escape the police net when the menfolk are jailed. The girl reports, “As usual the women went to work on the fields. On their way, they fed their men in hiding, updating them on the state of affairs in the village. The women managed everything on their own without the men’s earning.” (31) Some of them even hid their husbands at home, spinning elaborate tales to convince the police that their husbands’ whereabouts are unknown to them. They usually cited alibis that allowed women’s active participation. For instance they would keep the police away by
claiming their child is suffering from chickenpox or claim that a delivery was in progress, or even dress up the husband in a saree and bring him home to mourn over the death of his son. The women even buried the dead on their own. The girl, thus, learns how Dalit women cope with a crisis and outdo men in traditionally envisaged masculine space and role. The Dalit women receive no support from the church either. In fact, the parish priest passes on information to the police regarding the whereabouts of Dalit men in hiding. Mocking notions of Christian charity and love, the priest functions in collusion with the police and the upper castes. The women point out to the girl that the priest is an upper caste, after all.

The Dalit girl, in this section, receives important lessons pertaining to her community's status in a caste-ridden society where perpetrators of injustice are protected by corrupt state machinery and learns how Dalit women are oppressed at multiple levels. While she has recognised the importance of education in granting a possibility of social dignity to Dalits, she now learns many valuable lessons to equip herself for her future. It is a significant phase, a moment of critical revelation that helps her to take up the responsibilities of an activist working for the uplift of Dalits and Dalit women in particular, in future. Thus, education for a Dalit girl child, in Karukku is represented as a process of self-awareness, as an orientation that takes her beyond the corridors of academic centre. While through her formal education, she fights back social indignities and attempts to empower herself in a discriminatory society, her interaction with the women of her community imparts her a critical sensibility and commitment to serve her community.

While autobiographies are read as grand narratives, as a bildungsroman of the individual writer, a Dalit autobiography like Karukku constructs the development graph of a community. In it, the growth and evolution of an individual's personality is inextricably linked with that of her community's travails and
triumphs. The individual and the community reflect upon each other and reflect each other as well. Hence, a Dalit's social achievements cannot be isolated from the triumphs of his/ her community. They sustain and nurture each other. The young girl narrator's education receives a purposeful input from the women of her community — old, illiterate, unskilled farm hands but exceptionally resourceful, resilient and hard working women.

The Dalit girl supplements this dual education by hands on experience in the fields where adult women work. She learns about the unfair system that employs women as hard labour and pays them unfairly. She herself joins her grandma in picking firewood, carting it home on her head. She also works in Naicker's lands where she collects or sorts groundnuts, gram or gather cotton. This work she undertakes when she returns home for a vacation from her hostel. Her lessons on dignity of labour as well as an awareness regarding the economic exploitation of Dalit women are learnt from the actual site of work.

A significant aspect of Karukku relates to depiction of privations of young Dalit Christian girls. Denied pleasures common to her age like watching a movie at a theatre (for fear of molestation by upper caste youth), Dalit girls are subjected to severe restrictions at home and outside. Dalit Christian girls are further subjected to a strict regimen of Rosary classes ('Mantra Class') in the mornings and evenings, learn hymns and japams, and attend sessions of regular, weekly confessions and so on.

It is an enforced rather than a devout exercise. Early in the morning, before sunrise, sleepy eyed girls are made to run to the church to attend the morning mass. They are severely punished at the school assembly the following day if they absent themselves. They are caned either by the priest or the teacher. The image of a rounded cane prompt the girls to kick the mattress on cold or rainy mornings and run towards the church. In the evenings the mantra class
cannot be skipped. As soon as they returned from school, suppressing their hunger, they rush to church.

The interaction between the girl-child and the church takes place in an unmistakable atmosphere of fear, punitive ethos, superstition and violence, physical as well as psychological. The sisters at the church feed the girls on a staple diet of ghosts, demons and, black devils equipped with horns, tails, protruding nails and teeth who kept a record of the evil deeds committed by the girls and pounced upon them when the notebook overflowed with their "sins". The girls probably aged between 6 and 9 could hardly commit "sins" in the theological sense of the term! But the sisters hold out visions of terror, torture and irreversible punishments. The narrator recalls that as soon as she entered the church, visions of terror and torture would conjure up before her and she would therefore rush to confront every single directive of the sisters to escape the devil’s net. She would recite mantras frequently, run for every errand set by the sisters without delay and attend confession sessions every week.

It is interesting to note the nature of this session. Confessions made mandatory for the girls were simply tutored passages that the girls recited after learning them up by rote. Neither the "sin" nor the punishment ordered by the priest ever changed. The confession went thus:

Prayers to the omnipotent. I am a sinner. Kindly bless me. It has been a week since I offered confession. I lied four times; I stole five times; I did not obey my elders; I stared here and there at the temple (church). I confess and regret these and all those sins I forget to recall. (69)

While the adult narrator is able to bring to this section a critical perspective, the narrative nonetheless evokes the terrified state of mind of the young girl. It
was sheer terror to run to the altar to recite the prescribed verses in the dark, deserted space of the church. And that too on a rumbling stomach, starved since school time! On Sunday evening, special mantra class was held followed by blessings (“Asirvadam”) at the church. It would be a long drawn out affair punctuated by a lecture, followed by questions and clarifications, etc. The children would feel sleepy at this session. But the sisters would keep vigil over them. They would hit them violently on the girls’ backs or pinch them hard on their thighs or punch them on their heads. Each act of violence would follow one after the other to prevent nodding children from dozing off! The girls would be often shocked out of their wits by such violent reprisal that some of them would wet their skirts. The traumatised girls’ experience is no less violent or painful than the brutality borne by adult Dalit men and women at the hands of the policemen. Although the girl narrator always won prizes and excellent marks at the catechism class, she was not spared the violent punches or derogatory casteist taunts. The girl learns to estimate institutionalised religion as oppressive and unfair to the poor and socially marginalized groups.

Hesitant protest and little subversive notes, malicious depiction of the sisters laced with humour are strategies employed by the narrator to mark the disenchantment of the Dalit girl with the ecclesiastical cadre and its edicts. There are moments when the girl reeling under a tight punch or pinch vows to hit the sister with a stone when she grows up. Religiosity is equated with terror, faith is rooted in fear. The church upholds hierarchy and authoritarianism. In this context, it validates the oppressive structure upheld by the upper castes and the State in relation to the Dalit community. When she reaches college, the narrator realizes the deception practised by the sisters and the priests towards poor Dalit devotees. She questions the dictum of daily visits to the church and the routine of japam classes and periodic communions.

I felt that the sisters and priests had deceived me a lot. I was made to believe that god could reach me only through them. But I recognise now
that god is nowhere near them. They are the most ungodly creatures. I fought with them. I questioned them. Oh! How fraudulent are these people? Cheats, hypocrites, actors – I hated them. (83)\textsuperscript{14}

Thus we can perceive how in the life of a Dalit girl child, casteist oppression is accentuated by gender discrimination. Caste and gender are so inextricably linked that it is difficult to decipher whether the narrator is oppressed more on account of her caste or on account of being a girl. As her suffering is symptomatic of her community’s alienation from the mainstream society, one sees that she is unjustly treated for being a Dalit born. Being a Dalit, she is pushed into a specific social and economic matrix which accentuates her suffering. Her identity as a Dalit Christian adds a further texture to the notion of social oppression. Her protests and subversive acts including her choice to invade the literary space hitherto dominated by upper caste male writers are rooted in her experiences and driven by her caste identity.

3.3 WOMEN’S WORK; WOMEN AT WORK

We have discussed above how Dalit girls right from a very young age work at home and outside. The nature of such work is physically pretty strenuous. In much of Dalit writing, women are represented primarily as workers, ceaselessly toiling from dawn to dusk. Whether we look at Sivakami’s Aanandayee or Imaiyam’s Arokiyam or Bama’s numerous women, at times named, at times anonymous, we see them at work. The nature of their work is defined by patriarchal role allocation, social convention and most importantly by their caste identity. Arokiyam, the most obvious example, is a Paraivannathil (a professional washerwoman allotted to work for the Paraiyar and other lower castes). In her case, her caste dictates her profession, her social stature and cultural location. Aanandayee is advised by her mother-in-law to take up work outside home, tend to cattle or manage the family land and not mourn over her husband’s
sexual escapades. Here, work is seen as a potential salvation for oppressed women. Aanandayee also realises that her ceaseless, strenuous work from dawn to night within the home goes totally unrecognised. Her husband denies her rights over her earnings from domestic work like milking goats or vegetable yield realized through her labour. In Bama's works, be it Karukku or Sangati she documents a series of women workers who cannot but work in order to survive and feed their children two helpings of Kanji a day. They work not to supplement their husbands’ or sons’ income as middle class women are perceived to do. But they rather share the responsibility, in fact, are loaded with a lion's share of it. Many women are the only earning members of the family. Thus Dalit women are workers in a fundamental rather than peripheral way in the works of Bama.

Bama sees women around her engaged in work during the entire period of their waking hours. Both her grandmothers worked at the Naicker's fields. As a young girl, the writer noticed and resented how even a small boy from Naicker's family used to boss over the women workers, calling the narrator's grandmothers by their names, showing no deference to their age. The boy was addressed most respectfully as 'Aiya' by the women who ran his errands most swiftly. The women workers were constantly reminded of their caste identity. They were served water in the most inhumane, demeaning manner. The Naicker women would hold the pitcher a good two feet high and pour while the Dalit women would hold out their hands to receive the water. Similarly, food was literally thrown at them from a height. The Dalit women workers would finish off their daily chores of carting the cow dung, clearing the cow sheds, round off other work related to scavenging and then place their utensils in a corner near an open drain. The Naicker housewife would throw the leftovers, the stale curry and rice consumed by the family the previous day or before into these utensils. The narrator feels outraged at this spectacle. But the grandmother perceives this as part of society's tradition: "They give us food.
Without them, how could we survive? After all they are upper castes. We are low born," she reasons. (13)

While the school-going grand-daughter protests against this inhuman practice and argues with her grandmother to accept only wages and not leftover, throwaway food from her upper caste landlord, the old woman accepts such practice as a matter-of-fact and as a convention sanctioned by society. We can see, here, how education can make a positive, enlightening, critical intervention in a Dalit’s consciousness. What is accepted as convention or as one’s fate by the older generation is subjected to a critical inquiry by the school-going grand-daughter. Secondly, we can see how women workers’ living conditions have not changed over the past many decades. In Sangati, the grandmother, Rakkama (the same as the one in Karukku) talks about her experiences in her long span of work in Naicker’s lands. Her observations reinforce our reading here that women workers from Dalit community have continued to suffer humiliation and low wages.

It is also of significance to recognize how caste overrides gender in this context. Although Dalit women, young or old, work at Naicker’s fields or sheds, their dealings over food or water take place with the women of Naicker households. We note here, that Naicker women ill-treat the Dalit women, abuse them, call them by disrespectful terms and throw food and water at them unmindful of hygiene or human dignity. The Naicker women, thus assert their caste superiority over Dalit women workers and are totally oblivious to the women’s plight or indignity. At various points in Sangati or Aanandayee we also observe how upper caste women are ill-treated at home by their husbands or sons or fathers-in-law. Yet in the context of their interaction with Dalit women, the Naicker or the upper caste women behave not unlike their menfolk towards themselves or towards Dalit workers at the worksite. The upper caste women have internalised the caste hatred of the social strata they are born in and
unleash it against the Dalit women workers more as an assertion of power rather than casteist venom. Power in their own homes is denied to them and they are allowed no space to operate in the outside world. Their interaction with the world outside is restricted to and conducted through the Dalit women who come up to work at their homes – specifically in the peripheral arena of their homes. The Naicker women, oppressed at home turn aggressive and violent towards Dalit women workers in order to exercise the power denied to them in their domestic space. Thus, while caste overrides gender, it also goes to show how gender impinges on caste.

While all Dalits are ill-treated and discriminated against, Christian Dalits face more specific forms of discrimination. Dalits who had converted to Christianity or born in Christian families experience caste discrimination within church and its various official organisations. Christianity and Islam, theoretically, do not practise untouchability. But a separate category of Dalit Christians or Dalit Muslims has emerged in our country underlining the hegemonic structure of caste that permeates every layer of our society. No area of social experience is immune to operation of caste ethics. When the narrator in Karukku enters a nunnery, she is appalled to discover that this profession too is not untouched by caste hatred. Teachers, disseminators of knowledge and ethical conduct, also practise untouchability. They enjoin upon Dalit students to sweep and mop the classrooms and clean the toilets. Thus students are employed as unofficial scavengers, a caste defined profession (20-1) The narrator laments, “Is there no space without the presence of caste?” (21)

Dalit women’s work within their domestic space is also manifold. Their most challenging task is to arrange for a bowl of gruel for their family twice a day. There is no clear-cut division of labour at home. There is no unwritten rule as in middle class homes or upper caste households that the men would work outside and bring the earning while the women would guard the hearth and
keep hot meals ready for the family. A Dalit woman has to pack a bowl of *Kanji* or *Kuzhu* for the husband, for herself and store the leftover gruel for the children returning from school before she leaves home, often before break of dawn. She is a worker in her own right although the landlord pays her less than a male worker’s share. Returning home in the evening, she spins through her chores, cooking a palatable meal before her husband returns from the village toddy shop or Chavadi (a meeting place for menfolk).

More often than not, dinner is preceded by a brawl with a drunken husband resulting in a dose of brutal beating. Dinner is followed by forced sex with her husband, often laced with violence. This aspect of a Dalit woman’s life shall be looked into at greater length in our reading of *Sangati*. Despite being oppressed by their menfolk (and by upper caste men outside), Dalit women are represented as highly courageous and hardworking. As we have seen, when their husbands and the other menfolk are rounded up by the police following a caste-riot, it is the women who work, earn, support and sustain the men in hiding as well as their children and old in-laws. They also befool the police and actively help men escape. No arena is left unattended by the women during the men’s sojourn in the jail. They stand up to police brutality and single-handedly protect their families. They collect money, engage a lawyer, make visits to trial courts and do not rest until their release. When the men are away, they take up all tasks including the burying of the dead, a task that is considered exclusively masculine. Their courage, resilience and survival intelligence far excels that of their male counterparts.

Dalit women’s work is a precondition for their daily bread. It comes as no surprise, then, that Dalit women invariably continue to work even when they enter their last trimester of pregnancy. Many of them deliver their babies at the fields or while collecting firewood, often on their own without any assistance – medical or human. In *Sangati*, the narrator’s grandmother recalls how a
neighbour had gone to collect fodder in the forest and gone into labour. She cut the umbilical cord with her sickle, dug up a pit to bury the placenta, picked up the bundle of fodder collected her new born baby and walked back home. Even if the women stay back home for a day, the family would have to starve, the cattle would go without their feed. (5)

The grandmother states, “Our women work as much as our men. Only they suffer more as they bear children year after year as well. Men’s work gets done at the fields. That’s all. Then they are free. One should be born as man. What happiness do we get, being women? Work at home, work outside. No relief, either way.” (5)

Much of women’s suffering is traced to their upbringing. Boys are cared for more. Even at games, boys dominate over girls. Young girls face threat of rape from upper caste landlords and their cronies. Even a girl of seven or eight is warned by elders not to walk around or play on her own. Girls are constantly advised to walk in a group to protect themselves from potential rapists. Young Dalit girls often die at the workplace. They are exposed to dangerous sites as they work at unprotected and inhuman work spaces. There are numerous cases of girls getting injured or succumbing to their injuries while working at sites of well-digging. Women and girls are also paid less than men although they face equal hazards at work. (18-20) In Sangati, the narrator’s cousin, Mariamma, gets multiple fractures when she slips up while carrying a headload of stones inside a well and is laid up in bed for eight months. (20)

Dalits – both men and women primarily form the working force of our society. Much of their work comes under the category of unskilled labour. Thus, they belong to the unorganised sector of the labour force. Dalit women labour throughout the year according to the agricultural season: sowing, transplanting, levelling the fields watering the fields, spraying pesticides, harvesting,
winnowing, storing crops. Dalit men dig up wells, (whose water of course they cannot drink), carry brick and stones and road laying materials during the off-season while the women climb up the hill, gather firewood, weave mats, work in a brick kiln or find similar hard task somewhere to fill their bellies. Many Dalit families work for a particular Naicker family and tend his lands. Paraiyars and Pallars are two Dalit castes who take up such strenuous farm jobs. Other Dalit castes like Chakiliyars (tanners), Kuravans (nomadic gypsies) earn their living through sweeping roads, cleaning the drains, weaving baskets, selling beads, etc. Paraiyars and Pallars work the hardest and are also the ones who are at the bottom most rung of the caste hierarchy. They are treated worse than bonded labour on the fields. The practice of untouchability is most rigorously and inhumanly followed with regard to these two castes. Their social ostracization and the caste anathema enjoined upon them is comparable to the treatment meted out to Mahars and Mangs in Maharashtra. It may also be pointed out that intra caste rivalry among Paraiyars and Pallars is most intense, violent and venomous. Bama’s novel *Vanmam*, which we shall study later, deals exhaustively with this aspect of caste strife.

We can see from the above analysis that Dalit women work for their survival. They are primarily daily wage earners. If they do not go to work for a day, they would remain hungry, their children would famish. They work from Monday to Saturday, from morning to nightfall, both at home and outside. Even after a hard day’s work on the farm, Dalit woman has to grapple with a smoky oven, blowing into wet wood to kick up a quick fire. If the Naicker calls her over on a Sunday, she has to rush for work. However, she has to make the mandatory trip to the church on Sunday morning before reporting for work if she wishes to escape a hard reprimand or penalty from the priest. The narrator sums up, “(women) have to wake up before the cock crows, often at two or three in the morning, fetch water, finish the household chores, walk an immense distance to
reach the fields, work until sunset, reach home after dark and then stir up a gruel.” (40)

Young girls also accompany their mothers, aunts or neighbours during school holidays to lend a helping hand and thereby earn a few rupees for the family coffer. However, even if they work through the day, picking gram or breaking ground nuts, the Naicker would pay a meagre five or ten paise per measure. They could not possibly earn more than five rupees a day, notwithstanding the painful labour. Often they were paid in kind that helped stir up a curry to accompany the Kanji. Fetching firewood from the adjoining forest entailed a payment of bribe to the forest guard. Climbing down the hill with the load on one’s head invariably resulted in bruises, scratches, bloody patches on the forehead and knees. Often, they have to crawl through the thickets. Bama observes in Karukku, “My people have to work and struggle like this ... unmindful of their health ... if they wish to clasp a cup of gruel.” (42) Many women, including the narrator’s mother have ruined their health owing to continuous hard labour. At times, some of them vomit blood, many suffer from respiratory ailments. But they have no choice. For them, work signifies the only available possibility to cope with hunger.

Karukku shows how Naickers and Naidus, upper caste landlords and shopkeepers cheat Dalit women of their hard labour. Women and young girls are often paid in kind rather than in cash. The women would sell the gram or cotton or paddy at their shops to get rice or sweet potatoes. They are further short-changed at this exchange. Thus, their labour is exploited by a well manipulated system utterly unfair to them. The narrator observes that the peanuts that the Naicker pays is swindled by the Naidu. “How could Dalits come up in life? Only those who are adept at deceiving the poor could prosper. There is no way to progress for Dalits who toil all day.” (43)
Economic exploitation of Dalits co-exists with social indignity and marginalisation. Dalit women work at Naickers’ lands and homes but are ordained to keep a safe distance from their person, from their kitchen, from their living quarters. The Naickers possess money and caste power. The Dalits are forced to follow their dictum in order to survive. The narrator observes, “I wonder from where these people (Dalits) get strength to render such hard labour? Going by their hard work, Dalit men and women could prosper easily but are not allowed to. They are not paid wages commiserate to their hard work. And women are paid less than the men even if they do similar kind of work. Men’s wages are higher than the women’s... This community is born to work. They always work with a song on their lips. Yet they continue to eat day in and day out only Kanji and watery Kuzh. I wonder how the upper castes would manage their lands and wells if there were no Dalits? A Dalit’s hands and feet rest only at night when they sleep. All their waking hours are consumed by work, work and work. Only then, could they manage to fill their bellies, somewhat.” (44-45)

Dalit women’s work at home or outside does not receive the recognition it merits. Further, it is to be noted that while Dalits protest against the repressive hegemony of Naickers, Nadars and priests it is interesting to note that they also internalise these categories as images of power which they play out in relation to Dalit women. They treat women of their community as their Other just as the upper castes treat Dalits as their political Other. Hence, a similar repressive pattern emerges between Dalit men and Dalit women which in a way duplicates the pattern of oppression that exists in the context of upper castes and Dalits.

We can see that while Dalits – men and women - work through the year and their entire lifespan, their work does not empower them either socially or economically. It is a strategy to survive. It is a mechanism that only enables them to live, to barely sustain themselves, not to march ahead either in
prosperity or dignity. Barna's writing argues that empowerment for Dalits is possible only through education. Dalits can rise above their abject poverty and indignity only by acquiring a critical awareness of their rights and an organised demand for social justice. These, in turn, can be forged only through education that would make them aware of their rights and also enable them to initiate social inquiry, protest against unjust concentration of social and economic power and organise themselves to charter a life of dignity and self-esteem.

3.4 FAITH AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: POSSIBILITIES AND DISENCHANTMENT

The Hindu system of Varna segregates and identifies people under a hierarchical structure. There are four major categories of people divided according to their birth, each one of them being allotted a specific professional space. According to Manusmriti, the Brahmans born out of god's forehead shall study the Vedas and function as purohits or priests who could interpret the Vedas, Smritis and scriptures. Kshatriyas born out of the limbs of god were to work as warriors and protectors of the state. Vaishyas, born out of god's belly would take care of mercantile interests of the society. Shudras, born out of god's feet were ordained to serve the other three categories of people. The Dalits are those who live beyond the boundaries of Varna. They have been, for this reason, often referred to as Panchamar, the class of people who are beyond the four Varnas and are hence untouchable. All the menial tasks are dumped upon them.

For centuries the Dalits have been branded and treated as untouchables, subjected to contempt and injustice. The vigorous proselytizing promoted by the colonial government in the nineteenth century allowed direct contact between Dalit communities and missionaries. The translation of the Bible into Indian languages, the opening up of schools and medical camps created
conducive conditions for Hindu natives to look up to Christianity as an egalitarian society that did not practise untouchability but held out values of love, brotherhood, forgiveness and charity. A significant number of conversions took place in mid-nineteenth century, especially in the Deccan and parts of south. Interestingly, a significant number of those early converts were Brahmins. Some of them have written memoirs, novels and poems that give an account of the trauma and agony they underwent following alienation from their earlier belief and lifestyle as well as the hope and spiritual ecstasy they discovered in their new faith. There are accounts of violent persecutions and boycott as well as that of unwavering will and commitment. Many of these accounts have received re-readings in contemporary times, especially since the early nineties.

In nineteenth century Tamil literary space, Vedanayakam Pillai, a converted Christian made a stimulating intervention. Credited with some of the earliest of novels in Tamil, his Pratapa Mudaliar Charitiram has been hailed as a significant milestone in Tamil fiction. His novels discussed issues of social reform, in particular widow re-marriage and women's education. This was also the time when literary translations into Tamil was being undertaken with great vigour. The translation of Krupabai Sattianthan's novel Saguna written in English as early as 1887 was an important milestone in Tamil in early Indian women's writing. Saguna was written by a woman, who was a second generation Christian convert, a medical student studying in Madras. After her marriage into a well-known missionary family of Madras, Krupabai, despite her failing health, devoted herself to work for women and children in the field of education. She opened schools for women, worked for their social uplift in remote areas of Tamil Nadu and kept a record of her spiritual journey that was riddled with intense anguish as well as joy. Her novel also traces the sense of alienation and familial persecution faced by her mother, the spiritual travails of her brother and her own discomfort among elitist Christian missionaries, snobbish school
teachers, wardens; her spirited protest against double standards and discriminating practices of English church officials towards converted Christians and poor people. Although she accepted the authority of the church, her own calling was a private spiritual mission. She preferred to access Jesus personally and spread his message of love and charity directly to the weak and the poor without relying upon institutional methodology.

Early translation of Krupabai's novel *Saguna* into Tamil in 1896 forged the confessional mode in literary writing as a popular mode in Tamil. The intimate tone, personalised narrative, accessing one's society through one's consciousness became strategies that began to be associated with women's writing. Bama's mode of writing can be placed in this tradition. She too writes in the confessional mode, talking about self and society in an intimate tone, falling back on colloquial vocabulary and spoken rhythms of her everyday life. Bama's *Karukku* has been hailed as the first Dalit autobiography in Tamil. True to its bearings as Dalit autobiography, her work is as much about herself as her community – the trials, tribulations, accomplishments, hopes, disappointments, anger and celebration – are common to both the self and the community. This observation is applicable to her second work *Sangati* as well.\(^1\)

In this section, I would like to examine *Karukku* as a conversion narrative (with a difference). *Karukku* was published in 1992. It was a period that witnessed mass conversions that were followed by volatile protest on the one hand and the emergence of Hindu revivalist agenda on the other. Following Ambedkar's centenary celebrations in 1990 Dalits began to raise their voice against Hindu orthodoxy in a sustained manner. This was the decade that saw the rise of Dalit publishing houses, Dalit theatre groups and a generation of young writers who affirmed their Dalit identity without fear of social ostracization. The Hindu orthodoxy sought to divert Dalit's political awakening and their organised protest through revivalist, fundamentalist, majoritarian discourse that valorised
Hindu myths and channelised them into political programmes. The Rath Yatra of L.K. Advani and the demolition of Babri Masjid was followed by nation-wide riots that seriously undermined constitutional principles of secularism and social justice. The emergence of Hindu revivalist thought was deployed to counter Dalit conversions to Christianity, to Islam, to Buddhism as much as to intimidate religious minorities.

Bama’s *Karukku* assumes significance in such a political context. Read as a conversion narrative, it seriously subverts the political implications of Hindutva forces that gave the slogan, “Garv se kaho hum Hindu hain” (Be proud to be a Hindu). Bama’s narrative thoroughly rejects the casteist basis of institutionalised religion – both Hindu and Christian. While it shows that Dalits’ conversion to Christianity (in her grandparents’ generation) as a phenomenon was precipitated by the unjust caste system among Hindus, it also documents how Dalits continue to be ill-treated on the basis of caste even in the religion they have converted into. It thus tries to extend the question of caste beyond the religious discourse and brings the debate into the arena of culture, political and social space. Caste is a social category, legitimised by religion and unaddressed by political authority, argues Bama in *Karukku and Sangati*.

Bama’s *Karukku* seeks to reformulate the central premise of conversion narratives (that gained popularity in academic circles in 1990s) that such narratives are about a person’s anguish at initial alienation from one’s old faith and relatives, followed by a celebration of spiritual awakening and gain of a new fraternity/brotherhood. Bama is born into a Dalit Christian family – and therein hangs the tale. She critically explores the implications and practical fallout of such a categorisation – Dalit Christian. Theoretically speaking, Christianity does not recognise or prescribe any caste gradation. Caste is a category that is specific to Hindu lifestyle. However, in practice, all those Hindus who convert to another religion that preaches egalitarianism, manage to
carry or are cursed to be fixed in their erstwhile castes. And this continues into future generations as well. Thus we have new categories of Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, neo-Buddhists, Ramgaria Sikhs and so on. These enfold people who wanted to free themselves from the casteist frame and hoped for social transformation through faith. B.R. Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism (that witnessed the simultaneous conversion of over a lakh Dalits to Buddhism) in 1956 was borne out of deep religious quest for deliverance from caste dating over two decades of his life. As early as 1935, Ambedkar had announced, “I will not die a Hindu.” His conversion was a culmination of his political struggle for a life of dignity and equality for Dalits.

Ambedkar’s birth centenary celebrations in 1990 initiated a lively assessment of Dalit literature and politics. It also inspired a number of Dalit autobiographies, conversion narratives and revival of Dalit arts including theatre. Our reading of Bama’s *Karukku* as a conversion narrative has to be placed in such a political context. *Karukku* seeks to redefine conversion narratives, infusing in them a political, sociological vision and divesting them of spiritual halo. *Karukku* subverts hallowed pillars of institutionalised religion, arguing for a direct access between the devotee and god. It attempts to bring in issues of social justice to the halls of worship emphasising that all devotes irrespective of birth have to be treated equally by those who man the altar. Bama, it can be argued, brings in a secular, social dimension to the form of conversion narratives that were, hitherto, received as sacred documents of a soul in ecstasy/ spiritual angst.

In this respect, Bama’s writing recalls the fierce questioning that marked the writings of Pandita Ramabai. Steeped in scholarship of Sanskritic tradition as well as a serious student of Christian theology, Ramabai’s confrontations with church authorities reflect her inquiry into the nature of self; religious and political identity (given her colonial status). They are also a fierce protest
against dual system of ethics, non-egalitarian practices of church authorities and an evaluation of position of women and their education.18

Unlike Krupabai or Ramabai, Barna does not experience the anguish, despair and anger of a faithful circumscribed by her conversion to a new faith. However, Barna too experiences the fallout of a momentous decision in her life pertaining to spiritual quest. She joins a Matam as a Kanyastree, spends seven long, agonising years in the nunnery and finally walks out. Her quest punctuated by hope for a better deal for fellow-Dalits, despair at the double standards and self-contradictions within the Matam she has joined resulting in total disenchantment with church and Christianity is a spiritual journey with a subversive twist. From an eager, committed Kanyastree to being an atheist, a critic of religious hypocrisy and a subversive non-believer – Bama travels a long, less travelled road of faith.

Conversion by Dalits has always been undertaken with the desire for social transformation. To rid themselves of demeaning labels and condemned status, Dalits have converted to such religions which promise the possibility of a casteless community. They have hoped to be accepted and treated as human beings rather than as sub-human creatures. Their dream of social transformation is proved to be unfounded and hollow by Bama’s Karukku, Sangati, Markku’s Yathirai and Imaiym’s Koveru Kazhudaigal. We shall now examine how these writers view the traffic between faith and social empowerment. We shall, specifically, look at Bama’s works at greater length here.

It is interesting to examine the reasons that account for Bama’s decision to become a Kanyastree at a Matam. We have earlier discussed how the girl narrator felt oppressed, threatened and subjected to physical violence by sisters and priests. Despite such an experience, the narrator believes that the church
could make a positive intervention in the lives of Dalit Christians. Her commitment and concern for Dalits motivate her to join the Matam to help Dalits march forward in life. (Karukku, 19) She is warned by friends and her family that caste bias exists within the various Matams. But the narrator decides to take the plunge in order to help and protect poor Dalits from casteist Kanyastrees. Thus, we see that the narrator believes in the theoretical matrix of Christianity. She enrols in the Matam to serve the poor and uplift the downtrodden. For the next seven years she continues to fight the system from within. She argues, protests, fights with Kanyastrees and authorities, works to break stereotypes constructed by church authorities regarding Dalits. But soon enough, she has to concede that caste is an overriding category that subsumes all other social criterion. She is pained to notice how Dalits are treated within church – forced to render menial service, shouted at, branded as uncultured creatures, not amenable to improvement. (Karukku, 21)

The narrator too was subjected to humiliation when her caste was discovered. She questions,

Is there no deliverance from caste? It makes no difference even if you are educated. A low born is treated lowly. Are not Dalits human beings? Aren't they blessed with intelligence and beauty? This is a conspiracy to keep us at the bottom of the social ladder. They want us to slog and work for them – forever. They don't want us to come up in life. That's why they have held us as bonded labour for many generations. Dalits themselves have been made to believe that they are unclean, without social esteem, unfit for social contact. Even kids are taught and fed with such an ideology. Dalits remain caught in this mire, in this vicious design.(23)
Dalits render not only menial service to church authorities, but also offer gifts to them at Easter, New Year, Christmas, etc. These are often expensive items, much beyond their means. Such occasions are termed "sandipu", sacred meeting. Although Dalits never get to taste expensive fruits like orange or grapes, they buy these fruits on festive days, as gifts for Mother Superior or Father Priest of the church. Some of them even carry goats or hens as their personal gifts. In return, the priest or mother puts a mark of Holy cross on each kneeling devotee's forehead, blesses her and sends her away. No souvenirs or fruits are given to them by the holy church officials. What is worse, they are shouted at and herded like a pack of unruly cattle and set off with a parting shot, "Alright, alright, now leave. Do not lean on the walls or touch them with your hands." The church finds no hesitation in accepting gifts from their "untouchable" believers but they cannot entertain any physical "contact" with them. The church clearly does not uphold or practise what it preaches – charity and love. It treats the rich and the poor differently, it discriminates between the upper castes and lower castes. The narrator is disillusioned with institutionalised religion when she confronts caste hatred among nuns and priests. Those who enter the Matam may have renounced their family but they do not renounce their caste. They do not erase the memory of their birth in an upper caste. Therefore, the paradox of Nadar priests, Naidu priests, Naicker sisters, Dalitsisters, etc., seriously undermines the fundamental premise of Christian thought: Love thy neighbour as thyself. An alienation sets in amongst the church and its neighbourhood – based on caste. They need the Dalit parish but only to swell the numbers of their faith. The Dalits remain uncared for by the church.

At the mass, Dalits are made to sit in a separate enclosure, they are put up in an exclusive choir (of homogenous, Dalit caste). They are ordered to sweep and mop the church floor before the entry of the upper caste Christian devotees. Dalit Christians, are allowed to bury their dead in a cemetery that is
outside the village boundary, different from the cemetery meant for the upper castes that is situated closer to the church. No priest enters the Dalitstreet, Cheritheru, to look up the dying or the sick. The only interaction between Dalits and church seems to be in an arena bereft of religious or spiritual significance, one that validates the discriminatory social practice of fixing Dalits as scavengers whether at church-run schools or the priest’s residence or at the church; Dalits’ menial services alone are acceptable to the church.

The narrator comments, “There is no space in Thirusabai (holy church) for those Dalits who wish to renounce. There is a huge business that goes on, using up Dalits as the capital. Dalits outnumber other castes in the churchfold. But all the comforts and blessings are enjoyed by upper caste Christians. They corner all the posts and hold court over us. Dalit priests and sisters are marginalized within the church.” (65)

Dalit Christians, especially the women among them, look up to the church, to resolve their problems, both domestic and social. The church, however, is shown to be utterly callous and insensitive towards their plight. In Imaiym’s Koveru Kazhudaiagal, Arokiyam, and her family visit their parish church to plead with the priest (Samiyar) to speak to the panchayat and redress the family’s grievances against the village community that employs them but disregards their interests and needs. The family travels an entire day to reach the church after bargaining hard with their employers to get a day's off. They of course, have to forgo that day’s wages. The samiyar fails to appreciate their devotion or Arokiyam’s faith in him to resolve all her problems. He reprimands her to be more regular at church. He barely gives them audience for five minutes, restricting the conversation to a condescending, polite enquiry, answers only in monosyllables, urging them to visit more often. Arokiyam is most obsequious, shedding tears constantly and pleads with the priest for a blessed visit to the village panchayat, to intercede on behalf of the family. The priest is unmoved.
and non-committal: “Alright, go now. You must come here often. Attend the mass. Pray. Only then god would pity you.”

Imaiyam captures the Dalit Christian family’s enormous faith, respect and abject surrender towards the church and towards the cheroot smoking, gluttonous priest who keeps the family waiting while he makes no concession towards his daily routine of lunch, siesta, tea and mass. This is how the conversation is reported:

“How do you do? What news from the village?”
“Hmm...Alright.”
“The village has turned into a menace Sami. Nothing seems to be alright.”
“Is that so?”
“Yes, father.”
“Alright, father.”
“No, father.”
“Father...”
“As you wish, father.”
“Alright, father.”

Samiyar swirled about in his rocking chair. (9)

And the meeting ends. The family treks back to village, to appease the angry villagers who resent their washerwoman’s absence from work for a day.

While this interview captures the elitist way of life, engulfed in comforts of the hearth that marks a priest’s lifestyle, it also brings our attention to the poverty and social neglect faced by Dalit Christians. Institutionalised Christianity welcomes Dalits only to swell the numbers of its faithful but is utterly unmindful, often contemptuous of them.
In Markku's novel, *Yathirai*, he depicts how the church is infested with high caste priests, bishops and archbishop who marginalize Dalit Christians from church festivities, liturgical service and actively promote caste discrimination within church – Dalits are ordered to sit in a separate, lower section, the priests refuse to conduct their weddings, preferring to solemnise only upper caste landlords' family weddings and do not allow Dalits to participate at the annual chariot festival. Further, they also silence, humiliate and marginalize priests who hail from Dalit families. Thus, even education, choice of a monastic life or a post with the church echelon of power does not guarantee dignity and inclusivity to Dalits.

In this novel, the Dalit Christians embark upon an agitation against the church, against casteism within the church. As part of their agitational programme, they take to reading the Bible on their own. The exercise is a shocking revelation for them. For, they discover a god who is intolerant of bloodshed, asks the faithful to fight for justice and help the oppressed, defend the helpless widow. They realise that upper caste priests preach to them only humility and obedience, they never discuss Jesus as a champion of the downtrodden. Their reading of the Bible empowers them to challenge the casteist church. They look up to a god who declares,

> Learn to do good, your sacrifices do not please me for your hands are soaked in blood...give up evil ways. Quest for justice. Help the oppressed.  

The Dalits wonder, why their priest never reads out such verses from the Bible! One of the leaders of the Dalit congregation, a priest, Father Raja, renounces the church at the end of the novel:
I hereby renounce this institutionalised (corporatised) church. I hereby renounce my renunciation. The god that you uphold is no god. I am going to announce to the faithful there is no god in this church, this church has been sold out to the rich and high castes. Your god is only wealth, post and caste hatred. You may keep this god to your (holy) self. I quit. (241)

The novel suggests another crusade to be fought, this time, against casteism within the holy church.

Bama’s *Karukku* also depicts that the church keeps the Bible out of reach of Dalit consciousness. Bama’s earlier belief that the church acts as a sacred intermediary between the faithful and Jesus is supplanted by her painful recognition that Jesus is erased out of church by his priests and nuns. Her close reading of the Bible proves the church’s construction of Jesus as misplaced, untrue and a wilful deception. She questions why the Dalit congregation is never taught that Jesus dwelt among the poor and fought for the oppressed. The church has taught them that

God is loving, pitiful, peace loving, forgiving, patient, non-aggressive, obedient, almost servile. They never taught us the truth – that god is just, honest, fights back injustice, opposes hypocrisy/pretence does not discriminate, does not believe in any hierarchy... There is a wide gulf between this Jesus and the Jesus of organised Christianity. (85)

The church twists the message/spirit of the Bible and teaches the oppressed the hollow virtues of “patience, obedience and suppression of anger”. (85)

Contrary to the unconditional love held out by Jesus, the church enlists a number of conditions to shower its blessing. It is a privilege granted on the
basis of one’s wealth, caste and social position. While the church valorises forgiveness and charity, it hurts the poor by its words and conduct. It treats the poor with utmost venom and injustice. The ecclesiastical commitment to poverty is as hollow as its 'love' for the poor. The church functionaries lead a life of luxury, routinely planning a rich cuisine and elaborate comforts for themselves. Their love for god is undermined by their inhumanity. Bama comments,

If Jesus were to come to this world today, he would be even more critical of his church than he was of Jewish priesthood. But would his words make a difference to these priests and sisters, I wonder. (88)

Majority of Christians are poor, marginalized Dalits while the ecclesiasts are rich, upper caste persons. They wield the power of church over the poor Christians. They use their power to forge servility and a superstitious faith among the poor so that they may rule over these unsuspecting souls while sustaining a cushy life for themselves. Bama argues that the church enjoins upon the faithful to offer their prayers with eyes closed lest their eyes should open up, it teaches the poor to prostrate at the altar so that they never learn to stand against injustice. The church has driven out god from its premises and has donned godliness as a cloak to camouflage its greed for power. (88-89)

Bama thus, argues for a rejection of institutionalised Christianity and points out that Dalits’ social empowerment is possible only when they agitate for freedom from oppression – both social and ecclesiastical. True faith lies in liberation not enslavement. The church, her analysis proves, is keen to enslave Dalits and hold them subservient and abject, thereby ensuring Dalitsubservience and social abjection in the context of dominant caste hegemony prevailing in society. Her reading that Dalits should reclaim Jesus form the ecclesiastical construction which seeks to distort his true identity as a defender of the
oppressed, as a champion of the poor, is a radical strategy to deploy faith in the cause of Dalit liberation. Bama keeps away from political rhetoric or angry outbursts but points out that the time has come when Dalits have woken up to the double standards of church functioning. Hence, she argues that Dalits need to educate themselves, read up the Bible as a political act. They need to render a re-reading of the Bible, and to deconstruct official (mis)representations of Jesus. Dalits, Bama implies, need to reclaim Jesus as their leader, appropriate him to their cause and deploy him to aid their political agenda of Dalit empowerment in a non-egalitarian society.

Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati* point out that in the present social context conversion does not ensure or encourage social transformation. The act of conversion for a Dalit is a political act. S/he protests against the inhuman social structure of caste that characterises Hinduism and chooses to convert to a faith that does not recognise such a discriminating structure. But Dalit experience suggests that, in practice, a Dalit is not allowed to rid of his/her caste identity that stigmatises him/her socially, even in the new theological set-up adopted by him/her. The hope for social transformation through religious conversion thus remains elusive.²¹

In *Sangati*, Bama discusses how conversion to Christianity has, in fact, brought irreversible disadvantages to Dalit community, especially to Dalit women. The divorce code prevailing among Dalit communities is favourable to women. Dalit women could ask for a separation or annulment of a marriage if the husband is a drunkard, wife-beater or adulterous. The panchayat would address the issue and allow the couple to separate and give directions regarding custody of children. However, Christian Dalit women are denied such a traditional possibility of annulment of a marriage that is difficult to cope with. They are also not allowed to remarry following widowhood or desertion by husband. Hindu Dalit women continue to enjoy such privileges while Christian Dalit
women cannot opt for a similar freedom (Sangati, 109-114). The narrator observes, "Had we remained Hindus, at least, this one privilege would have been available to our women. Of course, in all other aspects, we women (Hindu or Christian Dalit women) suffer alike." (117) Similarly, Christian Dalits are denied the benefits of reservation in education or employment extended by the constitution to scheduled castes and tribes.

Thus, conversion as a strategy for social transformation remains a mirage for Dalits. Dalits are neither granted equality, dignity or social esteem in the Christian fold nor are they entitled to constitutional privileges made available to communities with whom they share their social, economic and cultural milieu. In Raj Gautaman's novel Siluvairaj Charitiram (2002) the protagonist, Siluvai, a Dalit Christian, post-graduate unemployed youth and his friends reconvert to Hindufold so that they may become eligible for benefits of reservation and hence adopt Hindu names.22 The ceremony takes place in a temple following which he and his friends rush to procure their "conversion certificates" which might bring them closer to their dream of a steady job by allowing them to claim benefits of reservation guaranteed to Dalit Hindus. The episode brings to the fore, the frustrations among Dalit Christians whose dreams of social transformation are dashed to the ground both in religious/private and secular/public space. Dalit Christians are thus caught up in a social dilemma where they are not able to access the facility of positive discrimination offered by the State and are discriminated against by casteist church. Bama comments, "When my mother and her sister were young kids, the church missionaries came to our village. They promised free schooling to children, if the people converted to Christianity. The Pallars, Chakiliyars, Koravars did not join the church. Only Paraiyars did. Curse on them! By joining the church, the Paraiyars have lost out on the privileges extended (to Dalits) by the government." (3) Thus, Dalit Christians instead of achieving social transformation through faith, have grown rather disenchanted by it.
3.5 POSITION OF DALIT WOMEN WITHIN DALIT COMMUNITY

We have examined Dalit fiction, so far, as a category of writing that documents, foregrounds oppression of Dalits by upper castes, State and institutionalised religion. This form of exploitation extends to social, economic, political and sexual spheres of their life. In this context, both Dalit men and women, young or old, in rural milieu or in a metro are targeted without exception. However, when we study the position of Dalit women within the space of their community, we recognise that there is yet another dimension to the nature of oppression faced by them. While Dalit women face discrimination on grounds of their caste identity, their oppression both at home and outside on account of their gender adds another dimension to questions of identity and empowerment concerning Dalit community. The dual pressures of caste and gender place Dalit women in a specifically far more exploited matrix than their male counterparts. While sexual harassment, threat or fact of rape by upper castes or the police is a well recognised form of oppression faced by Dalit women, what is less recognised is that the Dalit men subject their womenfolk to equally violent, sexually demeaning conduct. The position of women in a Dalit community is far more vulnerable than that of non-Dalit women in our society. Their impoverished economic condition only adds further misery to their subjugated position.

An inquiry into the state of Dalit women in a Dalit community could be best undertaken by examining specific lives of these women, belonging to different age-groups. Here, we shall study the lives of some of the women represented in Sangati – Maikanni (11 years), Mariamma (16 years) Sammuagakkizhavi (60-65 years) and those of Ponnuthayi, Ottha, Rasammal as depicted in some of the short stories of Bama. An entire chapter is devoted to Maikanni in Sangati (Ch-7, 80-93)
Maikanni is a representative Dalit character who is moulded and constricted by her gender. In *Karukku*, Bama had commented on the loss of childhood pleasures and privileges to scores of Dalit children who were working at match factories to supplement their parents’ erratic income. In *Sangati* she presents the case-history of Maikanni who enters the vicious circle of work, violence and injustice that engulf the lives of Dalit women both at home and outside. Maikanni is an eleven-year-old who is so undernourished that she looks like a seven-year-old. Her name is Jayarani but she is universally called Maikanni for she has large, beautiful eyes that are as attractive as if they were Kohl-lined. Her name translates as “a girl with kohl-lined eyes”. Being the eldest of seven siblings, she takes over all the domestic chores, takes care of her mother during her recurring confinements and nurtures the younger children. Her mother has been deserted by her husband for a concubine (soon after Maikanni’s birth) but he nevertheless returns home every now and then. Hence the tale of her seven siblings is rooted in her father’s callous violence towards his wife and his children.

Bama relates Maikanni’s daily chores: “Maikanni, it seems, took over her mother’s chores, the day she learnt to walk. Her mother worked in the fields, she at home. Her daily routine included, mopping the floor, washing the dishes, fetching potable water, washing clothes, fetching firewood, buying groceries, cooking *Kanji*...she never ceased to work.” (81) When her mother was due for delivery, Maikanni would work in the match factory in the nearby town. As her mother could not work in the fields, Maikanni’s earning would be the only source of income for the family. She would work at the factory and at home. But Maikanni would not accept pitying glances from her neighbours: “Who would my mother turn to? My father is gone for good. I shall look after my mother, of course.” (81) When her mother resumed her work at the fields, Maikanni would stay at home, nurse the baby and manage the home.
Although Maikanni retains her spontaneity and innocent charm and does not perceive her condition as unjust and exploitative, we can locate the source of her oppression as essentially rooted in her gender. Her brothers do not lend her a helping hand either at home or at the factory. Her father’s desertion affects Maikanni the most. She is deprived of schooling, games and a care-free childhood. As she has to leave for the match-factory before sunrise, she suffers from constipation and stomach disorders. Her earnings range from Rs40-50 per week. Every Saturday, her father visits to collect her wages. On one particular Saturday, she is tempted to buy an ice candy for one rupee and gets severely beaten up by her father. She, thus, has no rights over her earnings. She also gets manhandled by the bullies at the factory. The boys do not allow her to sit near the window at the bus, often beating her up and kicking her about. The supervisor at the factory also beats her for any minor lapse. On one particular occasion, he severely beats her up as she relieves herself in the open (as the custom in her Cheri) instead of using the factory toilet. (85)

When Maikanni goes to fetch firewood, she is harassed and barely escapes attempts at molestation. This threat is posed by Dalit men, who lunge at her while returning from work. A Dalit girl finds no reassuring safe environment within her Cheri, even within her community.

While young Dalit boys loaf around in the streets, it is the girls who work at the match-factory and at home. (92) Boys graze the cattle, a less taxing and more fun-filled task. Maikanni is shown to retain her spontaneity, her laughter and innocence. While this could be partly the narrator’s exercise in romanticisation, Maikanni definitely comes across as a lively girl who is burdened much beyond her age. The violence at the hands of her father, factory supervisor or the bullying boys, the ceaseless chores at home fall to her fate owing to her gender. Her oppression is caused by men of her own caste.
Mariamma is a sixteen-year-old girl whose mother died leaving behind the responsibility of tending to two sisters and an alcoholic father on her tender shoulders. Mariamma faces constant teasing from the men in her community as she does not get her menstrual cycle even in her sixteenth year. Hers is a condition of acute anaemia caused by poor nutrition and excessive workload. Mariamma’s father virtually killed her mother through sustained, repeated beatings. Wife-bashing is perceived as a birthright by Dalit men. Mariamma’s mother falls a victim to this. Her grandmother testifies, “she was killed by the ceaseless beatings she received from her husband. He would demand his quota of sex from her every night. She worked day and night, at home and in the fields. How could she put up with his demands night after night? He was a beast. If she dared to refuse, he would break her bones. Any object would serve him as a weapon, even an iron pestle. When she died, her last-born was barely four months old.” (9-10) The infant was nurtured by Mariamma. Her father won a concubine for himself. Here, again, we perceive, how Dalit women receive no protection from the family. Rather, they need to be protected from the family. The violence from within the family complements the violence at the hands of the community elders at large.

While returning from work with a head load of firewood, Mariamma is molested by a high-caste landlord. When she protests and runs away, leaving her bundle behind, the landlord approaches the Parai panchayat and lodges a complaint that Mariamma and her cousin, Manickam were found in a compromising position at his field. (21) The headman promptly calls a meeting of the panchayat of Parai community. The panchayat meeting could be attended only by men. The Dalit women only crowd around and eavesdrop from a distance. The men, frequently, abuse them for being “too forward” and drive them away, at time, using sticks. They shout at the women, “Are you out of your mind? What are you moping about here where men have gathered to discuss. Go back home, the lot of you!” (23) Even old women are not allowed to speak up.
Here, we can see a pattern of marginalisation that is imitative in structure. While Dalits are kept out and marginalized by upper caste communities, Dalit men follow suit when they occupy a position of power. They keep their women out of any form of participation concerning decision-making or community oriented activity. The enforced absence of women from Dalit panchayat is a reflection of patriarchal functioning of Dalit men in the context of women-related issues, especially pertaining to their sexuality. Mariamma is called in but her testimony is hardly esteemed. The men conclude that the Modalali (landlord) must be right and that Mariamma should accept her crime or else she would be heavily fined. When Kaliamma, who followed Mariamma on her return journey from work (and hence a reliable witness) intervenes that Mariamma had left long before Manickam joined Kaliamma and others, a bunch of men pounce upon her and abuse her, “You slut! Leave this place, hey women! How many times shall we drive you off?” (25) Women are violently silenced at this Dalit panchayat. They are given no opportunity to defend themselves or testify facts. One woman’s alleged sexual misdemeanour is construed as the entire community’s shame: “This is a great dishonour to our Jati,” says the headman. (22)

The panchayat briefs Mariamma’s father to procure her apology or face a hefty punishment. The father promptly slaps her hard repeatedly right before the panchayat, ordering her to concede guilt. When Mariamma relates the facts to panchayat, the men disbelieve her, discredit her integrity and announce their decision to fine Mariamma (Rs.200) and Manickam (Rs.100). Not only does the panchayat take a more lenient action concerning Manickam (notwithstanding the fact that the act of misconduct was committed allegedly by both of them), the headman gives his authoritative verdict thus: “Girls need to be more careful of our honour. A man may commit a thousand lapses. Only women have to remember that they shouldn’t end up with a burden in their womb.” (28)
The all-male panchayat duplicates the discriminatory, unjust, repressive attitude of the upper castes towards Dalits in its treatment of Dalit women. It violates their dignity, erases them spatially, silencing them and excluding them from decision-making even on issues directly concerned with their being. In a telling visual motif, the women of the Parai cheri are shown to huddle together at a distance, hovering over the margins, far removed from the centre where the men hold court. In a bizarre twist of irony, Mariamma’s father decides after a few months to marry her off to Manickam as she is unable to get a groom from the village following her discredit at the panchayat meeting. Manickam, a drunkard, gambler and a jailbird over his involvement in illicit brewing of liquor turns into a regular wife-beater after the marriage. Mariamma suffers violence both at the hands of her father and her husband. Her bruised body bears witness to the oppressively hegemonic control of Dalit women by the men of their community. The Dalit women have to bear the dual oppression of caste and gender hegemony in our society. If the upper castes throw the leftovers as food for Dalits, at home the men beat up the women if they eat before the men do. A folk song among Dalits describes how a pregnant Dalit woman eats up the crab stew that she had cooked with a great effort, after having waited long for her husband. The man kicks her in the stomach, throws her out, beats up his children, injures the baby in the womb, smashing his wife’s bones and her bangles. (33)

While the divorce code operating among Dalits is unfair to Dalit Christian women, Hindu Dalit women lose out on their traditional privileges in practice. Either the women put up with wife-beating, the presence of a concubine or face annulment of marriage as arranged by the panchayat. (112-13) Even simple pleasures like going to a cinema are denied to Dalit women as their menfolk fear that their honour may be at stake at a place teeming with upper caste men. At the village festival, men do not allow women to take up a role in plays or other enactments. Men might dress up as women instead, denying women
the right to mount the stage although Dalit women sing and dance very well. Not even an infant girl is allowed to play act a baby Jesus at the stable! Even educated, professional, unmarried Dalit women face problems regarding accommodation as they are driven out by landlords both on account of being a single woman and a Paraichi. (146)

3.6 SUBVERSION AS SELF-DEFENCE: DALIT WOMEN’S HANDLING OF CASTE AND GENDER BIAS

Dalit women have very few possibilities of empowering themselves in a society that keeps them out of power, privilege and dignity of self that are granted, even if, to a limited extent, to women of other castes or class. Dalit women are saddled with poverty and illiteracy in a society that looks at them with casteist and gender prejudice. However, Dalit women exhibit enormous skill for survival and combat. They not only circumvent the restrictive code imposed upon them by upper castes or their own menfolk, they even challenge or subvert the same. They excel in music and rhythm is a part of their basic physical movement. Every aspect of their life is rendered into songs by the women. Singing is a strategy they adopt to break free from the fatigue of hard labour, to celebrate important milestones in a woman’s life, to participate and mark their presence in social-religious functions where, by and large, they are kept away from the limelight. Their oral rendition of their life’s sorrows and joys is a parallel literary history, undocumented in hegemonic literary, academic discourse. Their humour, their ability to laugh and tease even while leading a socially repressed lifestyle bring out their innate strength, resilience and creativity.

Bama reports in Karukku, “Women sing songs composed by themselves. They sing when they sow, when they transplant, when they harvest. They compose the tunes themselves. Their lullabies, their songs to celebrate the onset of puberty, their dance at Easter or their song of lament at a death...” show how
songs are and integral aspect of Dalit women’s existence (51). The song sung by the grandmother at Mariamma’s onset of menstruation in Sangati is a rich, aural tapestry of poetic beauty, and picturesque details. It celebrates a woman’s initiation into sexuality with a joyous and not a censorious discourse. (18) The women ululate collectively, sending the listeners to a state of rapture. The bonding among women at such occasions creates a powerful structure of solidarity in the context of constant chiding, abuse and violent assaults on these women by their husbands, fathers and brothers. The women cook the wedding feast themselves while the men are made to sit outside the house in a huddle, hungry and inactive. (102)

We shall now examine specific representations of women who subvert patriarchal and casteist domination through strategies that are engendered by attributes allowed to them in a gendered society. Sammugakkizhavi is a sixty-five-year-old woman who is perceived by her community as a “crackpot”, a "tough nut" and a rude person. She is unpopular among children and women as she teases them, abuses them and prefers to work and stay alone. She is considered eccentric and difficult to get along with. However, Sammugakkizhavi uses these shrewish and ‘difficult’ traits to subdue the men and fight back caste discrimination.

In her youth, once Sammugakkizhavi went to have a bath at a well owned by an upper caste man. To prevent “Parai jati women” from polluting the well, the owner, Seenivasan had put up thorny bushes at the steps. Sammugakkizhavi carefully pushed them aside, entered the well and had a joyous bath, alone by herself, enjoying a long, undisturbed swim. This had continued for many months when one day the owner caught her red-handed. Unfazed, the woman told the upper caste owner, “Sir, the water in your well is very salty” and spat out a mouthful of water into the well. She then leisurely climbed out in her bathing attire and put on dry clothes. Seeing her in a partial undress, the man
could not approach her to even hit her or shoo her away. He ran to the headman and complained. When the headman chided Sammugakkizhavi, she waited for a suitable opportunity to teach Seenivasan a lesson. Two months later, while working at his fields, she was angry at the man’s violent beating up of a small cheri boy for having drunk water from his mud pot. She simply went towards the pot unnoticed, and pissed into it! She later told the villagers, “Oh didn't this man say that the well water would turn smelly if a Paraichi bathed there? Let him drink my urine now.” (142-43) If only there were a dozen women like Sammugakkizhavi, the Parai jati would be better off, comments the narrator. (143)

Sammugakkizhavi thus seriously subverts casteist taboos like Dalits cannot bathe in tanks or wells manned by upper castes or that they cannot drink potable water or that their presence is polluting in nature. What has not been resolved by political movements, agitations or constitutional amendments is tackled successfully by a Dalit woman branded as eccentric and abusive. Sammugakkizhavi does not challenge this image, instead she uses it to assert her self-esteem and affirm dignity to her caste people. She also seriously challenges the corrupt electoral process in a democracy that buys up ’Dalit’ votes or else intimidates Dalits into voting for candidates on casteist lines. She happily takes the ride to the polling booth arranged by and upper caste candidate, Kovalswami Aiya. While the voters are ferried to the booth in his car, they are dumped there without offering them a return trip to their homes situated at a formidable distance. This is a familiar practice in our electoral set up, of course. Sammugakkizhavi challenges this. She jumps into his car and orders his stooges to drop her at her village. “How could you leave us in the lurch after getting our votes? We gain nothing by casting votes. At least let's get the pleasure of a ride. Take me back or else I shall tell the women of my cheri not to vote for your party.” (122) and of course, she gets the ride back home! In fact, she is the only one to get her point across. Her conduct proves
how Dalit women can subvert hegemonic, oppressive structures like caste and patriarchy by resorting to wit, humour and shrewish behaviour.

Sammugakkizhavi undermines the corrupt electoral practices by choosing to cast an invalid vote. "He gave a ride, alright. But I voted for no one. I simply folded the ballot paper and put it in the box. He can't spy upon me inside the booth, can he?" (123) Here, she asserts the dignity of the voter while pointing out the manipulative politics of candidates/ political parties that seek to garner votes on the basis of caste, community or religion. She also shows how Dalits could subvert what they are not allowed to openly protest against. Her abuse of vote is to be perceived as a strategy of protest against abuse of Dalits by the powerful. Her wit, sarcasm, banter and subversive acts offer a counter discourse to the oft-heard discourse of Dalit oppression and suffering. She exults rather than cringe, she undermines rather than wail. Rasammal in Bama's short story Egaththalam (Mockery) spits at the board bearing the slogan "Police – your friend in need" lying outside the police station where Dalits are tortured and all the Dalits – men, women, students, infants, old women are rounded up and brutally beaten up to teach them a lesson for fielding a Dalit candidate in a constituency that is not a reserved seat. Here the police collusion with upper castes is blatant, resulting in violent repression of Dalits. Rasammal mocks at their rhetoric and public posture. 23

While women like Mariamma, Taayi or Rosamma are brutally beaten up by their husbands, dragged in the streets, kicked about even at an advanced state of pregnancy, (46-47, 71) it is the women like Rakkamma or Kaliyamma who tackle their violent husbands, ward off their blows and drive them out by their shrewish tongues (46-47, 71). They know that they cannot match their men's physical violence, hence they use their speech as a weapon. Repeatedly, we see that the shrew alone escapes domestic violence. (69-74) If women are granted only speech, are kept out of decision-making bodies and
speech is rendered powerless at centres of power, these women use their speech as shrewish nagging, or loud wails that are branded womanly attributes but manage to prevent their husbands from assaulting them. They also resort to socially unacceptable sexual behaviour to shame the macho husband and force him to quit home thereby escaping a brutal assault on their bodies.

Before Rakkama’s husband is able to bring his foot down on her fallen torso, she wails and abuses him loudly, liberally using sexual innuendos and verbally attacking his sexual organs. She challenges him to attack a man instead of her, insinuating that he would only get sodomised by another man rather than assert his physical prowess over him. (69) If the husband used physical violence upon her, she pays him back through violent speech and shocking conduct that are violative of womanly speech and behaviour as codified by society. The husband sneaks out silently when Rakkamma abuses him for his drinking bouts, taunting him, “Why do you drink liquor every day? Drink my son’s urine. Why don’t you drink up my menstrual blood?” and lifts up her saree. (70) She justifies her abusive speech and “unbecoming” behaviour to other women thus, “You go and do your work. Only I know how I escape death at his hands every night. This is the only way to straighten him up. Or else, he would have broken my skull by now.” (70)

Both Rakkamma and Kaaliyamma break stereotypes regarding women’s speech and behaviour as self-defence in the context of socially sanctioned marital violence. When Mariamma, her mother or Rosammal get dragged and kicked about, the neighbours, men and women keep away. “Oh it’s their conjugal matter. How can we interfere?”, they say. But Kaaliyamma knows how to preserve conjugal amity. When Chinappan, her husband kicks her, she kicks him back. When he beats her, she gives it back immediately. It turns into a bout between equals, often resulting in Kaaliyamma’s triumph. No wonder then that the fight between this couple is invariably confined to a verbal duel. If the
rice is burnt, she kicks him in the butt, she reiterates her equal burden of work, quarrels with him to return her money he took away for his drink, makes his life hell so that he sneaks out to the Chavadi, the village meeting point for men. Kaaliyamma manages to subvert patriarchal sanction of male superiority in a marriage and demands an equal share in work and earnings.

In one of Bama’s short stories “Ottha” (Singular), a Dalit girl (Illamalli) loses one of her breasts when a wild boar attacks her in the forest where she had gone to relieve herself. She attains a healthy womanhood but due to her singular condition, she is teased and nicknamed singular, a woman with a single organ (in this case, a single breast). She longs to get married and nurse a baby but no one is willing to marry her. One day, she is molested by the upper caste landlord who teases and abuses her condition. She tells him, “I look, my people can call me by any nickname. You have no right to do so”24 She tries to wriggle out of his clasp but he holds her tight and calls her Ottha repeatedly. She takes out her sickle to cut off his hand but the sickle falls on one of his eyes and the landlord loses it. A granddame of the village assures her, “Only if they are tackled this way, would they learn their lessons.” (151) The landlord too becomes an ‘Ottha’, a man with a single organ. In another story, Ponnutaayi, the woman Ponnutaayi returns to her natal home when she can no longer put up with her husband’s violent, abusive behaviour. When he continues to harass her and hit her here as well, she runs to the police station with her bleeding wounds and files a case against her husband. He gets arrested and she tells the SHO that he could do what he wants with her man, she is off him, for ever. She sells her taali (wedding string) and sets up a shop with the money. She also dumps her children on the husband reminding him that they are his responsibility as well and he cannot use them to tie her down.25 Both Ponnutaayi and Ottha assert their right to live according to their belief and choice. They also address their problems directly, often using the same male discourse of violence and intimidation to subdue their adversary.
They subvert codified conduct outlined for women and transgress spaces demarcated on the basis of gender. Both are conscious of their Dalit identity and prefer singledom to an unequal relationship based on oppressive hierarchy either of caste ("Ottha") or gender ("Ponnutaayi"). All the women studied in this section subvert hegemonic caste / gender discourse in order to defend themselves against an unjust system, often employing parody, invective, banter, subversion through ridicule which Bama terms Nayyandi or Pagadi in Tamil. Through verbal Pagadi (subversive discourse) Dalit women affirm their self-esteem and counter oppressive control of their physical, social and domestic space. As Raj Gautaman writes in his foreword to Bama’s collection of short stories, Kisumbukkaaran, “Dalit invective and banter (Pagadi) ultimately empower Dalits to rise against caste oppression with courage.” 26

3.7 PATRIARCHAL VALIDATION OF CASTE: IN MYTH AND IN REALITY

Folklore is an integral, self-defining aspect of Dalits’ lives. As Dalits are kept out of mainstream society, they construct their own myths, fabricate legends and fuse rumour, fear, fact and fiction to formulate paradigms that govern their psyche and reflect their community’s deep felt fears as well as their aspirations. Interestingly much of their folklore, transmitted through oral narratives that invariably dominate women’s gossip sessions, their mutual "lice-finding" sessions or a leisurely session to exchange betel leaf and areca nut revolves around spooky tales, ghostly adventures and tales about this or that woman being "possessed" by Esakki, a female ghost or someone attacked by "Muni", a mischievous ghost or gheraoed by "Aiyangachi Padai", an army of ghosts that can transform into human shape at will. Such exchange of spooky tales always carry an implicit message for women: "Do not go around unescorted. Do not walk alone. Do not leave your home at night. Do not stray outside if you are menstruating." The tales exaggerate and construct many myths about
“possessed women” such as, women when possessed do not feel pain, they can be caned, flogged, beaten up, their hair can be pulled out from its roots and they can be handed over without any reserve, to the exorcist (Kodangi man). (Ch.5, Sangati, 49-67)

The exorcist exercises enormous power over a “possessed” woman’s body as well as on the minds of the onlookers, usually a large number of women and young girls, though men are not absent. The woman is virtually held a captive by the Kodangi (exorcist) who flogs her, pulls her up by her hair and finally escorts the dishevelled, traumatised, semi-conscious woman to the forest to deposit ritual offerings to “Esakki”, a ghost that is believed to have entered the woman’s body. Two or three men accompany the victim and the Kodangi but women are not allowed to join them. The woman victim could be exposed to sexual assaults at the forest but her physical and psychological condition might not permit her to resist or report it to others. It is interesting to note that only Dalit women get “possessed” while this phenomenon is unheard of among upper caste women. And among Dalits, men are never reported to be “possessed” either! The narrator’s grandmother opines that as men are courageous at heart and as they do not menstruate they do not risk being possessed (55). Whether owing to biological difference or psychological constitution, Dalit women run the risk of a systematised, socially sanctified structure of violent, physical, psychological and sexual exploitation by men. The Kodangi and the accompanying men represent patriarchal power centres who control women’s body under the guise of offering it protection/deliverance from “ghost”. To avoid being sucked into such a system of legitimised exploitation, women are counselled to stay indoors, not go for a bath alone and lead a restrictive life. Whether it is a threat of rape at the workplace, or threat of ghosts, women are expected to protect themselves by staying indoors, stay among women and stay subdued.
The legend of Esakki is also embroiled in caste prejudice. Esakki, the only daughter in a family of seven brothers was in love with a washerman (a low caste) and was not permitted to marry him. The lovers eloped and lived happily on their own. The brothers return when Esakki is full term pregnant, lure her to her natal home for her delivery, gag her and dump her in a closed van and kill her brutally with a sword, rip open her womb and strangle her baby. (58-60) Dalit women believe that Esakki possesses young women and demands a cradle, a winnowing tray or a frock for her infant as ritual offerings and then “leaves” her victim in peace (of course after being flogged out of her wits by the Kodangi). The offerings are emblematic of patriarchal constructs of women as essentially mothers who love to rock the cradle.

Esakki’s brutal, violent, in fact inhuman murder brings to the open the intensely vehement, deep seated prejudice against inter-caste marriage that involve lower-castes. The brother’s liquidation of their sister was on account of her marrying a Dalit youth as well as on account of her exercise of choice concerning her sexuality. Both her choices are believed to have brought “dishonour” to the brothers. The patriarchal validation of caste reinforces the dual structure of oppression on women that operate in our society. The method of liquidating Esakki employed by the seven men is as violent as a gang rape that is routinely employed as a form of punishment to women who transgress caste or sexual boundaries.

Esakki is visually erased, her body is not traceable, she is gagged and bound, that is, effectively silenced. Her erasure – visual, aural, spatial – is symbolic of women’s bondage under a patriarchal structure. The image of the men tearing apart her foetus and smothering it also recalls a similar infamous incident in Gujarat during the Godhra riots. While communal frenzy was responsible for such an inhuman act in Gujarat, Esakki’s brothers are prompted by their keenness to wipe out any trace of caste pollution to their family that the baby
born out of such a union is likely to cause. It is indeed an irony that after having awarded her such a brutal death, Esakki is not spared even when she roams the wild as a ghost. When she allegedly enters a woman’s body, men are authorised by society to heap violence on that body to drive Esakki away.

Esakkis still inhabit Dalit communities albeit under different names. In Sangati, Bama describes in Chapter 11 how an educated, Paraiyar girl who works as a teacher is brutalised by her father and brother for she has fallen in love with a Pallar boy. Legend and reality, myths and facts corroborate each other. The girl is not given a name in Sangati. There could be two reasons for this. Either she is too “live” an issue in contemporary Paraiyar community that the writer decides to keep her identity concealed (and not even give her fictitious name so as not to undermine her real anguish). Secondly, this anonymity could be read as a deliberate strategy to recall Esakki and thus fuse folklore and social reality, myth and person. This neo-Esakki is beaten up by her younger brother so harshly that her eardrum is torn, her earrings are torn apart, her chain is pulled out causing her grievous injuries. He kicks her, stomps on her face, locks her in and beats her unconscious. When he pauses, her father takes over. Although the priest encourages inter-caste marriage in his sermons, in private he ogles at her, gossips about her, casts aspersions on her character, harasses her but does not grant her the license for marriage required by her. Here Bama points out how caste and gender bias legitimised by patriarchal society is further sanctified by institutionalised religion in practice. Like Esakki and her lover this pair also elopes, gets married and lives in a different town. They are not allowed to enter their village and are forced to live like refugees. Bama comments, "If men marry outside their jati, it is accepted. But if a Paraiyar woman marries a man from another caste, they wail that their honour is plundered, their caste pride is wounded. How is that so, I fail to perceive.” (132) Esakkis would continue to be liquidated as long as the nexus between caste and gender forces that target Dalit women go unrecognised.
3.8 CASTE STRIFE AMONG DALITS

In Bama’s third work, *Vanmam* (2002), intra-caste strife among Dalits is discussed and strategies are debated to resolve the same. In many respects, *Vanmam* is a less intense or moving tale in comparison to *Karukku* or *Sangati*. Certain issues, even incidents narrated or discussed in her earlier two works are taken up again in *Vanmam*, without, however, adding a new or different dimension to the quality of discussion. The narrative is less gripping, at places, rather tepid. Although Bama had employed repetition as a deliberate narrative strategy in *Karukku* and *Sangati*, she had used it to add a fresh interpretation or reveal another critical reading of the narrative material than given in her earlier treatment. This engaging trope is missing in *Vanmam*. Disappointing as this may be, a critical study of *Vanmam* is warranted as she subjects Dalits – both Paraiyars and Pallars – to an objective scrutiny and calls for forging of unity among Dalits on social and more significantly political grounds.

*Vanmam* shows how Dalits have internalised the given social system of segregation based on caste. If Paraiyars and Pallars are outcasts in the eyes of Naickers, Odaiyars, Chettiars, Naidu and Nadars; Pallars and Paraiyars treat each other as outcasts within their own social habitat. While Paraiyars have embraced Christianity, Pallars remain within the Hindufold. This fact is played up by Naickers and other upper castes to keep the two Dalit communities divided. This results in Paraiyars and Pallars getting into arguments and tiffs over whose lands should be watered first. While Paraiyars and Pallars remain landless, they go to the extent of killing each other over an argument over whose landlord’s lands be irrigated better. The novel in fact opens with an account of murder of a Paraiyar farmhand, Mariyasu at the hands of Karupasami, a Pallar farmhand, over distribution of water to their respective master’s lands. As Karupasami’s master protects him, he gets away with Mariyasu’s murder and surreptitious disposal of his body. In this way, the
enmity between the two communities is nurtured and kept alive by Naickers. “God knows when we, Paraiyars and Pallars, would stand united”, exclaims a Paraiyar woman, Mekelamma. Mekelamma’s lament becomes the central refrain of the novel. One incident leads to the other. If a member from the Pallar community becomes the aggressor in one incident, a Paraiyar becomes the aggressor in another. The upper caste landlords stoke the fire of hatred and prejudice, call in the police and settle scores with the Paraiyars. The novel is written from the Paraiyar’s point of view although an objective analysis is undertaken to demonstrate that Pallars are used by Naickers for their own political gain.

The Paraiyar community, thanks to education accessible through missionary-run schools, is considered advanced socially and economically. There is a greater political awareness among them and they are highly resented by upper castes for emulating Ambedkarite thought. The novel depicts how Paraiyar youth, most of them college-educated, pursuing a post-graduate degree, organize cultural activities, sports competitions and awareness campaigns to spread Ambedkar’s thought in their community, when they return home from their hostels during vacations. Hope for political unity among Dalits lies with this segment. Pallars are mostly school dropouts and their youth are shown to be either working for Naickers or unemployed but always envious of their Paraiyar counterparts. But despite the best efforts of Paraiyar youth, caste strife between the two communities does not get stalled, resulting in rampant police brutality, forcing young men and adult males to either flee and live incognito or rot in jails.

Paraiyar youth, although they fashion themselves as radical, are yet orthodox in their attitude towards their women. After the cultural programme, the young men want to hold a meeting at the chavadi to discuss future action plan. But they do not invite or want women to be present. Jayarasu announces, “We
shall continue with our cultural programme. As a meeting is scheduled to be held at *chavadi*, women are asked to return to their homes quietly.” (80). The educated girls protest, but to no avail. Selvarani observes, “These boys call themselves great reformists. But if there is a ‘village meeting’, they ask us, women, to go home. What kind of justice is this?” (80) Older women explain to the girls, “Oh, come on. Men shall be men and women shall remain women.” (80)

However, when the police swoops on the men, killing them or arresting them indiscriminately, Paraiyar women, young and old stand by them, protect them, nurture them, take over their chores, run the household single-handedly and also arrange for their bail or professional help. (Ch.8) Much of their work profile during the crisis following police intimidation in the village has been discussed in our section on *Karukku*. In fact, the section in *Vanmam* on Paraiyar women’s management of the crisis following Paraiyar-Pallar strife/riot is almost a re-narration of Bama’s representation of women’s response to cemetery feud between the two communities in her earlier work *Karukku* (Ch.3). Young women accost the police, drive carts to carry their dead and dig up a mass grave and bury the men. (105) Police excesses on women during the raid on the village are largely sexual intimidation, molestation and physical violence. (105-7) When women are not allowed to leave the village for work, they survive and nurture their children by selling milk of their cattle. (145) They also stay together at one house by turns and subvert police repression through their gendered bonding. (108) But when the situation normalises, while Dalit boys return to their college by borrowing money, girls are forced to give up their studies and stay at home. Thus, the impact of caste-strife on women is more acute. Even pregnant women, lactating mothers, old women and school going girls are rounded up, jailed and severely beaten up by the police. (102-5)
When Paraiyar boys plan a counter strategy to avenge the Pallars’ murder of innocent Paraiyars, Rosamma points out, “You men will kill and run away and dodge the police. Here, we women are beaten up by the police and intimidated by the Pallars as well. We can neither go to work nor cook and eat in peace ... lord ... what a life...worse than a dog’s ... we can neither live ... nor die...” (134-35) *Vanmam* depicts how women get punished and suffer on account of caste-strife engendered by men. They do not want it. They do not precipitate it. Yet they become its worst victims.

### 3.9 HOPE FOR UNITY AMONG DALITS

*Vanmam* posits an important caveat to the issue of identity of Dalits. Non-Dalits tend to homogenise Dalits, erasing out differences, contradictions and anomalies that prevail among various Dalit communities. To the outside world, they are dumped as a common heap – a homogenised, monolithic category of untouchables. *Vanmam* alerts us to this disturbing facet of Dalit life, where while they accept a unified, singular political identity as Dalits, culturally, they are unable to overlook or overcome differences that exist amongst them. While the upper castes mock at them and use this dimension of their social identity to exploit them politically, it is worth remembering that the heterogeneous character of Dalit community is a reflection and extension of our pluralistic society where homogenisation is unwelcome as well as unfair.

However, for purposes of political empowerment, Dalits would have to sink cultural, regional differences and work together under a common banner. Unity among Dalits is a pre-condition to a successful overthrow of upper caste hegemony in society. *Vanmam* reiterates this in each of its twelve chapters.

Paraiyars initiate negotiations to arrive at peace between the two communities. Paraiyars have lost more in terms of human loss, economic set-back and
pending court cases. While Naickers fume, Pallars and Paraiyars agree to withdraw cases against each other and put up a common candidate for the panchayat board election. The newly elected Dalit president Kaalaiyan (belonging to Pallar community but voted to the post by both Paraiyars and Pallars) foregrounds the need for unity among Dalits if they wish to defeat upper castes’ domination over them. He also promises to work for victory for Dalits at the State assembly and Parliamentary elections. A democratic resolving of intra-caste differences becomes the accepted mantra at the end of the novel, much to the discomfort of Naickers.

Kaalaiyan comments, “As Ambedkar pointed out, we need to capture political power first. Let the Panchayat election be the first step towards that goal.” (158) The novel concludes with a typically Bamasque optimism, hoping for a result-oriented future for “though there are fears lurking in our minds, there exists clarity of thought and a strong will as well.” (157)

3.10 CRITICAL RECEPTION TO BAMA’S WORKS

Bama’s works have won critical acclaim steadily over the years. Initially, her use of Dalit vocabulary and unconventional use of language was criticised by mainstream writers and critics. Bama’s reformulation of genres, narratorial innovations were attacked by critics. Bama recounts, “In literary circles there were some who discounted it as not being literary enough... not keeping to the generic definitions of novel or autobiography. Some of them were upset by the obscenities used and found them un-parliamentary! But there were also those who welcomed it as new and experimental ... once they commented on the language and called it vulgar and obscene, I was all the more convinced that it was my language, our language.”28
Bama’s writing indicates a conscious choice in terms of form, language, mode of narration, tone, characterisation and content. She points out, “The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits, in particular, and the liberation of the oppressed, in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest.”

Having articulated her writing as a subversive practice, as a political choice, Bama succeeds in dismissing biases and objections to Dalit literature as motivated by traditionalist ideology with rigid notions of what is or is not literary enough. Raj Gautaman evaluates *Sangati* as a sound model of Dalit literature that fuses a feminist perspective with Dalit consciousness. He holds *Karukku* as a Dalit text that evolves an oppressed group’s subjectivity. As Dalits have been denied subjectivity for ages, Gautaman holds *Karukku*’s accomplishment as of historical significance. He, however, cautions that *Karukku* has not succeeded in instilling “a sense of guilt or anger in anyone’s (reader’s) mind. It has invested Dalits’ lives, Dalits’ suffering, disappointments and unhappiness with pathos and pity. Self-pity is of no use to *Kalaga* – Dalit literature.”

The writer Ambai observes that Bama “employs absence of easy flow of narration as a deliberate structure. In Bama’s *Karukku*, words and images hit you as lumps of soil breaking down on one’s head with a thud. They hit you hard as stones would. They hurt. They cause pain. This work could not have been written in any different way.”

Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati* have been translated into English and are commissioned to be translated into French. Lakshmi Holmstrom points out that “the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional ‘feminine’ ideals of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather, courage, fearlessness,
independence, and self-esteem ... Besides overturning received notions of decorum and propriety, she bridges spoken and written styles consistently. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil.” 34

Markku commends Bama’s "use of spoken vocabulary without ornamentation, reflecting people’s language directly... Her writing depicts Dalits’ ability to parody, lampoon, ridicule and subvert” figures of authority.35 There have also been critics who evaluate Dalit writing like Bama’s from the standpoint of notions enmeshed in assumptions about what literature should be. Their comments are embedded in value-judgements that disregard the political context of Dalit enterprise. M. Kannan and Francois Gros believe that Dalit literature privileges testimonies over works of imagination, valorises lived experiences over poetic experimentation; chronicles over artistic constructions. They also have reservation over Dalit literature’s call for action rather than remain content with re-presenting life as art.36

Bama’s rejoinder could well be, “I feel my writing has a definite social function.”37 Her works have won awards, especially her Karukku in English translation. Her readership has widened and her books have received greater attention and approbation. Bama sees this, “as acknowledging the award, not the work. For me recognition in my own village as one who voices their experiences is what matters most.” 38

3.11 CONCLUSION

Bama’s writing embodies an activist agenda. As a Dalit, writing has empowered Bama. Her entry into academy, her presence at literary meets, conferences in Indian metros and abroad, her continued contribution in the sphere of
education as a school teacher are various facets of her social empowerment. In turn she employs her writing to implore Dalits to adopt education as a sure strategy for self-empowerment and acceptability in society. Her writing while using spoken Dalit women’s vocabulary is addressed to non-Dalits who need to be educated and sensitised about Dalits’ struggle for a dignified existence. At the same time it also shows possibilities of success to her Dalit reader.

In all her works, *Karukku*, an autobiographical narrative, *Sangati*, a feminist narrative on Dalit women’s lives, *Vanmam*, a novel, Bama reiterates and calls upon Dalits to organise and help themselves, “Who would come forward to aid us? We would have to help ourselves” is her repeated reminder. In *Karukku* she comments, “Each one of us has to wake up from slumber. Instead of accepting our lot as our fate, we should reject this bondage, this unjust system. We must be brave and stand up for ourselves. Break up caste barriers and biases and prove to the world that no man is inferior to another. Those who have prospered by suppressing us would not give up their hold so easily. But we need to show them their place, show them all are equal and change this society.” (23) *Karukku* is a clarion call to Dalits to liberate themselves from bondage based on caste, religion and Bama reposit great faith in education as a possibility for deliverance from exploitative social structures.

In *Sangati*, Bama urges women to organise themselves and fight for their rights. “Why should we suppress our talents? We work as much as the men do. In fact, much more, I should say. Ask these men to take over our chores for one day. They would run away in no time...We have to assert our rights. We have to stand up for our esteem. If we wait for others to come and give us a helping hand, then you better stand prepared to rot for a lifetime.” (76) She also points out that Dalit women have to assert themselves politically to reap gains for themselves and their community.
In *Vanmam* forging of unity among Dalits is stressed upon most forcefully. Education for Bama is not limited to formal education. She lays equal emphasis on spiritual education but wants this to be free from interference from ecclesiastes and officialdom. Dalits have to gain enlightenment in a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees.

We can conclude that Bama works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If *Karukku* upholds education, *Sangati* foregrounds organised agitation, while *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities.
NOTES

1 Use of colloquial language, spoken vocabulary of a community had been used earlier in Tamil fiction or plays only with regard to upper caste communities or middle class, non-brahminical but non-dalit communities. Writers like Pudumai Pittan, Jayakantan used community-specific, region-specific Tamil vocabulary for the characters and standardised Tamil for narratorial voice. Dalit writers like Poomani, Daniel, even Sivakami have used standardised Tamil for narration and Dalit vocabulary to a limited extent for characters’ speech. Bama consciously uses Dalit vocabulary both for narratorial reportage and characters’ speech. Her political, radical use of Dalit vocabulary raised a debate in literary circles when Karukku was first published.


5 Sharmila Rege, ”‘Real Feminism” and Dalit women’, Economic & Political weekly (5-11 February, 2000) 8.

6 Bama’s attempt to foreground Dalit women’s culture in Sangati through valorising knowledge received from one’s maternal genealogy can be traced to showwalter’s theorisation of gender. Ambai’s Squirrel, however, could be a
more apt example of emulating principles of Gynocritics school of feminism rather than Bama’s *Sangati* despite its shared notions of gender or women writer’s cultural resourcing strategies with Showwalter’s analysis of the same. Similarly, an emphasis on women’s language, notion of writing the body, women’s sexuality, feminine writing, and its own specificity in its relation to language, critiquing of valorization of reproduction and nursing, effort to seek a language for women’s inter-subjective experiences which have been silenced by the cultures of the past, critiquing of appropriation of women’s unpaid reproductive and productive labour etc. are discernible in Bama’s writing as in those by Julia Kristeva, Lucy Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Monique Wittig or Simone De Beauvoir. A direct influence, however, is denied by Bama. She likes to draw attention to Dalit women’s struggle to survive, their strategies of resistance to oppression. For a quick survey of French feminist theory, see *French Feminism Reader* ed. Kelly Oliver (Maryland: Rowman Littlefield, 2000).


8 Bama, *Sangati* (Madurai: Ideas, 1994) 1. All references to *Sangati* are to this edition. Translation mine for the purposes of this research. Hereafter, page numbers are incorporated in the text.


11 Bama, *Karukku* (Madurai: Ideas, 1992) 10. All references to *Karukku* are to this edition. Translation mine for the purposes of this research. Hereafter, page numbers are incorporated in the text.


14 In an interview to Agnes Fernando in August 2004, Bama comments, “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 don’t 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 will lose all their power and position.” Agnes Fernando, “celebration of self in Black and Dalit autobiographies”, Thesis submitted to the University of Madras, November 2004: 270.


17 On 13 October, 1935, Ambedkar declared, “Because we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so. Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment. We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an untouchable. However, it is not my fault: but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power.” Quoted by E. Zelliot, From Untouchable to Dalit, (Delhi: Manohar, 1992) 206.

18 Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922), Letter to Miss Dorothea Beale, Sept. 1885 as quoted in Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present vol-I eds. Susie Tharu & K. Lalita (New Delhi: OUP, 1991) 253-255. Pandita Ramabai, a scholar who could give lectures in Sanskrit and argue on theology with Shastris became a widow two years after her marriage to Bipin Behari Das in 1880. Known for her critique of Hindu orthodoxy and its treatment of upper-caste women, in particular widows, Ramabai left for England in 1883 and converted to Christianity. She confronted Christian theologians as well and declared: “I am not bound to accept every word that falls from the lips of priests or bishops... Obedience ... to the word of God is quite different from perfect obedience to priests ...” (quoted in Tharu & Lalita, p. 245). Bama’s critiquing of priests even while accepting Jesus as a radical defender of the oppressed merits comparison with Krupabai’s and Ramabai’s similar critiquing of church authorities and upholding of Jesus / Bible as vehicles of personal, spiritual fulfillment.


20 Markku, Yathirai (Madurai: Ideas, 1993) 185, translation mine.

21 For an account of disenchantment among neo-budhists, converted muslims, see M. N. Srinivas ed. Caste, its Twentieth Century Avatar (Delhi: Viking, 1996).


27 Bama, *Vanmam* (Coimbatore: Vitiyal, 2002) 20. Translation mine for the purposes of this research. All references to Vanmam are to this edition, hereafter incorporated in the text.


33 For more information see Bama’s preface to English translation of *Sangati* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) viii.


