

Caste Discrimination and Education as a Hope of the Underprivileged – A brief study of Poomani's *Heat* & Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract

Education is a force that liberates the underprivileged people from their sorrow and misery in the form of slavery. In recent years opportunities for education are widespread but in ancient days educational opportunities were for only particular community people. Around 1500 BC the Aryans arrived in India. They conquered Northern regions in India and pushed the native people towards the Southern region, forest and mountains. They disregarded the local culture and initiated the caste system in India. This caste system continues on till now. Many atrocities are done in the name of caste and community. One community people attack and kill other community people in the name of caste for petty things. Even though we live in a highly advanced world where the government supports the underprivileged people, crimes against them are regularly executed. Government supports them by giving large scale educational opportunities but even those opportunities doesn't help them to survive in this world unscathed. In Poomani's *Heat* in the name of caste many atrocities were done to these people. Bama in her autobiographical novel believes that education is their only form of survival. This paper analyses how education is the only hope of these people and how even it failed to help them.

Key Words: culture, caste, education, sufferings, land disputes, honour killing, violence

Introduction

In the 16th century Portuguese coined the word 'caste' to refer these four groups: teachers and priests are known as Brahmins; the warrior, rulers and soldiers are known as Kshatriyas; artists, traders and farmers are known as Vaishyas; servant are known as Shudras. Tribal people and people without caste are known as 'untouchables, backward class, Dalits'. In 1950 'untouchability' was termed as illegal by the Indian constitution.

A person's caste is determined into which he/she is born. Most of the underprivileged people live in a segregated colony away from the upper class people. They often receive poor facilities in most of the things such as medicine, food, education, even water, etc.

'Untouchability' is severely enforced in certain villages where the underprivileged people are less in number. Drawing water from upper-class people's well or refusing to perform certain tasks or entering upper-class people's temples often brings violence as retaliation. To escape the ill-treatment in the society the underprivileged even tried converting into a different religion.

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar were two most prominent people who protested against untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi published three journals in order to support the underprivileged people which led to the Harijan Movement in India. Dr. Ambedkar joined the Harijan Movement to show his protest against social injustice caused in India. He became the spokesperson for underprivileged people in India where caste has been spread in every nook and corner irrespective of their educational background. Many caste reformers believe that liberation can be pertained only by unity, protest and education.

Education brings a type of transformation within an individual which in turn brings a transformation into the society in which the individual lives in. It has become a tool of hope for underprivileged people. Education gives an individuality, identity and self-confidence to these people. It makes them concerned about their society and contributes towards the development of it.

Caste Discrimination

Even though education exists since the evolution of humans, it has been transmitted to only selected groups from one generation to another generation. Education was denied to the people who lives outside of this groups. During the ancient times people were educated according to the caste they belong to. Brahmins were taught Vedas and mantras whereas Kshatriyas were educated in the art of war. The capabilities of Shudharas

were devalued and educational opportunities have been denied for them. In modern times educational opportunities have been globalized and the underprivileged people are given many concessions by the government in order to support them.

Poomani and Bama are two prominent writers in Tamil literature who brings out the significance of caste discrimination and education through their works. The protagonist of the respected works fights against domination in their own way. Even though one opts for violence and another prefers education their cause is the same that is to fight against caste discrimination. In Poomani's *Heat*, Chidambaram believes that violence is their only form of survival in the society.

"That rogue who is the supervisor in Vadakkuraan's house? He is sure to testify. He was Vadakkuraan's henchman."

'Arrogant bastard! He'll turn up in court. I should have stabbed him first.'

'If he testifies, he'll be slaughtered next. Anything that happens next is all right by me. But I don't think he will play mischief now that his master is done for.' (Heat: 61)

Even though in the beginning his father denies that violence is not the only way after the death of his eldest son he also changes. In Bama's *Karukku* one can see a differential aspect, here they believe that education is their form of survival.

"Once, when Annan was signing out his books, he added his title, M.A., on a sudden impulse. Immediately the attendant brought him a stool to sit on, and what's more, began addressing him as 'Sir'." (Karukku: 17)

Underprivileged people have been harassed, humiliated and killed because of their illiteracy and social backwardness. In *Heat*, Ayya refuses to give up his land so his eldest son was brutally murdered.

'I had never imagined that it would turn out this way. I didn't know there was such bitter enmity between you and Vadakkuraan. I didn't know, too, that the goatherd was your boy. It was high noon, and it looked like they were thrashing a boy they'd caught trespassing. There was some stranger standing next to him. I had had a few, you see, so everything was a blur. Since I had drunk a lot on an empty stomach, I wasn't steady on my feet. I couldn't even walk a few steps more and shout at them. All right, I thought, they must be bullying the boy for letting his goats graze on their land, so I went home. The bastard has done this!' (Heat: 157)

Since education have been denied for the underprivileged people for a long time it plays a significant role in their development. It frees them from the clutches of the dominant society. Social improvisation will only occur when the inequality between caste and sexes are cleansed from the minds of people. People should know that there is an increase in caste and gender based violence not only in villages whereas even in cities people are subjugated to it. Education is the only way to put an end to this. Only through education equality among gender and castes can be promoted. Education should also promote the values of equality among castes and gender so that it gets deeply rooted in the minds of people and brings a change in society.

Underprivileged people begun to realize that the process of their liberation is only through the significance of education. Bama's brother tells her the importance of education.

'Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn.' (Karukku: 17 - 18).

Inspired by her brother's words Bama studied earnestly and stood first in her education. Due to this many children irrespective of caste and community approached her for clarifying their doubts and befriended her. For higher education she was admitted into convent hostel. There she could see how the Warden - Sisters treated her caste students and the upper caste students clearly.

“These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat,’ she would say publicly. When we returned to the school after the holidays, she would say, ‘Look at the Cheri children! When they stay here, they eat their fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state in which they come back from home-just skin and bone!’” (Karukku: 20)

She wanted to leave the place because she did not like the atmosphere there but was forced by her mother to stay and study there. Since she had no other options she continued her stay. Even small things like dress highlighted the difference in their status.

“Both in the hostel and in the school, the children wore all sorts of fine clothes, and they kept nice things to eat in their rooms. So I thought they must all be upper-caste children. My mother too had given me some fried groundnuts and puffed rice. I had put this aside for myself. I wondered to myself how it was that children belonging to other communities always had fine clothes and good food. I realized it was they who had money. As for me, my community was low-caste; I had no money either. All the same, I thought, I would study hard and make good. So I worked really hard. (Karukku: 73)

Bama worked hard in her studies and got first mark in her class. Her educational achievements changed the atmosphere in the convent and everything turned in her favour.

“Many of the children at my school were very poor at their lessons. I studied hard and got the best marks in my class. Because of this, all the children would speak to me and were friendly. Frequently I remembered what Annan had said to me when he was at home. The teachers and Sisters who taught me often encouraged me and were friendly towards me. This made me keener about my lessons. They asked me to help the children who were really backward at their lessons. I was overjoyed. (Karukku: 21)

Due to these types of differences only, government insists educational institutions should demand their students to wear uniforms. These educational institutions also provides equal opportunities for all irrespective of their caste. Education can solve poverty only when the underprivileged people get opportunities related to it. If the higher class people brings hindrance in this also then it is no way useful for them. Sometimes educational and professional achievements of an individual closely relates to their social background.

Education

To bring a conclusion to these things, educational institutions should promote the knowledge of equality in caste. But instead of doing that certain education institutions increase class distinctions and social segregations. So sometimes education actually worsen the situation of the underprivileged people. These people have the hope that education will improve their situation and that they can bring a change in their society but when they come to a realization even that education can't help them they feel shattered. When Bama worked as a teacher she faced the same situation.

“It was this train of thought that led me to the foolish desire that I could become a nun and enter a convent, and in that way work hard for other children who struggled as I had done. There was a desire in my heart to help other children to better themselves, as I, born into the same community, had been able to do, because of my education. I really wanted to teach such children. But I understood, after I entered the order, that the convent I entered didn't even care to glance at poor children, and only wished to serve the children of the wealthy. In that convent, they really do treat the people who suffer from poverty in one way, and those who have money in their pockets in a totally different way.” (Karukku: 77)

This situation shows us how education couldn't even improve their state. Due to this the scholars and educationist doubts that the gap between the privileged and underprivileged is only going to widened and is going to take us back to the days of 'Gurukulas' where only the privileged people got education and the underprivileged were dominated.

The inequality between social and economy was so wide that in order to survive Bama applied her brother's advice and started to study hard. She believed that education will break caste discrimination and give them the strength to fight back. When she entered the convent she could find inequality in almost everything such clothes, food, etc. But as she started to focus on education she loses interest in all these things and slowly elevates her level by comforting herself.

"In my village, taking as evidence my skill at picking out the lice from her hair, my grandmother used to claim that I going to be a really smart child. And whenever my elder brother wrote to me, he would say, 'You have lots of brains; it's as if a Palmyra fruit has been thrust into a sparrow's head. Study well and gain lots of marks.' And so, gradually, I cared less and less about clothes. I went about my business, telling myself this was the destiny that was given to me." (Karukku: 73)

Education has failed to change the life of the underprivileged people and provide them with the opportunity that they need. Since the upper-class people are not ready to accept them as equals and let them out of their clutches their progress is very slow. Due to these reasons they are unable to flourish and are forced to live within the minimal resources they are with.

There are educational institutions in India which are run by various caste people who appoint their caste members in their institutions. Situation like these doesn't improve the gap between caste and religion whereas it rather strengthens it. Bama also describes the same situation.

"So it seems that Nadar schools only admit Nadars, and Naicker schools only admit Naickers. And then, Aiyar schools will only teach Aiyar children. If it is all like this, then heaven knows where all the Dalit children can go and break their heads. I don't know if there is such a thing as a Dalit school.

Then, if Dalits accept that nobody else will take any notice of them, and ask for admission in the schools run by Catholic nuns and priests, they are told that if they take Dalit children, their standards will fall. They marginalize all of us Dalits as being of poor quality. Amongst all this, it is a real dilemma where and how I can find a job and survive." (Karukku 119)

If this is the case for the underprivileged, then how will they be educated? These things project that their survival itself is a big problem.

Education is actually making the underprivileged students to tolerate what is happening to them rather than making them fight against the domination. It only teaches them to be the same submissive people like their ancestors instead of giving them the strength to fight against the dominant class. In *Karukku*, Bama narrates how the church preaches one thing and does entirely a different thing. While preaching they say that all the people are same and equal in the eyes of God but they doesn't treat the underprivileged people as their equals. The author argues with the authorities when she finds underprivileged children are made to work overtime.

"I was shocked when I saw this convent and the school attached to it. I couldn't begin think how I would spend my years in such surroundings. And this convent too was not without its caste divisions. From the very first moment I understood the state of affairs.

In that school, attended by pupils from very wealthy households, people of my community were looking after all the jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories. And in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people. They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings. They did not know that I was a low-caste nun. I was filled with anger towards them....." (Karukku: 25)

Even though they mostly lose the battle the underprivileged people have to fight for their rights since the very beginning caste system was formed.

The underprivileged people mostly doesn't own land so they work for the upper caste people for low wages. Sometimes they borrow it from the upper class people to yield crops but has to give most of the crops to them as wages. So they only had minimum of crops to spare for themselves. Only a few people own land even those people are tortured to the core so that they will give up their lands. If they don't give up their land it is grabbed from them in some way or the other.

"Why did they torment you like that?"

'No reason. The rich guys couldn't stomach the fact that we were farming our own piece of land. They wanted us to give it up and go away.'

'Was it their ancestral property?'

'No, but they had grabbed properties from a lot of people.' (Heat: 47)

Conclusion

People as a united front should fight against this caste discrimination. It should be seen as a common issue for all then only as a nation we can fight against it and eradicate it. To protest against it the underprivileged should challenge the caste system which exist in the Hindu and Christian society. To bask in their luxurious lifestyle the upper-class people follow certain ideologies which burdens the underprivileged people. So the underprivileged people should protest against it. Without fighting nothing can be achieved so instead of accepting their fate and wallowing in misery they have to protest, fight and ignore the upper-class self-imposed ideologies. They have to fight against everything that has been imposed on them in the name of culture, caste and religion. If they fail to do so then the underprivileged has to lead a life full of despair, fear, ignorance, humiliation and domination.

The cultural identities can only be eradicated slowly through education. Most of the educated youths nowadays opts for western culture and stopped dwelling in Indian caste and culture in the name of superstitious beliefs. Even though it's a little alarming to know how they have adapted to the western culture so swiftly in some ways such as caste it also helps. Many people in certain places doesn't want to let go of this caste system for their own selfish reasons. But the educated people nowadays has an open mind which leads to protest against caste discrimination. They are fighting for the rights of the underprivileged people. With the help of social media they are creating awareness among the people for the liberation of the underprivileged. They are also protesting against the crimes such as honour killing, rape, etc., which are done against the underprivileged people. Since the underprivileged people are getting support from the other people who belong to various religion and caste their situation is slowly improving. It can only be eradicated if the educated people destroy the deep rooted caste system from all religion. The education institutions should also help by not naming their institution after their caste. They should also stop giving preferences to staff and students who belong to their caste and community that way the underprivileged people will also get their chances. The government should also help by eliminating the caste column from the educational institutes. Only through this way caste system can be completely wiped out from our country.

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