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AUTHOR INTERVIEW

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“I write for social change”

Jaydeep Sarangi in conversation with Bama Faustina

J.S.: Bama, You are a cyclonic dalit activist and writer. Would you please share some of your experiences regarding caste stratification in India?

Bama: I can share my experience of my place only. Our place has age-old caste stratification and the lowest are the Dalits. My experiences here are dehumanizing – wherever I go, whatever I do and however I try, I cannot escape from this caste tentacles. Each caste tries to dominate and suppress the other below it. Not only from womb to tomb, but even after one’s death caste follows and segregates – even in the graves. Stratification of caste is faced at every level – education, employment, religion, marriage, everywhere.

J.S.: Your mother had to work as a coolie who didn’t get the privilege of education. How did she contribute to your identity making?

Bama: My mother was a hard working woman and what I am today, I attribute to her. She was a very loving, simple and beautiful woman. She was a philosopher and guide to me. I have inherited a lot of values and convictions from her which enable me now to face the hardships of this caste-ridden male dominated society. My father was a Lt Colonel in the Indian Army. My mother had brought me up as a sensitive human being with love and dignity.

J.S.: How do you view rape of Dalit woman in the news these days?

Bama: Yes, raping and killing of Dalit women are in the news these days. But it is not something new. It is a common thing in this country and it has been happening from time immemorial. It is heart breaking to know the violent and inhuman killing of the 19 year old Dalit girl in Hathras, UP who was gang raped and brutally mutilated by dominant caste men of her village. The way the broken body of the girl was cremated, the authorities rejecting heartlessly her parents’ right to see their daughter’s face for a last time, is cruel and shows that in this country, dalits are denied dignity in life as well as in death. Personally it is too much of pain to go through and live with. After disposing of the body in such a high-handed manner, the police has the temerity say that the girl was not raped, but only killed. Of course, killing dalits doesn’t matter!?. Raping them is one way of asserting their upper caste aggressiveness and they don’t mind any untouchability while subduing and enjoying their bodies. In this country we seem to have strange human beings. It would be safer for us to live in forests with animals rather than with this so called upper caste brutes.

J.S.: Can a dalit woman speak differently?

Bama: Every moment of their life, dalit women suffer atrocities, violence, untouchability, cruelty and abuses based on caste, class and gender. They are treated with no self respect and with no human dignity not just because they are women but because they are dalit women. They are treated worse than dogs and so they speak and can speak differently. Not

only their bodies are broken but all that they are,- their dreams, their emotions, their aspirations, their very existence- is crushed and crumbled which makes them see reality differently and hence, speak differently. Naturally they not only speak up, but in their outrage cry out for social justice, equality freedom and for human dignity.

J.S.: How do you view a dalit woman's body different from others?

Bama: For the male, a woman's body is a mere property for a man to perform and fulfil all his desires. In the case of a dalit woman, her body is treated as a bundle of flesh and blood with no emotions, no dignity, no self-esteem, no respect and no humanness. In real life a dalit woman's body is a symbol of hard work, freedom, dignity, throbbing with life and in harmony with nature and the cosmos. In this way her body is different from others.

J.S.: Why do you write?

Bama: I write because I think it is the duty and responsibility to write the real stories of my people. I also feel that by writing my own wounds are healed and I am liberated and renewed. Writing is self-healing! *Karukku* is the living story of a particular group of Dalit people in a particular village in which the narrator (myself) is a part and parcel of that group. It talks about their style of living, their hard work, their culture, their belief system, their entertainment, their spirituality, their love, their fight, their struggles, their pain and agony, their joys and sorrows, their tears and dreams.

J.S.: Do you like the tag 'Dalit Feminism'?

Bama: Yes. The life of a Dalit woman is totally different from a non-Dalit woman. So, Dalit feminism is a must. The language that I use, the content that I write, the characters that I create in my writings and the values and convictions that I advocate through these characters are all of militant nature. I strongly believe that writing itself is a political act and it is one of the weapons that I use to fight against this dehumanizing caste practice.

J.S.: What makes Dalit autobiographies so popular among the readers?

Bama: It is because they speak the 'truth'. It is the experience of not only a writer, but also of many Dalits in this country. It makes the reader feel one with the writer and gives identity to the writer. It is kind of an opening to assert and free oneself.

J.S.: Why are the Brahminical forces still at the helm of affairs in this country?

Bama: The Brahminical forces are strongly injected in most areas and in most of the minds of our people. It is strongly rooted in the spiritual soil and has a religious sanction. Our people who are highly religious accept anything and everything without questioning if it is given in the name of 'God' and religion. Brahmins who had the advantage of getting education and employment unlike the other people stubbornly believe that they are the intelligent people and cling on to power and authority. The nature of Brahminism is such that it easily permeates everywhere and gradually and silently kills everything in order to establish its ideology.

J.S.: Why do you need a separate term ‘Dalit Feminism’? How is it different from feminism in India?

Bama: Feminism in India emphasizes the empowerment of women in general in terms of equality in all its dimensions. It is true that all women all over the world suffer because they are ‘women’. In India the problems faced by dalit women are entirely different from that of nondalit women. In the Indian context, women suffer a lot in the family because it is ‘man’ centered; in the society because it is patriarchal and male chauvinistic, and religion justifies and legitimizes both these unjust institutions and mind sets favouring men alone. In addition to these, dalit women face other problems because our society is not only a male dominated society, but it is an upper caste male dominated society. Due to untouchability and caste based violence and atrocities dalit women are tortured and humiliated even by upper caste women. So, the term ‘feminism’ in India is not enough to encompass the liberative perspectives, aspirations, values, convictions and dreams of dalit women. How can any ideology of emancipation and empowerment that does not include the annihilation of caste in its agenda and is not committed to the task of restoring the self esteem and self respect of dalit women who do not have equal social status like other non dalit women, make any sense to us? Therefore, I strongly feel, we need a separate term, ‘dalit feminism’.

J.S.: What makes you write, “We must crush all these institutions that use caste to bully us into submission and demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low?”

Bama: I write for social change. Even now my neighbour, who is an ‘upper caste’ woman lets all the dirty gutter water in front of my house. When I point out this to her she stubbornly and angrily refuses to stop it. She uses abusive words every day whenever I go out of my house. Now I am really tired of telling that woman and she continues with her inhuman behaviour. Others who witness this daily don’t even oppose this because she is an upper caste woman. She deliberately does this because I am a dalit woman. For her dalits ought to live in a filthy and stinking area, and she is not able to digest the fact that I have built a house and I live a decent life in front of her. If some upper caste family were to live near her instead of me, she won’t dare to do this. It is a daily struggle for me. Even if we move to an urban area, we are always treated with contempt and cruelty once they come to know our caste.

Not only in the neighbourhood but also in many – religious and educational institutions beginning from primary schools, in offices, in working places and almost in all walks of life I have seen a lot of injustices done in the name of caste. The dominating and oppressive forces paralyze people constantly and continuously.

In Rohit Vemula’s words, our birth is a fatal accident and from womb to tomb we are compelled to do menial jobs and to live as servants of all. We are segregated by caste which is decided by birth and which follows us even after death. We long for equality of human persons and by all means we want to demonstrate that among human beings there are none who are high or low. We want to annihilate caste which permeates the whole fiber of Indian

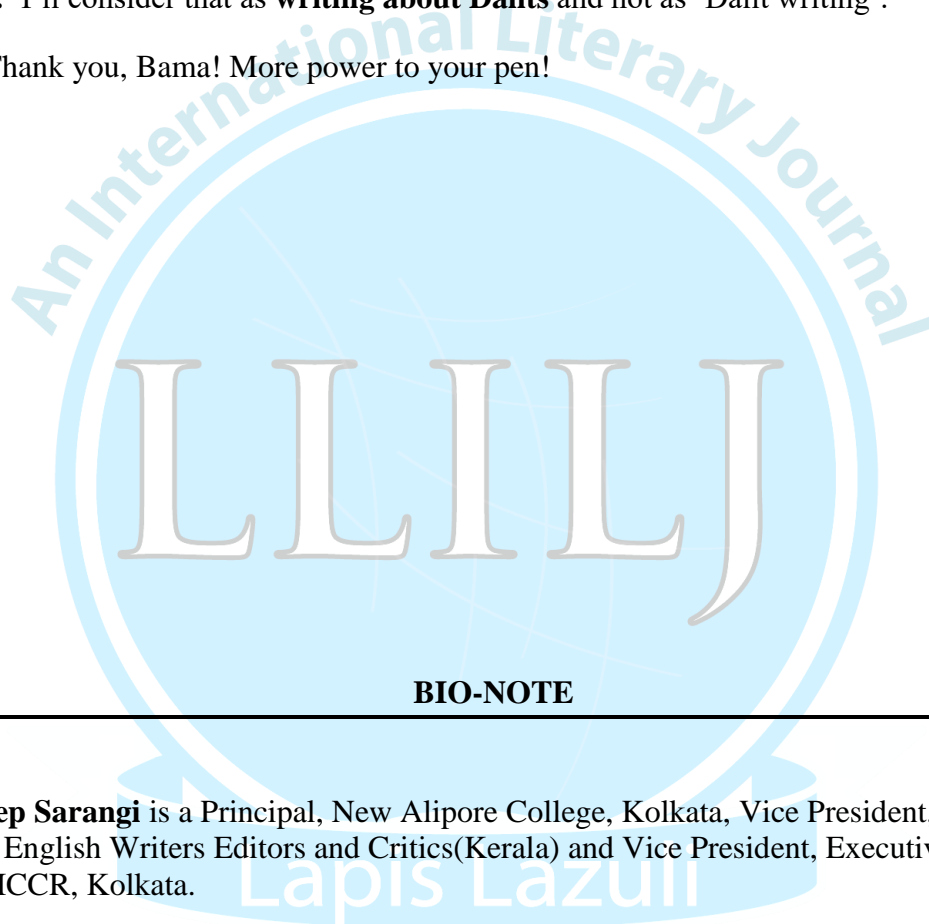
society. The 'high' and 'low' status of human being is created mainly by caste which is irreversible, needs to be destroyed in order to promote equality, fraternity and liberty. Here I want to end with Dr Ambedkar's final words which I deeply cherish :

My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality.

J.S.: One last question--If a non-Dalit writer/researcher writes about Dalit life, would you consider that as Dalit writing?

Bama: I'll consider that as **writing about Dalits** and not as 'Dalit writing'.

J.S.: Thank you, Bama! More power to your pen!



BIO-NOTE

Jaydeep Sarangi is a Principal, New Alipore College, Kolkata, Vice President, Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics(Kerala) and Vice President, Executive Council, IPPL, ICCR, Kolkata.

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Bama (born 1958), also known as **Bama Faustina Soosairaj**, is a Tamil Dalit feminist, committed teacher and novelist. She rose to fame with her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002) along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum* (2003), In addition to this she has written twenty short stories.