

Positioning and Representing The Self in Constraints: A Comparative Study of *Sangati* and *Bharatipura*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the technique of questioning and representation of characters in *Sangati* by Bama and *Bharatipura* by U. R. Ananthamurthy. By focusing on the representation of protagonists within and outside the system, the paper analysis lives of marginalised representations overpowering the constraints and norms. The technique is analysed as a method to emphasise the protagonists of different hierarchies to address similar ideologies. By doing so, the paper compares the technique adopted by the writers to address the issues of a community as an insider and an outsider. The paper frames a comparative study on the lives of the protagonist and other characters emphasising their lifestyle. The paper thus, analyses the hegemony of the non-Dalit and Dalit characters, gender privileges and tries to frame *Sangati* as events within *Bharatipura*.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Identity, Hierarchy, Ideology, Caste and Gender

Sangati probes the life of Dalit women dealing with the double disadvantages of caste and gender discrimination. Bama realises that moving away from her community does not allow her to escape from the caste bounded world, even when she establishes her identity as an educated and independent woman. Bama turns *Sangati* into the story not just of one individual but of a pariah community. London-returned Jagannatha, from the most potent Brahmin family in *Bharatipura*, is caught in an existential disjunction between his traditional Hindu upbringing and the modern thought he has imbibed through his education. Life in the small town is contained within its power structures; specifically, caste and Jagannatha profoundly need to rupture them. The action he takes is the pivot of the novel, around which the public and his personal crisis are negotiated. *Bharatipura* is famed for its temple of Manjunatha. The lower caste believed that if they entered the temple, one spirit of Bhootaraya may drag them by one foot and make them spit blood. Jagannatha motivates the local Dalit community to enter the temple, thus exposing the fallacy of the power of Manjunatha and opening up the possibility of a new social order.

The actions of Jagannatha, as a representative of the western-educated Indians in the post-Independent era, were a symbol of growing discontent against anti-social practices like caste and untouchability. The impact of western liberal humanism and equality is found responsible for the change that happened in the character of Jagannatha. Changed by his visit to England for higher education, he could no longer live in a space where men like him were legally allowed to exploit other human beings. Exposures to the modern world created an aversion in the mind of Jagannatha regarding these unreasonable customs at Bharatipura. However, apart from his education, several things enabled Jagannatha to help the Holeyaru or start a historical revolution with little support from the fellow villagers.

To Jagannatha, as an upper caste foreign-educated, wealthy landlord, it was effortless to take up an issue and seek solutions for the existing customs and practices. He does not have to die in the fields under the scorching sun to earn a handful of rice. Without denying the sympathy of Jagannatha towards the Holeyaru, we can say that it was the privileges the caste system provided that enabled him to act against the sufferings. The sedentary life in *Bharathipura* astonished Jagannatha, and he found that eradicating the superstitious beliefs would help *Bharathipura* move to the path of change. However, Jagannatha is bewildered by the change that happened to his town's great advocates of revolution.

His mentor Sripati Rao, who had inspired him to leave the country to build a future, was once a great revolutionary and freedom fighter. Sripathi Rao, who had sowed the seed of revolution and free-thinking in Jagannatha, now seems to be relatively inert. The plan of Jagannatha to take the Holeyaru into the Manjunatha temple frightens Sripathi Rao, and he advises Jagannatha; "People live by their faith. What right do we have to destroy it, tell me? Can we ask them to forget their faith in God and live by the trust in a cabinet of minister?" (14). Sripati Rao stands with Jagannatha in his revolt against the exploitative religious customs, not because he supports Jagannatha, but because he could not refuse his responsibility in making a new Jagannatha. Sripati Rao as a family man was unable to focus on social issues. He had lost his intense urge to build an ideal nation, and he describes himself as a loser who cannot be ethical. Jagannatha meets his old friend Vasu, who talks about revolution and change and stands ready for any sacrifice. Vasu had left his ideologies, and his new motto is that the world can accept nothing from a man who has three children and an ever complaining wife. Jagannatha, being a single and exalted person, could think of his role in society. His reputation helped him go ahead without facing much threat and protest as a man who had received enough respect from his childhood onwards could grow unchallengeable self-respect in mind. Moreover, Sripati Rao, to whom Jagannatha has confided, instilled the value of sacrifice. Thus, Jagannatha's brevity and other personal qualities culminated in the privileges he enjoyed throughout his life. Jagannatha was elite, whose personal life was safe and secured. He could possibly initiate any revolution as he was his own master. The absolute

pressure was on the Holeyaru, who reluctantly followed their master but had to face the burning rage of Bhootaraya, whose slaves they were.

Bama's *Sangati* is not only an autobiography of a community but also the possible ways through which she questions her conscious mind as well as her community. Bama is a converted Christian who knows about the haphazard of a Dalit community to which she belonged. Analysing Bama's personal life, in *Karakku*, her autobiography, she mentions her brother. "My elder brother, who was studying at a university, came home for the holidays. He would often go the library in our neighbouring village" (13). Her graduate brother was not like other male members in their community, for, when she mentions her community, there are very few people who graduated or even went to school. The hard way she explains the lives of Mariama or Maikanni or any other is not applied to explain her family. Bama's family stood different from any other in their community through the support they offered. She had the support of her family, which other children in the community did not experience. "If we study and progress we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. Work hard and learn" (13). Bama claims that these words Annan spoke to her made a profound impression on her.

While narrating the lifestyle of her peer group, she explains how traumatic it is. "The day Maikkanni learn to walk, she started to work as well. Her mother had to go out to work in the fields. It was Maikkanni who looked after all the tasks at home" (Sangati, 2005). On the other hand, in Bama's case, with the support of her family, she was asked to work at the factory or home but to go to school. To her Patti's statement, "As soon as she gets her periods you stop her from studying, handover to some fellow or the other, and be at peace", her mother replies, "Her father wont allow to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the tenth. He says, we didn't learn anything and so we go to ruin. He says, let them at least get on in the world". (15)

On the contrary, most of the fathers in the community were like Mariamma's father, who is drunk and never bothered to take care of their children. Narrating the events in Maikkanni's life, Bama feels sympathetic. "I used to feel sorry for her. She is such a young child, I used to think" (20). Bama herself comments that one woman in their community does not feel pity for the other. Moreover, she feels sorry for this. However, this is because she is an outsider in her society. It is the privilege of Bama that makes her feel sympathy towards an underprivileged girl, Maikkani. While other girls go to factories, Bama goes to school; her graduated brother advises and motivates her. Moreover, her parents wanted her to study and were not worried about the system of marriage and social norms in the community. Bama experienced a privileged position in her community where she got respect and freedom. Because of this, all the events going on around her bothered her. For this, she could not understand Patti's words, "These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice. Without

them, how will we survive? Haven't they been upper-caste from generation to generation and haven't we been lower caste. Can we change this?" (*Sangati*, 2012). Furthermore, this privileged position paved the way for education, the source of knowledge and opened the possibility of free-thinking for both Bama and Jagannatha.

The story is from the viewpoint of a lower caste girl and the other from the perspective of an upper-caste male. Bama talks about the male authority in her community and says that they are the ones who are directly humiliated by the landlords. In *Bharathipura*, from Jagannatha's narration, we know that the ones to whom Jagannatha talks and teachers lower caste men, and there is hardly any description of lower-class women. Bama tries to bring change in her community, and Jagannatha tries to change the social realm. However, as the social issue let them, Bama can only question the members of her community. However, Jagannatha succeeds to force the lowercaste men to enter the temple of Manjunatha. Thus, *Bharathipura* leaves an open ending, which in turn seems to be answered by a Dalit in *Sangati*.

Fitting into such vast outlooks and blurring boundaries, *Sangati* of Bama becomes the event within *Bharathipura*. Thus Bama and Jagannatha, from lower caste and upper caste respectively, seem to fight in the same *Bharathipura*, which is under the fame of Manjunatha. The novels merge and sink to evolve into a looking glass of society. Even though they are somewhat at the same venture, the questions raised by Bama remains as an unheard melody to Jagannatha for which she belongs to the doubly marginalised female community, which he hardly knows. The possibility of raising the question of oppression is futile for the oppressed class of society. Is it possible for an upper-caste man alone to bring out a change in a community that has been exploited for centuries by this own people? However, critically analysing Bama's approach, she leaves her community with so many questions unanswered. "After all I was here today, tomorrow I might be somewhere else; it was they who had to stay and suffer. And that struck me as true, too." (*Sangati*, 2012) She wants to see progress in her society and uplift them from the humiliation they are undergoing. For them, the one who gives the food for their daily living will play a vital part in their lives, and they can eat and live because of the leftovers and jobs given by landlords.

Moreover, they might fear losing these leftovers to sustain their lives and stepping down to even more poverty if they had fought and raised voices. This haunted thought makes the Dalits or lower castes believe upper-caste themselves as a supporting factor of their community. They cannot speak because they are unaware of what to speak. Raising sound as a symbol of confidence, growing discontent and revolution was always kept out of the caste-ridden societies as a precaution to protect the ways of exploitation. As a reflection of submission, silence carried out the weapons of suppression, and the upper caste hegemony remained unaffected.

To substantiate this point, let us consider the event that happened in the life of Mariamma and Pillai. In *Sangati*, Ayya tries to molest Mariamma, and when she escapes, afraid of his reputation, he hurries the village and complains to the headmen. Even when some women knew the truth, they were not allowed to talk, and likewise Mariamma's case. The naattanmai accused Mariamma allegedly of having a relationship with Manikkan. Nobody asked Manikkan to prostrate himself, whereas the one who was left to suffer was Mariamma. Within a community, when issues arise, it is one justice for men and quite another for women; also, whatever a man does, in the end, the blame falls on the women.

In the same way, Billa is presented in *Bharathipura* as a representative of the Dalits who was never allowed to speak and explain their part. Pilla, the Holey, was allegedly arrested and thrashed for molesting a Shetty girl. It was a trick of Jhanardhana Shetty and Kaveri to defend their dignity in the society, whom Pilla saw in the night together. Billa was not asked about the event and did not allow to explain anything by the police. He does not even know what the complaint was charged against him.

Jagannatha felt very tired. The daffedar did not think Pilla as a person at all. His indescribable cruelty was backed by centuries of ignorance. A Holey had desired a caste girl. No doubt it is wrong for any man to abuse a woman, but it was considered a grievous crime because he happened to be a holeya. (*Bharatipura*, 2012)

It was the sacred duty of people like Pilla to obey their masters in any condition. They are the persons made to suffer for the crimes committed by the powerful castes. They endure everything because they know that there is no way out of their age-old desperate social conditions. The formidable obstacles of the caste system destroy their hopes and desires. The blood in their veins has squeezed out, and the clutches of the caste system tightens its hold. In both cases, the accused is a lower caste, and the one who tries to molest is an upper caste. They safely cleanse their past by accusing the crime of the lower caste people. Always privileged people get their ways cleared, and it is a fact that subaltern people are not allowed to speak too. Jagannatha realises the need for bringing out the Holeyaru into the public sphere. He understands the significance of raising them in protest against the system which has never ceased torturing them, as it is the first step in helping them to recognise their identity as human beings. Jagannatha's intention behind motivating the Holeyaru to enter the temple was to expose the fallacy of the powers of Manjunatha and the myths about Bootaraya. The sight of Jagannatha mingling with Holeyaru gives a shock to the people of *Bharathipura*. This eccentric science of a landlord wearing a sacred thread, teaching and leading the Holeyaru to the temple invites admonition instead of encouragement and support. The upper caste people

became enraged because they had taken charge of protecting God from being polluted by the very sight of the unclean bodies of the Dalits.

The opposition faced by Jagannatha from all parts of society resulted from financial motives wrapped in a fine cover of piety. A threat to Manjunatha's fame will produce an equal threat to the prosperity that the fame of Manjunatha has brought to the town. The unending flow of the pilgrims to the temple has boosted the business ventures in and around *Bharathipura*. The tension of the businessmen was that the upliftment of the lower caste would shake the very foundation of their trades. So, it was the need of persons like Prabhu to resist Jagannatha and insist he focus on more practical and productive projects like the construction of cement roads and the electrification of *Bharathipura*. The powers of Manjunatha and Bhootaraya were a construct of the beneficiaries like Prabhu, who reap profit from the business, and the temple priest who steals the gold of God. Defending Manjunatha's fame and Bhootaraya's rage was their need as it was the way they earned their meal.

Subaltern people are conditioned for; they believe they are polluted people and thus should be marginalised. As Paatti says generation to generation, it was like this, and who can change this. In Bhatatipura, a similar kind of type-casted mind of Dalit could be traced. In one of the divisive situations, Jagannatha took Pilla home from the police station, and when they were walking, Jagannatha held Pilla as he was limping. The touch of Jagannatha creates a kind of uneasiness in Pilla, and he says, "Don't touch me, Odeya" (174). The touch of a Brahmin on a lower caste man's body intending to help him walk disturbs him as an assertion of his existence obeying the orders of the caste system. As Sripati Rao once told Jagannatha, he could not produce a similar willingness in the Dalits to touch the upper caste.

Whether you touch them or don't is not the point here. What is important is whether they would touch you willingly, if they have any desire to touch you at all. It is natural for you to want to touch them; you are an educated man. Our awareness has grown. You are heir to every good fortune in life; you want to reach out for this new ideal. To you, it is a luxury, but to them? (Bharatipura 2012)

The social predicaments amidst which the Dalits live have taught them the lessons of assimilation much more effectively than they could study the possibilities of existence. As a result, they started to laugh at their hopeless life and found their own little moments of enjoyment even in their rather dull days of suppression. The story of *Bharathipura* conveys how strongly the delusions have got a hold on the minds of the Dalits. The repeatedly narrated stories of caste inferiority and pollution by the upper caste could make the lower caste people identify with this uncleanness. These figments could easily exploit the credulous Dalits, and they acted in a mechanical way to satisfy the collective social and hegemonic conscience.

It was with the Holeyaru having this mindset, Jagannatha tried to yield something for their sake. However, they showed little interest and went whenever Jagannatha called them because he was their master. They obeyed their master's instructions, as they were petrified. They sat in front of him, as they wished for nothing and as they needed for nothing. Jagannatha, who wanted to slit the dark womb of Manjunatha and to walk out with Holeyaru, many times lost his confidence due to the indifference and lethargy he found in them. They just obeyed him as they did all these years. With their overwhelming reverence to their master, the gap between the Dalits and the master was left unbridged. As Jagannatha says: "But beyond that, I know nothing. Because I happened to be their landlord, the farm hands move aside when I walk among them; they lower their gaze respectively: they act as if it is wrong even to be seen". (*Bharatipura* 2012).

What Jagannatha did for the emancipation of these Dalits was to educate them and make them strong enough to lead a revolution. However, Jagannatha finds it impossible to transfuse his detestation of the caste into the very veins of Holeyaru. As a result, Jagannatha was left stranded on many occasions, even without a look of support from the people for whom he had challenged the entire village. He could never understand how to change these Dalits who still waits for Bootaraya to come and drag them and to make them spit blood. The powerful landlord on their side did not help the Holeyaru to expect a bright future. So they are sceptical that anything and anyone can wipe out the problems they face and the exploitation they suffer. The inertia that has got a hold on them is a result of the unwanted life they led. The Brahmins regarded them as low born, and over a period of time, they also started to believe that they were untouchables. They are convinced of the invisibility of the caste system in which they have to spend the whole of their lives in servitude. *Sangati* breaks the normative literary narrative and concentrates more on anthropological and ethnographical studies. Lakshmi Holmstrom states;

Sangati flouts received notions of what a novel should be... It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. '*Sangati*' means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes... These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person... (xvi)

The plight of women time immemorial was subjugation, subordination and patriarchal oppression. The patriarchal control or male-centered subordination of women to men in all cultural domains could be seen in earlier stages of human life. The women in the Bible and old Greek philosophic writings tend to be defined by negative references as an "Other" or kind of non-man. Bama gives a picture of Dalit women's life and their toil all through their lives. However, the women have to toil hard both in the field as well as at home. The double toil forces them to curse their birth as women. Discrimination based on gender, caste, class

and sex remains predominant in the Paraiya community, “Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. It is the same throughout world: women are not given that kind of respect”. (*Sangati* 2012)

Bama substantiates her point that: “If there is not courage in our hearts, we lose our strength and become good for nothing. If we are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything we want” (*Sangati* 2012). Here Bama very rebelliously calls up the minds of the new generation of Paraiya women. Bama injects courage in their hearts and minds to struggle for their existence by fighting the patriarchy against the subjugation of women hood. Here the “Pey”, superstitious concept, becomes the oppression and suppression that fall upon womanhood in the Paraiya community. Anandamma and Bhakkiyam are the characters who are aware of political tactics. Bama fights against the political parties through those characters, thereby giving a definite picture of the Dalit subaltern and the marginalised. The economic disparities and untouchability are also involved in a definite way in the case of Dalit womanhood in this novel. Bama asks Patti that how can someone be so indecent and rude to them. For which Patti replies:

I have told you already that haven't I? They are afraid to touch other women because they have caste power, money, everything. Moreover, what do we have? Even if a fellow assaults one of us, it is difficult to stand up to him or make an enemy of him. Because in the end, we have to go to him for employment. How long can we keep up the fight? (48)

Bama explicitly points out that whatever happens, there must be according to the menfolk's pleasure and convenience. They can marry out of caste. In the case of women, they can marry only within the caste. Whatever a girl does or achieves, the patriarchy gives it no credit “they say, whatever it is she is only a woman”. If men marry what girl they like, it is socially acceptable, whereas if a girl tries to marry, it is termed as terrible, and she is also not allowed to marry from outside her caste. In such cases, the honour of the family and community is said to be lost. In *Sangati*, Bama decides that it is up to them to be aware of their situation,

We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never let our minds be worn out, damaged, and broken in believing that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (59)

The Dalit men undergo harsh treatment from upper caste men and vent their suppressed anger on their women. Ultimately it becomes the women who are tormented within and

outside the system of caste and class. As Bama puts it, “it is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (65). The writer comments on how the upper-caste people treat people with contempt. She draws a comparison between the women’s lifestyle of different castes and states that the paraitar women at least work hard and earn their own money and do not depend on their husbands for economic freedom. The author observes that shouting and shrieking are tools of survival for these women. However, Despite being subjugated to men in terms of both mind and body, these women resist men by shouting names of the body parts and obscenities, as Bama puts it, “self-worth, honour, and self-respect” (68), which would enable them to lead their own lives in their way. Sometimes even a widow is allowed to remarry in their caste, unlike the upper-caste tradition of excluding widow from the mainstream of affairs, with the word ‘widow’ not being used at all in their pariah community. Revolt against injustice is human, and if the victim is a sensitive young woman, her reaction may be intense alternation between the two extremes of resignation and rebellion. The disparity between men and women results from the complex operation of economic, political, social and other factors. Despite the significant change in women’s position in society in the post-independent era, she is still not emancipated. In the end, Bama hopefully states:

We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them, with equal rights. Then injustices, violence, and inequalities will end, and the saying that “women can make and women can break” will come true. (123)

Even when the world asks, “Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four and five men?” (28), She adds: “I am hopeful that such a time will come soon” And this hope and prayer still echoes in the heart and minds of many women, the characterized singular group based on shared oppression. So a change, in order to make a change, does not solely depend upon gender, class, caste or ideology, but the effectiveness brought from the upper caste and the lower caste together.

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