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The Communal Self: Reading the Autobiographies of two Indian Christian Women

*Mrinalini Sebastian*¹

Young or old, the question “Who am I?” fascinates all of us. In a way, this question that is turned inwards is a byproduct of the Enlightenment and then the Protestant Reformation. By turning the focus away from the hierarchy of the clerical order, and by upholding the unmediated relationship of the individual with God through faith in Christ, the events of the sixteenth century that led to the Reformation movement, also inaugurated a period of unprecedented attention to the Self. Testimonials and autobiographical writings became important genres of writing in the post-Reformation world. Autobiographical reflections accompany me as I ruminate about the conversion of my own ancestors to Christianity during the second half of the nineteenth century. My forebears belonged to the tiny segment of the population that became Christians in the South Canara region in response to the work of the Basel Mission.² Even though the existential question “Who am I?” was the motivating factor behind my research interest in the history of Christianity in South India, over the years, as someone who has lived in a context of diversity all through her life, the subject in the question has become plural: “Who are we?” Of late, it has even used the non-specific third person plural: “Who are they who claim to be different in a multi-cultural, religiously plural society?”

Considering that in recent times there is much focus on how we are shaped by our communities – communities that we belong to by birth as well as the communities that we choose to affiliate ourselves with – we need to ask if we have a good understanding of our ‘communal Self’ (Pelz, 1981). I use the term *communal Self* to suggest that human beings, even when they see themselves as discrete and independent individuals, are “restlessly inter-dependent” communal beings (p.35). In my view, the stretching of the existential quest to understand the *Self* into an attempt to comprehend the *Self in Community* need not be considered an obsessive identitarian quest. It has its roots in a spiritual quest that focusses simultaneously on the Self as an unbound entity that is also at the same time bound in a relationship to the community. Such an understanding of the Self acknowledges the freedom of the individual and, at the same time, concedes that this freedom comes with a responsibility towards the community. This paradoxical relationship between self-reflexive inwardness that sets us free and the Self turned towards the community reminds us of Martin Luther’s own “view of the Christian life as both free (in the gospel) and bound to the neighbor” (Wengert 2016, p. 470).

Communal Self and Writing Ordinary Lives

Can an individual’s religious faith set her free and simultaneously tie her to the neighbor? I ask this question because I have had the privilege of living in the midst of

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² The Protestant missionaries of the Basel Mission arrived in India in 1834. The Mission had its headquarters in the city of Mangalore in South Canara district of the Madras Presidency. Mangalore is now part of the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka State in southern India.

diversity of all kinds. I grew up in a small town in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. I was the only Protestant Christian in my class and one of the few non-Hindus in my entire school. We lived in a 'compound' where our immediate neighbors were all Hindus. In the very adjacent lot, there were a large number of houses belonging to the Muslims. Even though we were aware of our 'difference' from the others, it was possible for us to live next to each other without having to resort to violent conflicts. When Hindus had festivals like Deepavali, the festival of lights, they celebrated it with us; on the eve of Christmas, we carried trays of sweets and cakes to the houses of our neighbors. I have happy memories of life in this community.

And yet, I would never idealize this situation because the small town where I lived was communally volatile. Crossing of boundaries could cause the town to take up arms against each other. There were many days in my childhood when we could not go to school because of communal conflicts. Usually communal conflicts got metamorphosed into conflicts between political parties and led to violent clashes between different groups of people. Quite early in my life, I realized that the heterogeneity of life around me was tolerant only in a limited way. Food, the very medium for inter-cultural commensality, could also subtly, and at times grossly, declare caste and community boundaries. Falling in love with a person from a different religious background could be an issue that led communities to fight against each other. There was also diversity of yet another kind, namely, the hierarchized, radical difference perpetuated by the birth of an individual in a specific caste or religious community.

Well before I was to be exposed to the discourse on caste, I was acutely aware of the fact that the poor who silently came to take away a dead cow from the compound, or those who collected discarded food at a banquet, did not do so merely because of their poverty, but because of a system where birth in a particular community determined one's identity. Some of these practices have been discarded in recent years, but the stories of everyday lives caught in a system of hierarchical difference rarely get heard. M. S. S. Pandian talks about these lives in the essay "Writing Ordinary Lives" (Pandian 2008, 34 – 40). Pandian turns to autobiographical writings of the Dalit writers where the authors are "both actors as well as narrators" (39).

My own difference as a minority citizen in a secular democracy did not really oppress me. It did, however, confuse me. I could not understand why Christians were considered alien and Western (Sebastian 2010, 109 – 125). In my school people asked me: "What is your Christian name?" Mrinalini is a common Bengali name, chosen because it was the name of the heroine in a novel that my parents were reading at the time of my birth. It had nothing to do with my region, my ancestors, or my religion. Perhaps, in calling me Mrinalini, my parents sought to avoid the radical difference announced by their own 'Christian' names. In spite of the fact that there is an Orthodox Christian tradition in India that claims a Christian ancestry from the early centuries of the Common Era, Christianity is considered alien in a commonsensical way. Roman Catholic tradition is associated with Portuguese aggression on Indian soil, and Protestantism with the British colonialism. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries, by default, are associated with these forms of colonial aggression; and the Indians belonging to these traditions of Christianity, by extension, as representatives of a Western and colonizing influence. They are often thought of as the betrayers who had not held on to their own traditional religious culture. Not all Indians share these negative perceptions of the local Christian community. For every general description of this sort there

are innumerable counter-examples of generosity of spirit and hospitality of traditions. But as commonsense, these views about Christians still persist in a general way in the Indian society. In so far as they color people's perceptions about Christians, these views need to be addressed for what they are and not for the truth that they may or may not be representing.

In contrast, some Indian Christians adopt a gesture of faith that is deeply antagonistic towards people of other faith. They are unwilling to grant their neighbors the same integrity in devotion and faith that they so readily give themselves and their own Christian faith. The aggressive methods of 'bearing witness to Christ' adopted by fundamentalist Christians are often based on a sense of moral superiority and religious exclusivism. Unfortunately, the intra-communal critique of intolerance and fundamentalist aggression towards people of other faith has been rather weak in spite of a long tradition of Indian Christian theologians like Stanley J. Samartha (Samartha 1991) who made significant contributions towards inter-religious dialogue.

But then all Christians are not aggressive about their faith. There are Christians whose devout faith will not allow them to deny the others their way of doing things. There are many Indian Christians who see themselves as members of a community among communities. My question "Who am I?" had to take into account my rich experience of hospitality and friendship in a multi-cultural context and my happy childhood in a devout Christian family. It had to make sense of the commonsensical perception of religious exclusivism by some Christians, and it had to make sense of the perceptions of cultural exclusivism by some members of the dominant communities. In order to understand my position as a member of a non-dominant minority community, I had to turn to the printed books. Easy access to the printed book is another byproduct of the Reformation era that transformed the world. Books helped me in my attempt to make sense of the world around me; they offered me insights into the world of hierarchized difference and the more tolerated version of difference, both of which were aspects of the multicultural upbringing that had made a significant impression on my early life.

Narratives, Religiosity, and Relational Identity

From my childhood days I have had easy access to books. There were plenty of them at home, some bought by my parents, but mostly borrowed from friends, neighbors and the library. Even as a child, I read books written in my mother-tongue, Kannada, both children's books as well as social novels, many of which were written by women authors. In addition, my grandmother used to narrate stories from the Bible to us. Every evening, we had family prayer when one of the children had to read a portion of the Bible aloud; every morning, each member of the household would read a portion of the Bible silently. These are, once again, habits initiated by the Protestant Reformation. My grandmother also told me other stories, 'Christian' stories with a 'moral' lesson encapsulated in each of them: a story about the wisdom of the small child who warned his father about the heavenly eyes that watched the father whenever he stole something; another about the wicked children who never obeyed their parents and one fine day had to pay a heavy penalty for their disobedient behavior; and yet another about the poor family that had nothing for Christmas and suddenly the doorbell rang and there stood a stranger with a big gift hamper in her hand. I was quite willing to accept the package offered by my grandmother, with its moral and religious pedagogy, because many of these stories were originally written in English; they were stories that belonged to another world, and another context. These stories were meant as pedagogic

tools for training children in good Christian behavior but they also opened for me a fantasy world that was both alien and exotic, even as it endorsed a normative moral upbringing. My current interest in investigating the documents left behind by the missionaries, in reading autobiographies of the early converts and in understanding the history of Christian communities are connected to these early days of my upbringing in a deeply devout Christian but equally open-minded religiosity that I experienced as a child, both inside as well as outside my home.

My Christian upbringing was appropriately balanced by the predominantly Hindu culture that I experienced at school. My school provided another context of story-telling. I studied in a government school that professed secularism. Our afternoon classes were not always about social studies, science, and math. There were other sessions called Moral Studies. For us children Moral Studies meant stories. We could get to listen to stories from Aesop's fables. It was during these classes that one of my teachers decided to read from *Mahabharatha* and *Ramayana*, the two great Indian epics. I always enjoyed these afternoon sessions when I could listen to a very long story narrated in installments over many months. We relished the gory details of fights and intrigues, not one of them less frightening or less exciting than the computer games that the children play in the present times! The stories that fascinated me were those of Hidimbe who seeks to seduce the strong-man Bhima of *Mahabharata*, of the blind old woman Shabari who bit a small piece from each fruit and kept aside only those which had the perfect taste for her Lord, and of the little squirrel which dipped into sea and rolled over the sand, and then shook the grains of sand on to the sand bridge that was being built across the ocean so that Lord Rama could reach Sri Lanka and rescue Sita from the clutches of Ravana. These stories offered the counterpoint to all the other interesting stories that my grandmother told me.

It is in this religiously and culturally heterogeneous but by no means entirely inclusive context – we had hardly any exposure to the stories of our Muslim neighbors – that I learnt to read and appreciate books. Between the age of 6 and 12, I was exposed to a variety of books: religious books – both Hindu and Christian, but narrated with children in mind, and fiction from the Kannada and English literary traditions. My systematic exposure to literature – especially English literature – came about when I opted for a Master's degree in English literature. It was during this time that I first felt that there were big gaps in our literature syllabus. There was no place in it for the Indian epics that I had read in my childhood or for the literature in regional languages. Apart from reading English literature from Chaucer to Eliot we had only a few European Classics, Commonwealth literature, and a paper called the Indian Writing in English. It was only then, especially because of the sensitivity of my own Professors to these issues, that I had become aware of the large body of writing that fell outside the canon of 'English literature'. What had begun as an introduction to Commonwealth literature through the reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) helped me to slowly unravel the intricate relationship between literature and the power dynamics in a given community.

My training and early research in the field of literature, my work as a teacher of literature to undergraduate and postgraduate students, and my involvement in the reform of the curriculum in the early phase of my career, make it difficult for me to view literary texts merely for the sake of the stories that they tell. While the world of fantasy that they evoke continues to hold its magic spell over me, while I continue to enjoy the time I spend in the company of novels, short stories, plays, essays, and poems, I am more conscious of the

context of writing and the process of reading. Who is the writing subject? How do we know the intentions of the author? Does it really matter what the author intended to tell us when she wrote something? After arguments about the “Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes (1967), neither the subjectivity of the author nor her intentions as expressed through language are taken to be the only elements crucial for the process of making meaning. The reader contributes quite a bit to this process of making sense of any given text. During my Master’s Studies, equipped by the tools that literary theory provided me, I was willing to dismiss the author as merely a medium through which an imaginative, creative world was presented to the readers. I appreciated the skills of the writer: the clever use of metaphors and other figures of speech, the ability to use realism and make language an almost transparent medium. But it did not matter to me, beyond a point, what the author actually thought about the world, or about herself. I was assured that what I, as a reader brought to the text was as important as the written text itself.

Yet my theories about ‘reading’ and ‘meaning’, and my skepticism about the author and her experience, were to be confronted soon by the writing that was specifically identified with the marginalized communities: women, Dalits, African Americans. I could go on with this list but these were the categories that I had encountered when I was finishing my Master’s program. Contrasting an autobiographical novel written by an upper caste novelist with the one written by a Dalit, M. S. S. Pandian says: “In marked contrast to the upper caste autobiographies, the self-definition of one’s identity, as found in the autobiographies of the lower castes, is located explicitly in caste as a relational identity” (Pandian 2002, 1735). In a culturally and economically heterogeneous context, everyday experiences act as determinants of this ‘relational identity’. Individuals who are identified with specific communities do not exist as citizens in a neutral space; they exist as members of a community. As a reader, as a student of literature, and now as someone interested in studying the claims and counter-claims being made by groups in the name of their cultures, I find autobiographical texts fascinating. There are two types of autobiographical texts: texts that can be termed collective autobiographies of subaltern communities, and texts which are autobiographies of specific members of these communities. In this paper, I am interested in autobiographies of individuals rather than of collective subjects. I would, however, like to argue that when authors from the marginalized segments write autobiographies, they are not merely about their own life-journeys; these autobiographies usually narrate the journey of a *communal* Self, a Self that identifies itself with the community.

Testimonials and the Autobiographical Narratives

The first texts that I read which were unmistakably ‘autobiographical’ in nature were the testimonials written by educated converts to Christianity. These testimonials were personal in tone but at the same time, they were also public declarations of their conversion to a new faith form. Narrating the act of one’s conversion could often mean becoming conscious of one’s own Self; it could indicate one’s transition from being a communal subject in a traditional society to being a subject who chose to speak of her exclusive relationship to God through her faith in Christ. Conversion narratives told a story of sinful, ignorant life transformed all of a sudden through a moment of epiphany, of sudden revelation.

The testimonial of a converted individual, especially in the nineteenth century, often reflects the process of an individual becoming newly conscious of the spiritual status of the Self. It signals the transition of a subject from a phase of ‘belonging’ to a phase of ‘believing’.

A testimonial captures the spiritual journey of the converted subject, and focuses especially on the transformative aspects of conversion. It is the story of evolution of a 'modern' subject where one's self-representation as a Christian is dependent on a narrative of faith and choice. This foregrounding of the freedom to choose could mask the fact that it is indeed difficult to be 'reasonable' in one's own choices in the realm of faith. In the testimonials from India, the conversion narratives speak of the difficulty in breaking away from the community of one's birth, but nevertheless present the one who converted as the one who had made a conscious and informed decision.

In contrast to the testimonials of the converted, which were one of the earliest narratives about the Self that emerged from the 'natives' in colonial India, the autobiographies, especially the autobiographies of individuals from the marginalized communities have a different kind of engagement with the Self. I would like to suggest here that the autobiographical narratives of an individual belonging to a non-dominant community often reflects the negotiation of the *communal* Self with its own community and also with the larger society. The highly individualized mode of narration normally adopted in autobiographies is roped in by the writer from a minority community to elucidate the various communal negotiations that she is called upon to make at various moments in her life.

In this paper, I would like to explore the autobiographies of two Christian women, one from the nineteenth century and the other from our own contemporary times; one of them was a Protestant Christian, the other is a Roman Catholic. Both of them write about their 'relational identity' that gets shaped by their own community and by the wider contemporary society made up of other religious and social groups. What is the nature of the *communal* Self that gets reflected in these novels? In order to understand the relational identity of these authors we need to turn to their books, *Saguna* (Satthianadhan, 1998), an autobiographical novel in English by Krupabai Satthianadhan and *Karukku* by the Tamil writer, Bama (2000).

Saguna

Saguna was first published as a serialized novel in the college magazine of Madras Christian College during 1887–1888; it was posthumously brought out as a novel in 1895. Its original title was *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (Satthianadhan, 1895). It was written in English and was translated into Tamil only in 1896. In 1998, when it was republished with an Introduction, the novel was seen as representing the 'new woman'. The 'new woman' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries desired education, and was open to the ways of modernity without giving up the value of 'local' tradition. *Saguna* encapsulates this ideal in her work. When the book was republished in 1998, it was called *Saguna: the First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman* (Satthianadhan 1998). It is not her community identity that gets emphasized here as in the first publication. If in the first her gender-identity is suppressed, in the second, it is her community-identity that gets suppressed.

The first paragraph of the novel speaks of it as being the life story of a 'simple Indian girl':

In the following pages, I shall in my own way try to present a faithful picture of the experiences and thoughts of a simple Indian girl, whose life has been highly

influenced by a new order of things- an order of things which at the present time is spreading its influence to a greater or lesser extent over the whole of her native land (19).

What was perceived by Saguna, the protagonist of this novel, as ‘the new order of things’ could refer to the fact that her parents had converted to Christianity. Her father and mother were Brahmin converts to Christianity, as we learn from the next paragraph. This declaration gains significance in light of the fact that most converts to Christianity during the nineteenth century came from the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. It is a narrative that asserts the coming into consciousness of a young Indian woman who was a second generation Protestant Christian. Though the story tells us about the conversion of her parents, and of the difficulties of transitioning from one religious community to another, it does not follow the usual teleological narrative style of a testimonial. The narrative, at regular intervals, invokes the centrality of texts and books in bringing about a ‘new order of things.’³

The first reference to books in this autobiographical novel comes in the author’s account of her father’s conversion to Christianity. Harichandra, the Brahmin father who was well-versed in his own religious texts, out of curiosity starts borrowing books from a local British Collector. He starts reading about the history of early Christianity and then attends a worship service in one of the local churches. The gradual process of getting acquainted with Christianity makes him take the decision of becoming a Christian. Yet in those days conversion to another religion, especially among the Brahmins, was equated with the loss of caste. Those who converted would be considered dead by the community, their claim over land and property would get nullified, and they had to forsake their families and break all ties with them. If the convert was married and the wife did not follow her husband, for the rest of her life, she would be considered a widow, and had to follow the austere and hard life a widow was expected to live. Saguna’s mother and Harichandra’s wife Radhabai decided to stay with her husband.

If the educated young Brahmin’s decision to become a Christian is presented in this narrative as the conscious and rational decision of a learned man who felt that what his own religion lacked could be found in Christianity, the faithful child-wife who had forsaken everything to be with her husband was bewildered by the books: “...she would never have anything to do with reading. ‘Those are magic letters,’ she would say, shaking her head, ‘and Christianity is *tied in the books*’ (Emphasis in the original; Sathianadhan 61). Books of a certain kind were seen to have the ability to transform lives, as if through magic. If Christian books were seen as the sources of chaste truth by the missionaries, they were viewed as those with a potential to destroy family and life by those who found that the transformation offered by Christianity was alien to their ways of living.

Narratives about religious conversion often speak of the convert severing all relationship with one community and establishing new contacts in the adopted community. In this autobiographical novel, Saguna, the protagonist, narrates the story of her mother’s conversion. Convinced by the ‘rightness’ of her husband’s decision, Saguna’s mother

³ The implications of this ‘new order of things’ within the context of nationalist ethos are well analyzed by Parinitha Shetty (2006). in “‘Re-formed’ Women and Narratives of the Self,” *Ariel*, vol. 37, no.1 (2006): 45 – 60.

gradually accepts his conversion and accepts Christianity. Saguna's childhood include stories of her growth into a young, faithful Christian. Her quiet and resilient faith is quick to sense injustice, whether it is an unjust act towards herself, or towards another human being. While studying in a boarding school, she was accused of not being in the habit of praying, reading the Bible, or attending the Scripture classes, she firmly refutes it:

'What am I to understand?' I said. 'How can you say such harsh things to me?' Let me see; first of all, you say I don't read my Bible, or pray. How do you know?'

'I won't tell you how, but I know it for a certainty,' – this with an ironical smile. 'Well, whoever has told you that, has told you a mean lie,' I said, nearly choking; 'but this is not a matter on which I need defend myself before you or any other human being. It is between me and my God.' I was still more provoked by the raised eyebrows of the old lady, which seemed to show that she had great doubts as to whether I felt what I said. 'I should be guilty of great hypocrisy,' I added, 'were I to tell you how many times I pray, or where I pray ...' (133).

In yet another incident, Saguna protests against the way a Bible-woman is treated by an Irish woman. The latter wanted the Bible-woman to be received in the kitchen and not in the drawing-room because she "is no better than a servant" (115). Saguna insists that the Bible-woman receive the respect that is due to her because "She is a Brahmin, and only takes money from the Mission because she is poor. She is no servant. In your country you are no Brahmins. You are *Sudras*" (115). We notice here that her resilient faith also draws from her confidence in her own status in life. It is built upon a tacit acceptance of her own social standing. She perceives herself as the 'real aristocrats' in contrast to the middle-class women who had come from the British Isles (115). It is her *communal* Self that is awakened by this act of injustice. Interestingly, however, she adopts a superior stance in response to what she perceives as wrong done to the Bible-woman. However, at the same time, she seems to accept the intra-Christian caste hierarchy at least in the instance of the Bible-woman episode. There is another instance in the narrative where there is a reference to the arrival of a 'dark, fat girl' who was 'moreover, of a low caste.'⁴ When confronted by a person who was from the so-called 'low caste' Saguna herself becomes paralyzed because of her own prejudices. However, it is precisely while dealing with this woman that Saguna is also able to call upon her sense of fairness that is derived from her faith. She makes the first move in welcoming the new girl. Her prejudices vanish when she begins to talk to her: 'We were human beings once more ...'⁵

It is this ability to recognize the humanity of every individual that makes Saguna's identity relational. Her faith enables her to relate to her own community of fellow Christians and see the humanity of the other person. Her way of accessing her communal Self is self-reflexive (and turned inward) but it is also self-critical of her own community (and turned outward). Freeing the Self in the gospel, at least in her case, also enables her to be 'bound to the neighbor'.

⁴ Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, p. 137.

⁵ Krupabai Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, p. 138.

Karukku

In 1992 another young woman published her autobiographical novel in Tamil language. It was translated into English in 2000. *Karukku*, claimed to be “[part] autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto,” is considered the first of its kind in Tamil. Its translator argues that in this writing there is “a powerful sense of the self and the community as Dalit” and also a “powerful sense of engagement with history, of change, of changing notions of identity and belonging” (Holmström 2000, x).

If the strong impulse in *Saguna* is to narrate the impact of the new order of things, in *Karukku* it is the coming into consciousness of the reality of a very old hierarchical system – the caste system. If *Saguna* represents the individuation of a Christian woman as the educated, thinking woman who makes conscious decisions about her education and marriage, in *Karukku* it is the story of the individual’s struggle to retain her sense of self-dignity in the church and the society where she experiences constant humiliation and privation because of her birth in a specific community. Bama’s Dalitness and her Christianity are both powerful elements in shaping her *communal* Self. Unlike *Saguna* who had to occasionally remind herself of her Brahmin status, for Bama, to be Christian was to be Dalit, and to be Dalit was to be Christian.

The metaphor of *Karukku*, the sharp-edged palmyra frond, is chosen by Bama to remind us about the pain experienced by her at different stages of life. It is also a reminder to her readers that those who have borne suffering in life ‘must function as God’s word’ (Bama 1998, p.xiii). Bama challenges all those who claim Christianity as their community of faith. They must allow the Word of God to soften their hearts:

Although the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (New Testament) described the Word of God as a two-edged sword, it no longer stirs the hardened hearts of the many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others.⁶

The communal Self of Bama is defined by both Christianity and her Dalit-ness. Her experience of her own community is more coherent than that of Krupabai Sathianadhan. We experience the inner thoughts of Bama through her description of the village, of the people, and where she lives, her explanations for the pet-names given to people in her village, and her detailed portrayal of the festivals and other events of the community. It is a process of self-reflection that stems from Bama’s life in the community.

Like Krupabai Sathianadhan, Bama too attaches great importance to her truthfulness and to her sincerity. Like her, she also faces unfair accusations. We learn about the coconut incidence where she is wrongly accused of having stolen the coconut. Not only was it a false accusation, but her entire community was accused: “You have shown us your true nature as a Paraya” (Bama, 16). She was publicly humiliated.

In another instance, she gets admonished because her christening certificate and her degree certificate carry two different birth dates. The Sister who admonishes her forgets that Bama was there to serve the church as a member of the religious Order. She refuses to accept the explanation that it was the school that had randomly put down some date as her date of birth. The Sister’s harsh words seek to turn the issue into a generic problem of the community:

⁶ Bama, “Author’s Preface,” *Karukku*, p. xiii.

She complained, “You Tamil people want to get admission into schools under false pretences, changing the dates on your birth certificates.” I thought to myself, what a nuisance this is turning out to be; thus far they made us hang our heads in humiliation because of our caste; in this order being Tamil seems to be equivalent to being a Paraya.

Then I told myself, “Well, after all, this woman doesn’t know about village life, that’s why she snaps at me like this.” So a little later, I explained to her in great detail that there was no problem about getting admission at our school; that on the contrary, teachers visited homes and dragged their pupils out, so there was no need to put false date of birth in order to find a place in school. Even after all that she insisted that I was lying. So I left it, realizing that there was no point in talking to her anymore (21).

The distrust that both Saguna and Bama experience in the church institutions reveal a lot about not just the individuals involved in these conversations but also about the deep fissures in the institutions themselves. The Sister who was talking to Bama was not going to give up her suspicion about Bama. Finding explanations redundant, Bama resignedly stops trying to set the opinions of the Sister right. In her pain, we see a tacit criticism of the religious Order that is impervious to life in the margins of a society. Like Sathianadhan, Bama too uses her outward-directed reflections to cast light on the unkind words of a member of the established religious order. Her “astonishment and incomprehension” communicate to the readers the frustrations of a young, educated, Dalit Christian woman (Pandian 2008, 40). As Sharmila Rege reminds us:

The dialectics of self and community assumes further significance in dalit women’s *testimonies* for, situated as women in the community, they articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of the dalit community” (Rege 2006, 14).

It is this connection between the self and the community that these two books seek to represent to their readers.

In spite of her disappointment with the system, Bama seems to share with Saguna her love of education. In both instances, there is the belief that books, reading, and education can empower groups that traditionally have been denied access to modern forms of education. In these two autobiographies, however, they achieve more than simply ‘articulate concerns’. These autobiographies are a way of remembering and reassessing life in community. The very fact that in ‘writing the ordinary lives’, the *communal* Self is constituted through “a process of remembering and in language” and this remembering connects the “social and the personal”; it “forces the reevaluation of the relationship between the two and makes the definition of individual identity inescapably communal” (Komar 1992, 57).

In Conclusion

Narrating the story of the Self is something that is very closely related to the genre of the testimonial. In many of the post-Reformation narratives about freeing the Self from the clutches of evil, we see a movement from a state of sinfulness to a state of liberation. In testimonials about conversion to Christianity, there are often references to being saved by

grace through faith in Christ. Even though religious faith is quite central to the two narratives that were discussed in this paper, we do not find these two authors following this pattern of a conventional testimonial or conversion narrative.

The quest in this paper was to relate the autobiographical narrative to the articulation of a *communal* Self, the Self that constantly connects the personal with the social. I began by providing an autobiographical background to my own life that was immersed in deep religiosity at home but was exposed to layers of multi-cultural and multi-religious influences outside of the home. Books, and educational training in reading books have nurtured in me a contemplative engagement with the Self without making these engagements excessively self-indulgent, nor narrowly identitarian. Reading *Saguna* and *Karukku* has been instructive in understanding the play between the social and the personal articulations of the Self. Both *Saguna* and *Karukku* come up with visions of a communal Self that identifies itself with the community without obsessing with mere identitarian politics. The communal Self that we see in these novels relates to the community in a critical manner. In both cases, the authors have shown the shortcomings of the community even as they write as Christian women. In both cases, the deep divisions caused by caste and social hierarchy within established religious institutions are questioned by the faith of the authors.

The reflexive, contemplative ruminations of the communal Self in *Saguna* and *Karukku* create a critical space within the community of Indian Christians, thereby showing the community ways of being free (in the gospel, through faith) but keeping the right to criticize the community if it fails to be bound in love to its neighbor, whether that neighbor is within the fold or outside of it.

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