



CASTE, GENDER, AND LABOUR: NARRATING WAGE INEQUALITY IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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ABSTRACT

Caste in India acts not merely as a system of social stratification but as an economic structure that predetermines labour allocation and distributes poverty through graded exclusion. In Bama's *Sangati*, the lived realities of Dalit women uncover how wage discrimination emerges from the interlinked forces of caste-based occupational entrapment and patriarchal failure to recognise women's work. Rather than reviewing text through the lens of identity or resistance, this work analyses labour as a central analytical category to examine the material foundations of inequality.

Talking about Dr B. R. Ambedkar's concept of caste as a system of graded inequality alongside materialist feminist theory, the paper argues that the diverse labour performed by Dalit women in *Sangati* is subjected to both intense economic exploitation and social degradation. The narrative illustrates how caste-based hierarchies confine individuals to menial occupations, while patriarchal norms ensure lower wages and intensified labour burdens. Persistent wage disparities result in wealth deprivation, debt cycles, and intergenerational poverty that solidify structural inequalities.

This study repositions *Sangati* within economic justice debates, redirecting critical attention towards menial conditions rather than mere representation. Wage inequality in this text is not rooted, but intersectional within caste patriarchy, making economic injustice a core component of Dalit women's lived realities.

INTRODUCTION

Caste in India mainly acted as a system of ritual hierarchy, but it also acted as a structure that regulates wages, labour, and access to resources. Caste is usually defined by social exclusion and symbolic degradation; the economic foundation acts as a main engine for its persistence. Occupation is hereditary, caste determines the hierarchy of labour value, and access to wealth is restricted. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, in his work 'Annihilation of Caste', argued that the caste system is not merely a division of labour, but a "division of labourers". This graded inequality makes sure to restrict economic mobility, and it also traps the lower caste in poverty. Within this framework, wage inequality and wealth deprivation are not accidental but structural consequences.

Dr Ambedkar's contribution to labour reform reflects his view that to achieve social equality, we must acquire economic justice. Dr Ambedkar advocated for working hours, maternity benefits, and labour welfare, which later shaped the Hindu Code Bill. It helped to secure women's rights in property and marriage and challenged the economic foundations of patriarchy. According to him, women's upliftment and democratisation of economic structures were inseparable. This acknowledges that exploitation operates through wage structure and



working conditions. The continued caste-based economic relations pose a fundamental question: how effective can legislative action be in changing the deeply rooted caste system that regulates labour relations at the grassroots level? This is where Bama's *Sangati* emerges as a work of critical significance in the tension between reformist vision and structural endurance.

Sangati records the everyday issues of Dalit women whose survival depends on hard agricultural labour and other forms of dangerous work. Bama highlights how females toil from dawn, going to fields, working under unsuitable and harsh supervision, and returning home to fulfil their unpaid domestic responsibilities. Despite toiling hard, their wages remain low, irregular and insufficient for them to achieve financial stability. The text exposes how caste-based occupation and patriarchal norms together undervalue women's labour and ensure that economic exploitation becomes normalised. Poverty here emerges due to wage discrimination, restricted access to assets, and limited upward mobility.

The central research problem of this paper is the limited focus given to the economic structure of wages and labour in the critical readings of *Sangati*. Existing research focuses on identity, resistance, and community; it fails to examine wage disparity and economic deprivation as matters of structural economic justice. This gap demands re-evaluation of the text through the lens of wage and wealth distribution.

The objectives of this paper are: to examine wage inequality in *Sangati*, to analyse how caste and patriarchy structure women's labour, to analyse how low wages lead to poverty and wealth deprivation, and to situate *Sangati* within broader debates on economic justice in India. The hypothesis of the paper is that wage inequality is produced by caste-based occupational restrictions and patriarchal devaluation of women's labour, which results in persistent poverty and wealth deprivation among Dalit women. The methodology of this paper is a textual analysis of *Sangati*, supported by Dr Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality and materialist feminism to interpret labour and wealth distribution within the socio-economic framework in India.

DISCUSSION

1. CASTE AS ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF LABOUR

Caste is an economic structure that determines labour allocation, access to resources, and social mobility. Bama's *Sangati* portrays Dalit women's confinement to menial work, where labour is hereditary and economic opportunities are limited. The text constantly demonstrates that occupation is not a personal choice but a structural expectation imposed by the caste. One of the characters in *Sangati* states, "We go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die." This indicates the lifelong hereditary nature of labour among Dalit women, showing how caste has the power to dictate the possibility of work and survival.

Bama highlights that the caste-based organisation works on community-level coordination. While talking about her Paati, she says, "She had to go to big landowners, ask them what sort of labour they needed in their fields, allocate the work among the women in our streets, and then go to work herself" (8). This shows that labour is compulsory and structured by society, where certain community members assign work under the supervision of upper-caste landlords.



This alignment ensures that caste acts as an enduring mechanism of occupational segregation and economic marginalisation. Right from childhood, Dalit girls are trained in this cycle of labour where they have to perform household work and take care of their siblings, and prepare for menial jobs. Bama observes, “As for girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on. When all this is done, they will carry the tiny babies, minding them even when they go out to play.” (7) This shows how caste structures the occupation since childhood, ensuring continuity of economic subordination across generations. Domestic work becomes early training for lifelong labour, cementing economic exploitation into daily life.

Dr B. R. Ambedkar believed that to bring economic justice, we must achieve social equality. He focused particularly on women’s labour, which was fundamental to social empowerment, and advocated for fair wages, proper working conditions, and protection for female workers. Despite his visionary reforms, Sangati shows how Dalit women are trapped in menial caste-based work. This reflects the gap between reformist ideals and ground realities. Labour is not just for survival; it is a structure through which caste hierarchies and economic inequalities are maintained.

2. PATRIARCHY AND DEVALUATION OF WOMEN’S LABOUR

Bama, by stating various examples in Sangati, highlights how Dalit women experience a double burden that is productive and reproductive, which is invisible and undervalued. She talks about the struggle of women, “We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they’ve finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vagina shrivel”. (6) This quote highlights how women are subjected to formal work and domestic responsibilities, a cycle of continuous work in their daily lives. Materialist feminists like Silvia Federici and Heidi Hartmann termed this type of labour as ‘reproductive labour’, which is socially necessary but economically unrecognised. It highlights how patriarchal and capitalist structures exploit women’s work.

Bama demonstrates how caste-based oppression of men translates into patriarchal violence at home: “Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within?” (65) This shows how oppression in public spheres directly or indirectly impacts Dalit women’s lives.

Women toil as hard as men, yet they are paid less due to gender bias. “Even when doing the ‘very same work’ as men in the fields or factories, women are consistently paid less” (Bama 18). This is how wage disparity due to caste and patriarchal norms persists despite equal efforts. Women’s work is devalued socially and economically, leading to intergenerational poverty. The text highlights how the interlocking system of caste and patriarchy amplifies women’s vulnerability: “It is not the same for the women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper caste masters in the field, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands” (Bama 65).



Dalit women are exploited in public spaces and private spheres. This reproduces inequality across generations. Sangati, symbolising Federici's and Hartmann's insights, shows how structural systems devalue women's labour and exploit them economically. This systemic devaluation of labour directly causes wage gaps and material hardships, reinforcing both caste and gender inequalities. This persistent devaluation stands in contrast to Ambedkar's broader vision of women's economic citizenship.

3. WAGE INEQUALITY, LABOUR REGULATION, AND THE REPRODUCTION OF MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Unequal wages become obvious when caste assigns occupation, and patriarchy treats women's work as less important. In Sangati, discrimination is institutionalised in daily wage practices. Women work as agricultural labourers and factory workers, and do their daily chores with energy equal to or greater than that of men. Yet their wages are low, not because of their incompetence or skill deficiency, but because gender determines the economic value. In rural areas, wage disparity is normal, denoting how caste patriarchal hierarchies shape material life. The economic hierarchy does not stop at wages; it also shapes the system of exchange. Bama observes, "Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price" (18). This illustrates how women produce, but men control the transactions. The market produces a social hierarchy. Women's work is only valued when they are backed up by men, thereby denying them economic justice even when they are sole earners.

Dalit women are engaged in multiple roles, denoting the injustice. Bama says, "It's the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else. Yet how many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops! Even machines can't do as much" (78). The metaphor machine suggests extraordinary productivity and constant activity. They do occupational labour, domestic work, take care of children, and perform community responsibilities simultaneously. This system makes them toil for hours, but the money they receive in exchange is minimal. Thus, wage inequality not merely defines unequal pay for equal work; it reflects the structural undervaluation of embodied and gendered labour.

These realities contradict the labour reforms advanced by Dr Ambedkar during his tenure as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-46). He advocated working for eight hours in industries, regulation of working conditions in factories and mines, paid leave provisions, and state accountability for worker welfare. Most importantly, he advocated maternity benefits for women workers, recognising maternity as a social necessity and deserving of legal protection. These measures helped labourers from unfair exploitation to a system based on rights, dignity, and government regulations.

The upper-caste community's hostility towards these reforms is visible in their taunts, "You people had better go and make a living by working on your great Ambedkar's fields" (Bama 103). This shows resentment. Despite these protections, the labour world in Sangati remains in the same age-old caste-gender bias, unaware of their legal rights. Agricultural labourers work for unfixed hours, without contracts, proper working conditions, paid leave, or maternity benefits. Wages are determined by employers informally, and in caste-based rural economies, weak enforcement allows social hierarchies to ignore legal standards.



The material consequences, such as low and irregular wages, keep people poor, making it difficult to access education, health, and savings. Girls are forced to work at an early age, thus restricting their educational rights. That's how poverty becomes intergenerational. Economic deprivation is reproduced because of unequal wages and limited access to the regulated labour system.

Despite progressive labour laws and Ambedkar's efforts for dignity, Dalit women are often left out of fair labour enforcement. Material deprivation reveals the limitations of constitutional and legislative reforms due to the control of upper-caste people. Wage disparity forms the economic foundation through which caste and patriarchy sustain inequality over time.

CONCLUSION

This paper re-examines Sangati from the perspective of economic justice and argues that caste is not a ritual system but a material structure that controls labour, wages, and poverty. By analysing hereditary occupation, less value is given to women's work, and continuous wage disparity; this paper highlights that poverty among Dalit women is an outcome of social structures. Wage inequality emerges as a result of caste-based labour allocation and patriarchal undervaluation, thus producing material hardship across generations.

Dr Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality helps in understanding this economic reproduction. His efforts in labour reforms, such as the eight-hour workday, maternity benefits, proper working conditions, and worker welfare, show his belief that social democracy must be based on economic rights. Sangati reveals the limitations of these reforms due to caste and gender discrimination. The gap between legal protection and everyday reality shows how structural power can resist reform without truly changing economic conditions.

The narrative acknowledges struggle, but refuses to give up. As Bama insists, "We must never allow our minds to be... broken in the belief that this is our fate" (59). This challenges the idea that inequality is natural and affirms the possibility of transformation. The vision isn't just symbolic; it is a practical, everyday reality. Bama ends her work with a hope, stating that, "Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustice, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'women can make and women can break'" (123). In this imagined future, equality is not confined to law but lived every day at work, at home, and in society.

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