



## Doings of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-Caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Novel, *Vanmam: Vendetta*

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**Abstract**— *Caste carries a sort of symbolic value. For those who are at the top in the hierarchical Indian caste system have positive symbolic value of caste and those who remain in the bottom have negative value of it. It is so infectious that everyone in this system wants to assert his supremacy over the next one and this hierarchy goes on till the lowest of the low. Dalits are no exception to this rule. Dalits as a community has been victims of caste-based atrocities since the inception of caste-system but they do not hesitate to apply the same sort of caste rules among themselves. Having been beguiled by the Brahmanical ideologies, Dalits have divided themselves into many castes on the basis of high and low. By doing so, they have unknowingly reinforced their own torture in the hands of their oppressors. Bama is a prolific Dalit writer who has touched upon this very sensitive issue of inter-caste violence among Dalits in her third novel, Vanmam: Vendetta. In the novel, she has underscored how Dalits fight among themselves in the name of high and low caste falling prey to the ideologies of their oppressors. In this researcher paper, a genuine effort has been made to highlight how caste becomes functional in promoting inter-caste violence among people of two Dalit castes in a village of Tamil Nadu.*

**Keywords**— *Caste, Inter-caste, Dalit, Oppression, Violence, Ideology.*

Violence per se is known as the intentional use of physical or mental force or power to inflict pains upon oneself or others. Various dictionary definitions confirm this from time to time. *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* describes violence as, "the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy someone or something". *Collins Online Dictionary* states that, "Violence is intended to hurt, injure or kill people". *World Health Organization* elaborates violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation". These definitions seem to be compact and comprehensive but not complete as they only underscore the visible manifestations of a variety of covert forms of violence and fail to highlight those subtle mechanisms which remain in the core of every sort of

explicit violence and help them to sustain indefinitely. Such mechanisms are not easily traceable as they survive in the forms of various social, religious and political norms, dogmas and institutions in any organized society and serve the purposes of the oppressors for a long time and become natural overtime in the name of rule of social, religious or ethical laws. Under such circumstances, most of the people of such a society become operative to protect these laws instead of eradicating them and help their own subjugation.

People of marginalized sections of any society unknowingly become easy prey to such maneuvers of their oppressors. Dalits create one such category in India. They have been victims of caste-based atrocities since the commencement of caste-system. Dalits who were earlier known as 'untouchables' comprise of almost 16.6% population of India according to the 2011 census. The root of the word Dalit can be traced back in Sanskrit word 'dal'

which means to crush or to destroy. Jotibarao Phule, one of the pioneering figures of anti-Brahminic movement in India, has used this term "to describe the condition of the outcastes and untouchables as oppressed and exploited people who were maltreated by the upper castes" (R. Kumar, 4). Dalits were traditionally not the part of the varna system as they were out of the four varna described in various Hindu scriptures. They were variously known as ati-shudras, chandals, panchmas, antyajyas, achhuts, asprushyas, neechjati, depressed classes, harijans etc. at different times in Indian history. As per Indian Constitution, Dalits are known as Scheduled Castes after independence.

With the passing of time, birth-based caste system had also infected Dalits. During the Rig-Vedic era, people were divided into two sections; Arya and Anarya. As time passed, Aryas divided their society into four varna; i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Varna system was akin to class division and migration from one varna to another was quite possible. Caste was created much later when Brahmins, the most revered of all varnas, self-enclosed themselves in order to maintain their superiority among other varnas by following strict exogamy from inside and even stricter endogamy from outside of their varna. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar states that "the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste" (Ambedkar, *Caste in India* in The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar, 246). Thus, caste is a sort of enclosed varna or class. Caste among Dalits might have percolated down from above as it had already infected the existing varnas. About the proliferation of castes, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar asserts in his popular Research Paper, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*:

Endogamy or the closed-door system, was a fashion in the Hindu society, and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste it was wholeheartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin subdivisions or classes, who, in their turn, became endogamous castes. It is "the infection of imitation" that caught all these sub-divisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes... imitation flows from the higher to the lower... and the intensity of imitation varies inversely in proportion to distance... The Brahmin is a semi-god and very nearly a demi-god... His prestige is unquestionable and is the fountain-head of bliss and good. Can such a being, idolised by scriptures and venerated by the priest-ridden multitude, fail to project his personality on the suppliant humanity? ... Such a creature is worthy of more than mere imitation, but at least of imitation; and

if he lives in an endogamous enclosure, should not the rest follow his example? ... It cannot be otherwise. Imitation is easy and invention is difficult. (Ambedkar, *Caste in India* in The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar, 257-58)

Dr. Ghurya also sates, "Caste is a Brahminic child of Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and then transferred to other parts of India" (143). With the passing of time, it heavily infected the native culture of India. Dalits, who were part of Indian indigenous culture, have also adopted this system in their society and started having faith in the idea of high and low born among themselves. Following the Brahmanical model, they have also enclosed their groups by following endogamous marriages. Brahmins follow strict exogamy within their groups in order to consolidate their power and unite themselves whereas Dalits and those who were left out of the varna system in Aryan culture follow strict endogamy without any sort of apparent exogamy. Owing to the lack of exogamy and imposition of stricter rules of excommunication, they have ceased to form a larger group or unity among themselves. Their groups are fragmented, dissected and non-cooperative to one another and it weakens their position in the caste-based Hindu society. Dr. Ambedkar states, "Caste to be real can exist only by disintegrating a group. The genius of caste is to divide and to rule" (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, qtd. in Bama, xiii).

Bama, a prolific Dalit writer from Tamil Nadu, has touched upon this very sensitive and crucial issue of caste-based conflicts among Dalits in her latest novel, *Vanmam: Vendetta*. Originally written in Tamil, the work has been translated into English by Malini Seshadri. The story of the novel takes place in a village named Kandampatti in rural heartland of Tamil Nadu. It depicts a long line of caste-based violence that swallows many lives of two Dalit communities namely Pallars (who identify themselves as Hindu Dalits) and Parayars (who are Christian Dalits). She has depicted how Dalits of different castes become sworn enemies of one another and fall prey to the stratagems of caste Hindus. Despite the fact that Bama warns readers not to extrapolate the story as it is set in a specific spatio-temporal context, it speaks about the truth of Dalit lives in almost all parts of India. The novel may have specific local colour but the ubiquity of caste-based conflicts and violence among different Dalit castes across India can't be denied. It is such a sensitive issue that even Dalit intellectuals avoid to speak on it as they may fear that it would be detrimental for their own popularity.

In the novel, the first major conflict takes place between two persons of different Dalit castes for the irrigation of the fields of Naickers, a dominant landowning

zamindar community. There used to be constant quarrel between Mariaraasu, a tall and well-built Parayar who was in charge of watering the fields of Ranga Naicker; and Karuppusamy, a Pallan by caste, who had the charge of watering the fields of Palanivelu Naicker. The intensity of the quarrel was so high one day that Karuppusamy killed Mariarassu with the shaft of the spade with which he was working on that day. Outwardly, this act of brutal killing was carried out by Karuppusamy over a simple dispute that was related to the irrigation of the fields of two Zamindars, but it would be unfair to ignore other dimensions of this clash which led to the ruthless murder of Mariarassu.

Caste system has heavily infected Dalits in India. As a result of the infection of imitation, they too have created caste-hierarchies among themselves. As its nature is very much unlike the caste-system found in top three varna of Hindu society, it provides an opportunity to caste Hindus to fuel the internecine rivalries among Dalits. In the top three varna of caste Hindus, exogamy is practiced within each endogamous group/varna whereas various smaller groups of Dalits are only endogamous with strict rules of excommunication which forbid them to unite together. In order to push away Dalits from the progressive ideas of Dalit-Bahujan revolutionary social reformers, caste Hindus take support of those Dalits who are illiterate and can easily be manipulated. Strict caste divisions among Dalits provide opportunities of manipulation to their oppressors who try to trap the people of relatively less educated castes among Dalits with the help of popular religious beliefs, myths and stories.

In the novel, it becomes clear when Parayars started emulating Ambedkar's ideology by improving their educational and economic conditions, they became unbearable for Naickers. When some of the educated youths as well as a few sensible men and women among Parayars started understanding the subtle maneuvers of the Naickers through which they used to torture them, they started focusing specifically on their own business instead of unnecessarily appeasing the landlords. Together with it, many of them sought work in the adjoining towns and cities. They were also helped by the church and missionary schools of their area. There was a wind of change among Parayars. Naickers found all these progressive changes detrimental for their hegemony. Therefore, they used 'divide and rule policy' on caste line.

For this, Naickers started prompting Pallans against Parayars in the name of beef eating, conversion to Christianity, worshiping false gods, belonging to the lower caste among Dalits etc. with the assurance that they would help Pallans in case of any need in their struggles with Parayars. Thus, Pallans were instigated to safeguard the

sanctity of Hindu religion by following strict rules of discrimination against Parayars whereas in practice, both were equally discriminated by Naickers. The idea of high and low caste is so much ingrained in the minds of Dalits that they themselves become instruments of their own suppression in the hands of caste Hindus. Priests, landowning and business communities use Dalits to consolidate their own power and prestige in the society. In order to propagate their divisive ideas, they take advantage of the illiteracy of Dalits. In the present work, Naickers select Pallans to support against Parayars as they were sure that provoking Parayars for violent acts against Pallans would be far more difficult than to instigate the Pallans against Parayars.

Generally, the nature of caste is static. Transference or migration from one caste to another is not possible. The rule of the caste hierarchy is this that those who are placed low will always be low regardless of the fact that they have uplifted their status in terms of education and employment. Under such circumstances, if any community from below makes a fast progress, a natural jealousy is sure to ensue in those who are at the top and also a strong sense of competition in them who are close by. This sense of competition would have been fair and healthy between Pallans and Parayars, which for sometimes had been, if they had not been instigated against one another times and again by the Naickers who were relatively more educated and trickier than the Dalits. They knew it very well how the fissures among Dalits could be created and maintained for a long time in order to uphold the system which consolidates their power. Therefore, they kept on stimulating caste-based rivalries among Dalits who continuously fell prey to the subtle ways of Naickers irrespective of the best efforts made by some educated youths and adults. An instance of this can be seen when the statue of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was being installed in Parayar locality in the good gathering of people of both the communities. Bama also asserts, "Marginalized people...have to put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their self-respect and their rightful place in society" (vii).

But, all sorts of efforts were disrupted by the Naickers as they were afraid of this unification of Dalits. As they had better grip on Pallans, they instigated them by saying, "When the Chakkiliya fellows are keeping their mouths shut, why are you fellows joining with those Parayans and talking rubbish about getting rid of caste and things like that...Just because they have got a bit of education, they are doing all this drama!" (R. Kumar, 61). On another occasion, Lokanathan Naicker tells Perumal, a Pallan who was the watchman of his guava orchard, "...they are of a lower caste than you. If you challenge

them, they will become docile...if we let them go on like this, it is not good for you and not good for us" (R. Kumar, 62).

The sole purpose of these instigations was to breed hatred, envy and enmity in Pallans against Parayars to get them clashed to each-other and Naickers fairly succeeded in their efforts when a bloody clash got its way after a stone had been pelted in the crowd which had gathered in the chavadi of Parayars during a cultural program; and Chinnappan had been severely beaten by a Pallan named Maasanam when he picked up a mango which was fallen on the ground in the orchard of Keezhoor Ayya. These seemingly smaller events heightened the intensity of the feud to such an extent that it devoured the lives of many Dalits of both the sides. The chauvinistic attitudes of Dalit youths played a very instrumental role in developing the enmity between Dalits of different castes. Sundarraju, a Pallan youth of almost 25 years, speaks during the meeting of his caste:

The Parayars are inferior to us, and always will be. We are not untouchables, we are of royal descent. We are not Dalits...So we must not have any type of contact or communication with those low Dalit Parayars...We must get together with our own caste people from all the surrounding villages, and make sure these Parayans don't dare raise their heads. (R. Kumar, 77-78)

This bloody clash would have been averted if caste heads, overlooking the passionate advices of the young boys, had taken some sensible decisions at the right time. But the Pallans, injected with the idea of caste superiority and supported by the Naickers, were in no mood to stop. Under the influence of Naickers, caste pride/superiority had swelled the chest of Pallan nattamai so much that he, even when fate presented him opportunity, did not make sincere efforts to stop this clash. Leanings of Police were in favour of Pallans due to Naickers. Outwardly they were helping Parayars, but the real intention of Naickers was to make this clash permanent in order to get the maximum advantage. The hope of any sort of compromise was discouraged by them. Finally, Parayars were instigated to retaliate fulfilling the dream of Naickers. All the worst things happened during these violent clashes: many people including women from both sides were brutally killed; police imprisoned, misbehaved and tortured Parayar women very badly; people had to leave their village for longer durations, education of the young children was discontinued, police cases were lodged against those educated worthy young fellows who could have brought positive change in their society by getting government jobs and various other sorts of private jobs in the nearby cities.

Bama writes, "Wealth, power, upper-caste status, and the might of the government itself are used against those who possess none of these, and this violence is sought to be justified" (vii).

Thus, Naickers, taking advantage of their social positioning in a caste-based society, had succeeded in halting the progress of these slowly emerging Dalit communities for almost two to three years by entangling them in the crude politics of caste. The chasm had become so wide between the people of both the communities that they looked towards one other with suspicion, hatred and ill-will; and all sorts of efforts of communion had miserably failed until the fear of judicial punishment crept in their minds. Cases of murder and other sorts of illegal activities were lodged from both the sides and it had become quite clear that they would get no respite without out of court compromise and their progress would remain halted as long as these bloody clashes and litigations would go on. Consequently, they themselves began to bridge the gap ignoring their internal differences as well as advices of their landlords who kept on taking advantage of their inordinate pride of high and low caste for such a long time. None but the caste heads of both the communities came ahead with a few youths for this purpose. Pallans also had come to know by now that they had been used against another caste Dalit to weaken the solidarity among them. And when once it was understood that the idea of caste is a machination of Caste Hindus to oppress Dalits and halt their progress, caste-based violence had been replaced by progress and prosperity.

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