

# THE PROBLRMS OF WOMEN: THE FRAME AND MIND OF DALIT WOMEN IN BAMA'S VANMAM.

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In Bama's *Vanmam* (2002), intra-caste strife among Dalits is discussed and strategies are debated to resolve the same. Unlike her earlier works and many of the Dalit writings, in *Vanmam*, Bama instead of blowing up the agonies and sufferings of the downtrodden, loudly raises her voice and vehemently asserts the need for the unity and solidarity of the suppressed for a better future. In *Vanmam*, the plot is a rather weak one as it merely dovetails the events involving two Dalit castes in a village called Kandampatti in Tamil Nadu which may be considered a microcosm of the Indian subcontinent. It is a village surrounded by beautiful mountains where people of different communities live for generations. The Parayars of the village are Christians and their Church is in the western part of the village. Next to the Parayar streets are the streets of Pallars who are also Dalits, but Hindus. Away from the Dalit streets are the streets of Naickers, Nadars, Thevars and Chettiars. Agricultural land owned by the landlords is in the western part of the village and therefore both Parayars and Pallars have to walk through the streets of the upper class to reach the fields. The Parayars and Pallars of the village are labourers in the fields of the landlords and they are destined to lead a pitiable existence with the husk thrown by them. In spite of their hard labour they have to remain half-fed with porridge.

While commenting on the diligence of Parayars, Bama writes, The Parayars toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields (6). Unfortunate, their hard labour does not guarantee them sufficient food. The poor students of the village, during vacation would play in the ponds and come back in the afternoon. Sometimes they would come home hungry after their bath and look eagerly into the kanji pot. But it would be empty because their younger brothers and sisters would have finished off the food (45). Worse than this that they would go for menial job with the empty stomach. Added to starvation they have to live in constant fear of the atrocities of the landlords and the communal clashes which may erupt any time. While dileneating the precarious existence of the Dalit, Bama avers, –what a life . . . even a dog's life would be better . . . can't live and can't die either . . . (113). The vendetta between the Parayars and Pallars does not have a valid reason and its source is not clearly known. The earliest instance of violence is the killing of a Pallar by a Parayan named Mannangati. Mannangati enjoyed certain privileges in the village which irked the Pallars who out of envy dragged him to a brawl and tried to stab him. But Mannagatti got hold of the knife and ripped out the guts of a Pallar. Yet the Parayas and Pallars get along well.

In another occasion, Marraasu, a Parayar and Karuppuswamy, a Pallar, got into a quarrel when both were involved in watering the farms of Naicker. Following the instigation of the landlord who encouraged him to be aggressive and promised to take care of everything (8). Karuppuswamy killed Marrassu. These are isolated incidents which do not affect the cordial relationship between the Parayas and Pallars and they celebrated festivals together and took part in common functions and programmes. By the time some of the educated youths of Parayar streets formed the –Kalani Arts Club (1) and conducted various cultural events. These developments on the Parayar street make the Naickers grew jealous and they accused the church for encouraging the Parayas. –. . . they belong to the Church, they get lots of support. Also, many of them are now educated (2). Strengthened by the successful conduct of cultural programmes, the Dalit youngsters wanted to install a statue of Ambedkar. Further, they desired the involvement of all Dalit groups in the venture. The Pallars donated Rs. 1,000/- for the statue, which was unveiled in a colourful function. The solidarity in organizing the programme and the speeches made on the occasion infuriated the landlords who conspired to annihilate the unity of the downtrodden. Goaded by the Naickers, some of the Pallars demanded to return the money donated for the statue. The corporate life of the Parayas and Pallars faced a serious setback over the issue of putting up a flagpole near the statue of Ambedkar. Violence erupted when a wire tied to the pole was cut by a Parayar young man. Instead of pacifying, the landlords instigated the Pallars. –How arrogant they are to lay a hand on the wire you people have put there. Don't let them get away with this. It's either you or them now (80).

In the violence that followed, innocent people from both sides were mercilessly butchered and houses and belongings were destroyed. The worst affected by the violence were Parayas who could not get support either from the Government or from the Church, whereas the Pallars enjoyed the favours of the landlords and police. The Paraya men dispersed to different places out of fear. Under the guise of searching for men, police enter the house of Parayas and talk vulgarly to the women and even misbehaved with them (88). The women were dragged to street and they were beaten brutally, –with no regard even for the infant and the aged, they kept and swirling their lathis down hard again and again (89). They got blown everywhere in their bodies. –All the women had swellings and black bruises all over their bodies as the blood clotted and congealed under the blows (89). The Parayar women were more scared of the police than of the riots. The women who were taken to the police station were subjected to more severe torture and abuses. Chellakili, a pregnant Parayar woman was kicked in the lower belly by a policeman with his boot. –Chellakili curled up and collapsed on the floor of the cell. As she lay there on the floor of that police lock-up, she felt a sharp pain in her belly . . . and had an abortion right there (86). Kandanpatti was under the grip of fear. The following year the Parayas had to skip Christmas celebration. However, during the Easter festivities violence broke out in the village. The loss of lives, oblique poverty and tormenting experiences of violence make the villagers brood over the destruction nature of vendetta which makes them realize that nothing can be achieved through violence. They could not harvest anything but the loss of a few innocent lives, untold miseries and misfortunes. For the upper class Naickers –the news that the Parayar street had become a wasteland was as sweet as the sweet of nectar (122).

When the murder of a Paraya came to trial in the Court of Law there evolved a common notion of peace between the two communities. Jayaraju, an educated Parayar young man, declared in public, –we were just beginning to progress slowly and now there murders and court cases and police raids . . . all over people scattered about, studies ruined, not even able to attend Church .

.. how long can we go on like this? (126). The two groups resumed discussion which led to a compromise between them. They unanimously declare, –After all, life is short. We work, we eat . . . we die. Why take on unnecessary problems?! (129). When the upper class people heard of a peace agreement, they mocked and ridiculed both Pallars and Parayars. –What sort of fellows are these? After so much killing . . . so much wandering around like refugees . . . they are supposed to be uniting again. Shameless fellows!! (132). In fact the upper class people are upset over the unity of the subaltern as they are quite sure that their domination will be questioned. Bama has quite an optimistic vision of a very bright future for the Dalits. She finds a zest for life, courage of the Dalits and she is astonished at the resilience of the Dalit women, in particular. There is a burning desire to develop and a thirst for knowledge prevail among the Dalit youths. When the men were hiding to avoid arrest, the Paraya woman stayed indoors. They carried on the routine work and withstood police brutality and threats. –Though misfortunes and problems continued to pile up, the women faced them all resourcefully (123). There is yet another incident in the novel where the Dalit women themselves received the corpse of three persons killed in the violence and the women gathered together, to took the bodies in the cart to the graveyard, dug a big grave all by themselves, and buried all three bodies in that single gravel (.....) Bama in Vanmam highlights the fact that Dalit youngsters attribute more significance to education as they believe that only through education they can liberate themselves from bondage and improve their status. There had been an age old practice in Kandampatti that the Dalits had to offer homage to the Naickers. –On every Pongal festival, with great festivity, they would set out for the landlord’s house with their families taking with them offerings of a rooster one or two large pumpkins, four, five stalks of sugar cane, and a measure of ricel (7). Ten years ago, the educated youths of Parayar community forced the elders to stop the practice, eventually which was followed by Pallars also. Bama’s ultimate concern in Vanmam is to edify the subaltern the need of solidarity and unity. In Vanmam the author speaks through the character Anthony while unveiling the statue of Ambedkar, which is fit to quote:

‘Educate ! Organize ! Agitate’ . . . we must all get an education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalizes us, discriminated against us. And having realized that, we must unite and fight the injustice. We must not be afraid to fight . . . we will make a new world. We will create an equitable society free of caste. (6)

Similarly, in the author’s note of the novel, Bama confesses her aim in the novel.

–Marginalized people, those when have been pushed to the very edges of society have to put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their self-respect and their rightful place in society – that was the message of my novell (vii). To validate her arguments for the unity of the Dalits, Bama portrays the election held in Kandampatti after the union of Parayars and Pallars. In the history of Kandampatti, only Naickers contested for the post of President and won. The enlightened Parayars and Pallars fielded Kaaliyan of the Pallar Street as the joint candidate. The Parayars and Pallars campaigned together for Kallaiyan which enabled him to win the election. Bama avers that the victory in Kandampatti is symbolic of the victories of the Dalits at the national level if they stand united, Kaalimuthu one of the minor characters of the novel affirms: –It’s not enough that we have won in the Panchayat election. The Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislature and in the national parliament . . . we must capture the levers of government power. Let they be the first step towards that goal. (134).

In the novel *Vanmam*, Bama has vividly presented that if the Dalits are united, they proclaim Surve's immortal lines, –now we alone are the heroes of history, of all the biographies too- henceforth...(qtd in L.S.Despande 71). As authorial voice Anthony on the day of inaugurating Ambedkar's stature declares the need for the solidarity of the marginalized. Only through unity and concerted efforts the downtrodden much cherished dream of liberty and equality can be a reality. –We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us ... we shall strive together to see that justice prevails... Arise and face the new dawn. Don't remain docile. You have been born to rule, to live like human beings...we will make a new worldl (Bama 61). As a result, Bama, the novelist has discovered that the latent potential in every individual needs to be kindled and activated. She understands that the strength to withstand and overcome the crisis is buried within individuals who must not be allowed to drift towards despair. As a writer, she believes that her words have the capacity to lift such individuals, teetering on the verge of despair to realize the power within to survive the crisis. And as a writer she has faith that all crisis will yield positive solutions and that order will emerge out of chaos. Bama, who always sees the weaker and black side of her people, does not fail to look into their bright and redeeming aspects also. She spearheads a campaign for social recognition and identity for the poor Dalit people, despite great odds. She changes her tone from poignancy to vibrancy.

Another prominent writer among the Indian writers is Urmila Pawar. Pawar is a well-known activist and award winning writer in India who continues to advocate for greater rights for Dalits (formerly called *untouchables*) and women in a country with complex social mores rooted in ancient traditions and religious teachings. Pawar tells of growing up as a Dalit on the Kolkan coast near Mumbai in the \_50s and \_60s when charismatic leaders like Dr. Ambedkar were advocating for a new casteless society where, if you were born into a lower caste, you were not born into your destiny with no hope of ever rising above your circumstances. She writes about her experiences with caste discrimination in a matter-of-fact manner devoid of self-pity. As she recounts in her memoir, –the community grew up with a perpetual sense of insecurity, fearing that they could be attacked from all four sides in times of conflict. That is why there has always been a tendency in our people to shrink within ourselves like a tortoise and proceed at a snail's pace.l Pawar says this slow pace picked up radically after her community's mass spontaneous conversion to Buddhism in the wake of Dr. Ambedkar's death because Buddhism allowed them to view themselves and their place in the world in a new way. Pawar was acutely aware of her caste identity even as a child because of the repeated instances of discrimination and humiliation she faced in her school and other places. She talks about an incident in school where her classmates invited her for a potluck lunch but clearly told her not to bring any food. Post-lunch, she also found herself as a topic of gossip for having eaten too much food. She also narrates an incident where her English teacher humiliated her for her poor English. She has described how her community lived in the centre of the village, unlike Dalit communities elsewhere in the Presidency that were usually expected to live at the periphery. The caste system of India ostracized certain sections of people by classifying the society into four varnas- where the Dalits are called \_avarnas', marginalized and alienated in every walk of their lives by the mainstream majority society. They have been reduced to men who \_left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrorl. (Roy, 216) Being treated worse than animals they are often bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the privileged by their spittle. They are even forced to carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through the upper lanes they can wipe away their footprints. But the Dalit women, vulnerably positioned at

the bottom of both India's caste and gender hierarchies, experience endemic gender and caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations and their socio-economic vulnerability combined with double risk factors of being Dalit and female, increase their exposure to potentially violent situations while simultaneously reducing their ability to escape. 'Subaltern' is the other term primarily encompassing the Dalits along with other oppressed sections of the society. When Gramsci, the coiner of the word 'Subaltern' says that 'The history of Subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic' (Gramsci, 55), Gayatri Spivak in her illuminating essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' observed that the subaltern cannot speak because 'the phased development of the Subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project' (Spivak, 271). But the articulation of the subaltern is possible, not always only through an ordered language but through gaps, fissures and silences in one's speech or narrative. The articulation is not what an oppressed subject says but it could be what he does not say. To answer Spivak's question. 'With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak, 285) one can refer Althusser's concept of 'interpellated subjectivity', (Althusser, 66) by which he believes, experiences of oppression do not always make the oppressed burst with anger, it sometimes interpolates his/her experience allowing for the construction of an 'interpellated subjectivity' that is more effective a strategy for confrontation with the dominant ideology, by virtue of its indirect encounter. Recently, James C. Scott innovates two terms 'public transcripts' and 'hidden transcripts' and show how 'hidden transcripts' can be more effective in resisting domination, by its strategy of indirect confrontation with the agencies of domination. (Scott, 2-4) When a Dalit woman is twice marginalized in her society, her gestures, her silence, her feelings, her rural language is able to articulate her resistance against the caste & gender discriminations. Spivak's essay and Scott's categorization of two forms of resistance provide for a new paradigm of tracing the voice of the powerless women.

Consequently, The Dalits have to renew themselves to become emancipated. Trust is the only ship that can land them ashore. Only by changing themselves, they can be an instrument of change. It is time that they ceased to survive as Dalits and started living as human beings growing within them the rose of hope. Most of the Dalit women get married out of compulsion and circumstance. They are forced by the manmade destiny to lead their life as prescribed to them. Oppression to a greater or lesser extent produces anger or hurt and oppression and injustice form an inevitable part of an untouchable's life, especially the Dalit woman, which has become a life of tolerance and sacrifice. Meanwhile the situation of dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the biggest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world. There is no doubt about the traditional taboos are same for dalit men and women. But dalit women have to deal with them more often.