

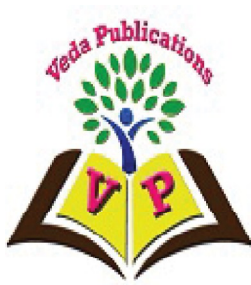


BAMA'S VANMAM AS AN EXPOSITION OF AMBEDKAR'S IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Ambedkar sees a great similarity between the position of blacks in America and Dalits in India. He is of the opinion that the injustice of demarcation on the basis of race and caste can be set right only by class based unity and not by individual acts of opposition. Caste being social division of people of one race is more cruel than slavery. Bama's Vanmam brings out the fact that rivalry between the Dalits will lead nowhere whereas if they are united, a change can be seen as individual enmity will only toughen their stand as the so called upper castes will take advantage of it. Bama ends Vanmam on the positive note that the marginalized communities have woken up to let their voices resound and resonate and as the champion of the downtrodden, Ambedkar says we must capture the levers of government power. Let this be the first step towards that goal. Vanmam exposes this ideology the best.

Key words: *Caste discrimination, Dalit consciousness, Marginalized communities, Hierarchy*

Caste in a society is based on the imagined traits and casteism is the favourable attitude shown towards one's fellowmen and caste discrimination is the feeling in the minds of the people that some castes are superior and others inferior.

In 1946, Ambedkar wrote a letter to W. E. B. Dubois, noting that:

There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Blacks in America and that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary... I was very much interested to read that the Blacks of America have filed a petition to the UNO. The Untouchables of India are thinking of following suit. (7)

Both Dubois and Ambedkar intellectually guided their respective communities, namely Blacks and Dalits, in their own countries. Both Blacks and Dalits suffer as minority groups against dominant social structures. They felt that their struggle to correct the wrongs committed through history will have to start by building a class-based unity and not through individual acts of opposition. The fight against discrimination based on race and caste has not been carried out only by the communities of black and white it has been assisted by Whites and non-dalits. They have fought along with them for democratization and social justice in both the countries.

When compared to the blacks in America the situation of Dalits in India was worse. They were segregated on the basis castes and pushed to live outside the villages.

The first reference to caste system can be found in the Purusukta of *Rig Veda*. Manu, in his *Manusmriti* supports the caste system and made it a code attesting the Brahmins theory that the caste system is God made and it is not one's option as it is one's birth that decides it. Therefore, the Shudras who were supposed to belong to the lower rung in the society were subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation by the so called higher castes, through centuries.

The idea that caste was God made was vehemently rejected by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and

he along with Mahatama Phule initiated a *political movement to bring about the freedom and equality for the Dalits*. This movement influenced very much in creating a space for the Dalits and in shaping and moulding their spirits. This spirit instilled within the Dalits sparked a rebellious feeling with an aim to bring about equality in the society.

The rebellious current aims to establish an egalitarian human society. Sharan Kumar Limbale, a reputed modern Dalit critic in his widely acclaimed Dalit critical book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* gives a comprehensive definition of Dalit consciousness:

Dalit consciousness is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle: it is a belief in rebellion against the caste recognizing the human being at its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slave conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature. It is separated and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. (32)

To Ambedkar untouchability was worse than slavery and he in one of his essays said that even the slaves in America had some privileges which were beyond the limits of the untouchables in India. Ambedkar was of the opinion that America discriminated the blacks on the basis of their physical traits but caste based segregation in India brought severe mental slavery and agony. He asserted that:

. . . The slave was not a legal person in the eye of the law... he remained a person in the sense of a human being in the eye of a society. Slave was touchable and enjoyed dignity from the society also.... Untouchability is worse than Slavery because it does not guarantee a lifelong social security the way it is entailed in the later. Nobody is answerable for an untouchable's food, clothing and shelter. From this perspective untouchability for sure was not just worse than slavery but crueler also.. .(32)

In spite of the fact that the dalits have inhabited India for many years and have become well versed in the language and culture, its religion and history, they are still marginalized and discriminated. It is sad to note that still they have an identical racial profile with others living in India. Ambedkar elaborated upon this theme in his *Annihilation of Caste*, stating that:

Caste System does not demarcate racial division. Caste is a social division of people of the same race. Assuming it however to be a case of racial divisions one may ask: what harm could there be if a mixture of races and of blood was permitted to take place in India by inter-marriage between different Castes? Men are no doubt divided from animals by so deep a distinction that science recognizes men and animals as two distinct species. But even scientists who believe in purity of races do not assert that the different races constitute different species of men. (11)

The post independent India, to articulate and counteract the caste system gave rise to the literary movement called Dalit literature. It can be termed as a protest literature because it is based on the mythology language and aesthetics which basically opposes the set norms of literature. Hence, it is "a dislocate literature. It is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature that has contributed a fresh experience, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and new chemistry of suffering and revolt to Indian literature" (Limble 37). In the words of Arjun Dangle, "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society" (264).

The present-day Dalit literature is a literature of the depressed, oppressed and suppressed people of India, and as such it is one of the most significant developments in modern Indian literature.

Bama's *Vanmam* is "Characterized by startling language, ethnographic details, and native idioms, Dalit writing in Tamil has gone hand in hand with political activism and with critical ideological debate" (blurb). A writer with conviction and concern has

focused on various day-to-day issues of life which have impact on human psyche. They are therefore infallible and vulnerable who do not put up a false front and their feelings of deep guilt, anger and revenge stand exposed. Bama through the novel *Vanmam* tries to project the ideology of Ambedkar of seeing a united dalit community which can oppose the power which tries to crush them.

The deceptively tranquil atmosphere with which the novel opens brings in an uneasy expectation of something horrid about to happen. The novel is a string of incidents of retaliations and counter retaliations which end in a ruthless clash between the two Dalit groups Parayars and Pallars. With no leading protagonist to name, the two Dalit communities become the protagonists. The parayars are Roman Catholics and the Pallars are Hindus. Greatly influenced by Christianity the Parayars are more assertive and humanized who talk of forgiveness and compromise. The pallars being Hindus, are the victims of Hindu discrimination, who fall low in their hierarchy and therefore are treated menial by the dominant caste, the naickers, who appear only occasionally. They never openly confront the Parayars, yet strongly stoke the fires of conflict, always provoking the Pallars into action.

It is ironic how the Dalit groups quarrel among themselves for their callous landlords. The ensuing fight between Marraasu and Karuppasamy culminates in the murder of Marraasu by Karuppasamy and burying him in a ditch. But the landlord is neither shocked, frightened nor perturbed by it but consoles and supports Karuppasamy. The silenced man's buried remains become a food for stray dogs. The deceased man's kith raises an alarm of insane fury at his uncle's death and laments. Besides the problem of being a dalit, they also face the misery of being poor and uneducated. Saminathan realises his unfortunate condition to be the reason for that inhumane treatment. "Because we have no money, no education they killed and buried my chittappa in a ditch ... as if he were a mere dog or something We should get ourselves an education, qualify as lawyers and come back to put an end to this sort of injustice" (V 11-12). Sensitized to their rights which have been denied to

them for generations, the youths like Saminathan and Jeyaraj resent their 'backward' status. Though these people were uneducated simple minded folks, they were able to see through the events and the masterminds behind them, yet were unable to fight back because for the want of proper unity among themselves and the lack of economy to challenge their oppressors. Talking about the murder of Saminathan's uncle Marraasu, Mekkelamma, his mother says

'I understand that you're feeling distressed. I'm upset too. Do you imagine that these Pallars thought of all this by themselves? No, they're getting coaching from the landlords'.

'What do you mean "coaching"? Why are they coaching?'

'They're the men who are plotting to make sure our two castes never unite.... I don't know how many lifetimes it will take for our two castes to come together as friends. The way things are going, it looks like it can never happen", said Mekkelamma with a big sigh. (V 12)

Though the dominant community nurtures the feelings of enmity between the two Dalit groups, Bama makes it clear that it is basically the inherent hierarchy and enmity that exists in the caste structure of the society, which becomes the reason for the two groups to viciously and suicidally attack each other. Therefore, here it is more the identity of a community that tries to assert itself than the identity of an individual.

Both the dalit groups are always at logger heads with each other. Both want to prove that they are better than the other. When the Parayars under the leadership of Jeyaraju and Saminathan started an Arts Troupe and named it as 'Kazhani Arts Troupe', with the good intention of promoting good manners, it only triggers the feeling of jealousy and rivalry in the minds of the opposing group, Pallars.

Everywhere they're calling Parayar arts as "Dalit Arts" and promoting them . . . it seems "Dalit" means only them, not us. We're better than them, said one of the boys. So the Pallars were seething with fury. . . . But between the two castes the rivalry and jealousy became

steadily worse. In both streets, the hot-blooded young men were going around looking for trouble . . . also an extra risk . . . the risk of riots. (V 54)

Adding fuel to this fury of the Pallars, are the naickars who constantly provoke them against the Parayars. After the installation of the statue of Ambedkar, the Pallars resented their hand in it as they had also donated for it. They wanted to do something to rival them.

In an attempt to outwit the parayars and prove their might, the Pallars decided to erect the statue of their leader next to the statue of Dr. Ambedkar. The platform they constructed was a bit too high which they thought would stand as a proof of their greatness. This action of the pallars infuriated the Parayar community people and Sesurathnam went to the extent of cutting the wires near the flag pole, not knowing that his life's wire will be cut soon, as a retaliation to his actions. The pallars' murderous rage reaching the zenith, ended in the death of Sesurathnam. Their anger full grown, they chased and hunted down Sesurathnam like a wild animal. After brutally murdering him they threw the corpse in the bazaar. It was lying there abandoned, like an orphan. The wailing of the women in anguish continued for days and it was like hell let loose as there was pandemonium and confusion at its worst, with people being butchered on both the sides. The police intervened and took the rebelling women away. The village wore a deserted and gloomy look.

Violence and pain undergone usually toughens an individual and give extraordinary strength during moments of adversity and pain. The untold suffering of the women folk became a matter of great concern. The psychological trauma and despair reaches the nadir of their existence. The eventual wave of despair and crisis should take the upward trend. Rising from their own ashes of desperation, with their men in hiding, the women of the village were pushed to the extent of burying their own loved ones. Rosemary one of the educated, among the young girls took the lead and when stopped by the police boldly challenged them.

'We're only going to Vadakkooru, sir. We're going to bring back the dead bodies of our street people. We have to do this. Who else is there for us?' asked Rosemary.

'why . . . the men from your street are hiding here and there, aren't they? . . . asked the policeman. Rosemary retorted boldly, 'If they're hiding here and there, why don't you go and arrest them? Why are you threatening us instead? (V 87)

The adversity had toughened the womenfolk endowing them with the capacity to withstand suffering but still act wisely.

With the end of their vacation fast approaching, the young men taking up education elsewhere were worried. They wanted to find a solution to the ever complicating problem. The year passed quietly without Christmas celebrations. Festivals usually boost up the drooping spirit of an individual and community, giving an opportunity to get over their differences. Hence, their anticipations were running high as Easter was fast drawing near, which they decided to celebrate in a grand manner. But everything turned a flop as the Pallars, as ever marshaled their way into the procession and caused havoc amid the peaceful atmosphere. Running helter skelter, the Parayars were crest fallen as their hopes were dashed. The height of enmity was reached as the, murder of Savariappan was disclosed the next day. Yet all that the Parayars could do was to console and comfort themselves "Kings kill immediately.....God waits to kill, atha. Just watch what's going to happen. All those murders that they committed will come back to haunt them. They'll never prosper" (V 109).

Transcending the limits of a normal behaviour, the psychologically aberrated minds of the people of the two communities lose their clear and rational thinking. With the two groups involved in satiating the thirst of blood in a blindly frenzied rage, the elders tried to instill in them some kind of sense, giving them advice. 'Enda, why are you always going around taking turns to slaughter people as if they were goats or cattle? If we continue stabbing and killing one another, how can we get along with our lives?' asked Perumal....

If we listen to these useless old fellows, there is no hope for us. Somehow we have to take revenge (V 121). The moralizing advice fell in the deaf ears of the pallars.

With their boiling blood hungering for blood, the Pallars, with their seemingly apparent superiority convincing them, continued to harbour the thoughts of revenge. Meanwhile the Naickers felt elated, as they thought that, that was the end of the parayars. Though the three youths surrendered at the persuasion of their people, the Pallars listed the names of innocent people too. The village once again wore the gloomy and deserted look of a graveyard, except for some skinny and half-starved goats and cattle which roamed the street.

Finally the two Nattamians chose a neutral place and sat down to talk the matter out with selected members from each group. After a long tirading, each one voicing their opinion, the battle of words came to an end with people weighing the situation at hand and resolving to put aside their vendetta and live a life of peace and harmony. "Fear lingered in people's mind. But the spirit of vendetta had by and large gone. In its place was the determination that, come what may, the people of the two castes should live in harmony. At last there were some early signs that, in the streets of Kandampatti, the old way of life was coming back" (V 131)

The truce, having reached the two groups went a step ahead to show their solidarity. Kaalaiyan of the Pallar community was unanimously elected by the both Naatamais as a joint candidate to contest the forth-coming election. With the Dalit groups outnumbering the Naickars, the Naickars lost in the election and Kaalaiyan emerged victorious making history, as none except a Naickar has ever become Panchayat President of Kandampatti village.

Bama ends the novel on a positive note which almost spells like a warning to all the oppressing dominant communities. She seems to speak through the character Kaalimuthu, her assurance and hope for the Dalit Community.

'We who were torn apart have now come together and shown that we can win... it is not

enough we have won in this Panchayat election. The Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislatures and in the national Parliament... As Ambedkar the champion of the downtrodden, said we must capture the levers of government power. Let this be the first step towards that goal. (V 134)

The united power of the Dalit communities is a bold affront to the dominant ones. As Ambedkar says, "Status is a dual matter, a matter intense between two persons and unless both move from their old positions there can be no change" (470). Bama's *Vanmam* has an inferred message that the oppressed and marginalized communities have woken up to let their voices resound and resonate and the village of Kandampatti after a long and bitter struggle, has set the ball rolling.

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