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VIRAMMA: A LIFE OF AN UNTOUCHABLE

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Abstract: Life histories open up an experience of the self- in-society unrecorded elsewhere. Whatever their form or intent, life histories offer unique—and still relatively underexplored—perspectives on Indian society. They are not intrinsically more or less valuable than any other cultural form, from temple sculptures and cinema screens to festivals and novels, for all these contain clues to social and or individual practices and intentions. In the case of life histories, however, those practices and intentions are filtered through the patterning of a life or lives, a sequence of events that is perceived to have an extra degree of immediacy and truth-value. Through life histories we can learn something of the impact of large-scale forces (such as industrialization and urbanization, the spread of literacy and the rise of the nation and the imprint of collectivities on individuals. The research paper focuses on a diverse oral record of Viramma, a Dalit woman.

Keywords: Dalit, women, caste, gender, discrimination, community, oral life story.

Introduction:

Viramma is a Paraiyar whose day to day life rotates around her family, diligent work and caste culture. But as ‘one needs to fill one’s belly,’ Viramma’s life also centers on the support of the main local landlord to whom she has got to be connected under the traditional bondage link involving the master and his *adimai*. Viramma sees this status as one combination of dependence and a degree of protection, for the master is her usual recourse in case of need, particularly when money has to be borrowed to meet the expenditures of important social occasions: funerals, weddings or other ceremonies in the family. This pattern of personal relations between the dominant and the dominated is extremely important, for it goes about as a considerable impediment stopping Viramma and others like her from joining a caste or class line of struggle to better their condition. Like many older Untouchables, Viramma appreciates the few enhancements she has witnessed in her lifetime. Still she sticks to the conventional view of what the Pariah’s *dharma* is: a sense of submission combined with a sense of obligation. The internalization of the dominant archetype of surrender does not,

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however, stop her from either joking about Brahmins (for she relies on Reddiars landlords, not on Brahmin masters) or from recognizing herself totally with the Paraiyar culture, which differentiates itself from upper caste norms in abundant ways, including a much liberated speech, a much more noteworthy nonreligious motivation, and a strong sense of humor. Even though not blind to the domination she faces, mourning and complaining intermittently, she does not dwell on her misery. Her potency, her ability to face terrible poverty, the way her culture maintains her moorings — she is a singer with a large repertoire and a born storyteller — are incredibly outstanding.

‘Few of the theoretical interpretations by foreign scholars on Dalits in Tamilnadu fully highlight the complexity of Viramma’s life. She shares, as Michael Moffatt(1979) underlines, the consensus that places the Dalits at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and accepts the rationale of a system based on ‘purity,’ a system that orders the hierarchy among the different Dalit castes as much as it does between them and the rest of Hindu society. However, Viramma also illustrates the view of Katherine Gough(1981), who stressed the distinctive features of the Dalit sociocultural world, freer than the inhibited brahminical model, and based on an admixture of less authoritarian family structure and a greater caste solidarity. Contrary to Mencher’s

(1973) analysis, Viramma does not basically challenge the dominant values. She accepts the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. Mencher’s finding is, however, much more prevalent amongst the younger generation, which Viramma finds disturbing’ (Arnold 267).

She in this manner tries to calm her son who questions the shrewdness of God’s inequities, and denounces the exploitation of Dalits by the dominant castes. Believing that things are better ‘when everyone is in his own place,’ Viramma, like many others, is scared of the militancy of the younger generation, which releases the authenticity of the ritual obligations of the Paraiyars and which wordlessly asserts itself in such facets of daily life as the way to dress after fieldwork, the way to walk in the main village street, or the manner in which to speak. While Viramma takes pride in sticking to the Pariah’s *dharma*, her son, exposed to the current reformist political conversations, wishes to endorse his self-respect, sense of pride. Viramma panics this aspiration to full emancipation, liberation and believes that controversy and dissent are hazardous because power lingers in the hands of the dominant castes.

Josian writes about *Viramma*; ‘this is an Indian history, which develops itself in one of the most specific and gloomy spheres of Indianness: Untouchability’ (Arnold 252). What should one recall from the account of an old woman remembering her personal

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past, as well as what were the lives, the beliefs, the values of a generation of Dalits that is currently vanishing? at the outset, her personality—a blend of strength and weakness, a profound humanity moved by an indomitable taste for life. Her acceptance of what she saw as her caste dharma is unquestionably striking, but she was not blind or naive. At the crossroads of individual recollection and collective memory, we may make out a few significant points. First, a sense of belonging is what best portrayed Viramma and reality of her world. The word ‘Paraiyar,’ or ‘Pariah,’ depending on how it is used, can be either a deliberate insult, a disdainful mark of contempt or an inevitable fate. But unlike her husband and her son, who were more politically cognizant, Viramma has constantly used it just as her very own identity, her caste name. Viramma has always seen herself as such, accepted herself as such, and stayed faithful to the words used in her everyday life: *paratchi*, a Paraiyar woman; *paraceri*, the settlement of the Paraiyars, and the *paraimelam*, the Paraiyar orchestra, whose flat drum, the *parai*, is said to have given the caste its name, even if it is more precisely the attribute of the Paraiyar sub caste, the Vettiayar, to which Viramma belongs. She was ignorant of the expression ‘Dalit’ all through the ten years of her conversation; regardless she didn’t know its importance in the late 1990s.

For her, as for so many, meaning and identity were found in a place, a community, a framework of life and thought, and an established order of things, even if that framework and that order can only be defined as oppression, obstructing emancipation. Viramma bears testimony to an Ideoigical system representative of the old order of the world, as her son Anban would say. In narrating her life, and expressing her views, Viramma did not formulate a critique of that system: she simply relates, in her own words, how it functions in the village space, in the heads of ‘those from the high castes’.

Once mutual trust was built up, Viramma portrayed story of her life and philosophy in great detail using the most vivid and simple words. Her story is of immense interest for its clarity and outspokenness, as well as for its delight. It certainly provides a first-person account of what was and still is, to a large extent, the daily life, the joys and sorrow, beliefs and the psyche of millions who share the life and the perspectives of this mother of twelve children — only three of whom have survived — dwelling in a village amongst paddy fields, in an enclave of former French Pondicherry region hemmed in by Tamilnadu, a four-hour coach drive from Chennai (formerly Madras). But Viramma’s story also reveals insight into what is conversed here: the dialectics of oppression, subjugation and emancipation of the

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individuals who for ages have been subjected to the scourge of untouchability. She conveys the views of the older generation, and offers a picture of those every now and then labeled 'the Subalterns,' not all the time in line with the 'subaltern' school of historians of India — who give emphasis to that behind the established history, there is another history to interpret: the voiceless or the open struggles of the subjugated and oppressed classes. They are right: there is a speechless history to find out and pull through, but it is not always a history of protest. Like Viramma, the majority of the 'subalterns' have probably had to balance an aspiration for a better life with the strong consciousness of what their *dharma* of submission is supposed to be, all the while experiencing the power of the dominated governing classes and the state power machinery anxious to crush even the most initially incipient forms of dissent. This does not put a stop to struggles, but rather it does decrease their occurrence.

II Behind Viramma's submissiveness to the dominant social system lies a facet of her personality, a wonderful strength, which to put it simply is the very force of life itself. Her vibrant interest in other human beings, be they itinerant singers, eunuchs, or snake-catcher tribes; her taste for songs, stories and street theater; the abundance of details she was able to provide on rituals and ceremonies, or on the exact types of food being prepared for special occasions, show a

lively curiosity about all facets of life. Contrary to popular expectation, the weight of poverty, illiteracy and oppression have not plunged Viramma and her like into a state of hopelessness. The Dalits are not their own masters, they are under the pressure of social domination and systems of beliefs, but they are not dispossessed of their most intimate self. Beyond the social definition of their position, they have something else, which is simply the unflinching, the unfaltering, the unflagging core of humanity. Whatever have been the tragedies and the trials of existence never has the sap of life dried up under the bark. And here, in the depth of their minds, lies a source of energy waiting to be tapped for their emancipation.

Domination is not the only fact of Viramma's life, her relationship with the landlord and his family was decisive for her on many accounts: economic, social and emotional. She works not only in the fields of her master, but also cleans his cattle shed in the house compound. Even if she was not allowed to enter his house, she had fed the landlord's son at her breast. Besides, whatever be the need, a funeral, a wedding, an ear-piercing ceremony, a sacrifice to the family god, Viramma and Manikkam turn to the master for a loan, a loan which will never match their full expectation, and which will have to be reimbursed in cash, in grain or in working hours, but which appears to them to be the safest solution, if

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sometimes a humiliating one. If domination castsets shadow over almost all aspects of Viramma's life, she has a margin of autonomy *vis-a-vis* the higher castes, which she is free to enjoy when it comes to her caste customs, her culture, and her relationships with her kin, which are so important to her.

What Viramma offers us, in this regard, is a vivid portrait of a woman caught between the traditional compulsions of her status and her quest for managing and expanding her margin of autonomy. Each episode of her life, and each aspect of her identity, has been confined within the space delineated by heavy compulsions but also by her frail autonomy. Successively or simultaneously, she has experienced both as a little girl, an innocent child-bride, a teenage wife, a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law, a mother, and a grandmother. Dalit women are said to be doubly discriminated against: as Dalits, and as women. Viramma, here again, provides a first-person account of what femininity could be.

The portrait she offers combines a very traditional perception of a woman--submissive and obedient, but only up to a point, allied with an, admirable strength for facing the challenges of daily life and assessing, her own rights in the family circle. This balance of strength and weakness is itself a stereotype, but Viramma breathes life into her account of femininity by the mere sincerity of her speech, and by

her capacity to analyze in great detail facts, relationships and feelings. She illuminates her truth, the story of her life, which is the memory of her past, her discovery of sex (terrible at the beginning, enjoyed later), her way to bear children, her care for all of them, cherished even when dead, then partly forgotten, her pride and anguish for the surviving ones, her relationship to her lineage god, to the smallpox goddess, to the spirits and to the exorcists.

In many aspects, Viramma simply believes in what was, or what still is, the standard way to look at serious issues. For instance, she thinks that women, who are unable to bear children, lose both the 'honor and reason for living.' Sterility is perceived as a curse, which, however, does not take away a feeling of compassion for those who are afflicted by it. The suffering of the childless is expressed in Viramma's favorite ballad, the 'Song of the woman who didn't have a child,' often sung when women are bent down, transplanting paddy in the muddy rice fields, along with another favorite and still more tragic ballad, the 'Song of Nallatungal,' in which the heroine prefers to kill her seven children and herself rather than accept the dishonor of being rejected by her in-laws in time of famine.

III Violence has been very much a part of Viramma's experience: the physical violence of a master, the brute force of thugs beating up Dalits on behalf of powerful men with political ambitions, or the violence

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encountered in police stations. But on the whole, what Viramma's life depicts is less the excruciating violence of killings, which draws the attention of the media and which sustains political debates and strategies, than the silent violence of a system of oppression which has worked so intensely and for so long that Viramma herself testifies how it can be internalized by those who have been submitted to its rule. This is the violence of hunger, which Viramma has known in difficult times, and which pushes her to conclude 'today, I live well . . . I live without starving,' as if this basic entitlement were by itself a victory over the shadows of the past. This is the violence of sickness, which killed nine of her twelve children in their prime. This is the violence of words or of gestures, expressed in all possible shades of contempt, when upper-caste landlords, government officers or simple peasants talk to Dalits, or talk about them; the violence of bondage, debt, economic dependence; the violence of a fate of uncertainty; the violence of sex, sometimes proposed and sometimes imposed upon poor women, who are expected to lie down for a little money or for medical care at the local hospital. Finally, it is the subdued, general, and permanent violence that sustains the daily practice of Untouchability; the violence of tradition which gives no consideration to 'Pariahs.'

Viramma's husband, Manikkam, a sympathizer of the local Communist Party

of India, and her son Anban, more influenced by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) rhetoric, bear this out. Both have rebelled in their own ways. Manikkam once opposed a master who beat him in violation of the established code of conduct. His resistance was a protest against the disrespect shown by his landlord's son to the notion of the master's dharma as defined by the traditional order. But Manikkam went further, analyzing the social relationships beyond a specific case of brutality. Commenting upon the reluctance of his master to lease him a small plot of land, he saw the age-old rationale of this refusal: to keep the Paraiyars down in full submission in order to compel obedience and obeisance from them and to ensure the safety and security of the dominant classes.

Viramma's son Anban understands perfectly well how the system works; how economic pressures interact with behavioral rules that have for centuries commanded respect for the powerful and humility in attitude, speech and dress from the dominated. In line with his father, Anban has understood that the powerful do everything to deny his community access to even a scrap of land, and hence access to a little autonomy and a greater sense of dignity. At least in some of his statements, he rejects the old rationale of internalized submission. He sees himself as a worker getting money for his labor, and no more as the Untouchable son of an *adimai*, attached

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for generations to the same landlord family which provides food and clothing at festivals, loans, protection and punishment if needed. All is said in a few words which negate the strong but unequal traditional relationship between high-caste landlords and Dalit laborers: 'They don't feed me, they don't dress me. I don't owe them a thing. I work and they pay for my work. That's all!' Anban goes further than his father Manikkam, and rejects the supposed divine justification of domination: 'Who is this miserable God who made us Pariahs? Why do they become superior and we inferior at birth? Who is this bastard of a God who's done that? If we ever meet him, we'll smash his face in!' (Viramma 191). All this is too much for his mother, who finds her dignity elsewhere.

Viramma was happy to note the improvements brought about to the *ceri* little by little: new house sites, street electricity, and a water cistern. She notes that boys and girls are much better dressed than before, copper vessels are much more visible, and some families in the *ceri* now have one member enjoying a 'sitting job' in town offices, thanks to the places reserved for Dalits in public employment and education. Happy with improvements, Viramma is afraid of emancipation. The ideological shift which has brought limited material progress to the *ceri* worries her. Viramma is afraid of the spread of new ideas and the politicization of the youth, and nervous

about losing the protection of her master, who is more significant to her than the electoral promises of politicians. She fears reprisals and repression from the powerful castes, who are displeased at seeing her community make progress. So she advises her son to remain humble, and she opposes youngsters who—as Anban did once—no longer want to perform their ritual caste duty in the *paraimelam*; she disapproves of the hotheads who argue for only one set of glasses for all castes at the tea stall. Viramma still believes in her caste dharma, which could be easily defined in a few words: acceptance of her social position and respect for the master who feeds his workers. 'People want the world to be one, and everybody to be the same, all with the same rights. That is the *kaliyugam*! It's good that people want us to be raised up, but it's better if we stay in our place' (Viramma 191). To cool down Anban, she found in herself words which occasionally sound strikingly Gandhian. She still believes that respect would bring more than what revolt will, and she satisfies herself with whatever fringe benefits the landlord allows her by letting her use a corner of his fields.

On the other hand, Viramma's life history would largely endorse the analysis of Kathleen Gough (1981), who argued that the socio-cultural world of Dalits offers a worldview distinct from the mainstream ideologies and practices based upon the brahminical model: Dalits, in her

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view, are less inhibited, have a less authoritarian family structure and a broader sense of solidarity. Not that there are no subtle relationships between the Dalit popular culture and the mainstream model—far from it—but Viramma does embody the liveliness and sociability that Gough emphasized (Arnold 269).

Viramma's life history offers an authentic account of a part of Dalitness, not the more publicly articulated part, but rather a part representative of a very large section of Dalits. The book, in English, Tamil and French, received mixed reviews, some very positive, some quite hostile, they illustrate what is at stake: the understanding of the Other. In his perceptive essay *The Flaming Feet*, D.R. Nagaraj has greatly helped to clarify the issue, when he distinguished, amongst Kannada Dalit literature, the 'school of social rage' and the 'school of spiritual quest.' The first category is clear; and Viramma's narrative does not belong to it. The second category is more ambiguous. For all her constant references to gods, spirits and demons, Viramma was hardly engaged in what we might call a spiritual quest. Nagaraj, however, writes, 'The second school has been called the School of Spiritual Quest because it tries to understand the world of Untouchability in terms of metaphysical dismay over the nature of human relationship. The ethos of portrayal of life is not informed by anger and agony, but by a celebration of the joys of life and its

possibilities, which also includes the will to change' (Nagaraj 63). This predicament is much closer to Viramma's vision, even if old Viramma was still afraid of radical change. Conservatives might prefer the second school to the first one. They must, however, be without illusions. Nothing can mask the fact that atrocities against Dalits continue, and that 'the Other,' the despised ones, are moving on the road to emancipation.

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