

Reconnoitering the Caste Violence in David Davidar's "The House of Blue Mangoes"

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Abstract

India is a gallery of languages and literatures and Indian Writing is the familiarity of its folks, their philosophy, convention, and the tactic they lead their existence. Violence is ubiquitous; and its roots are penetrative as well as pervasive in a society. And no society is free of all manifestations of violence. Therefore, it would be simplistic to believe that violence can be rooted out from any society. The renowned sociologist Francis Abraham also holds a similar view. In his book entitled *Modern Sociological Theory: An Introduction*, he says "Social conflicts are inherent in the very nature of social organization; they cannot be eliminated altogether, only their expressions in specific contexts can be resolved" (MST 112). David Davidar is a novelist, publisher, editor and anthropologist in this emerging arena. Always literary minded, Davidar published short stories and poems in newspapers and literary magazines. In 2002, he published his debut novel, *The House of Blue Mangoes*. David Davidar lavishly communicates a sense of place and skillfully explores the confluence of home, identity, and family ties. He throws light on a gripping family Saga in which he focuses on the caste conflicts in the Indian diaspora.

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1. Introduction

Functions of violence are to be studied with reference to the caste violence portrayed in David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes*. It is a novel that depicts conflict and violence in various contexts as they occur in a society: at home, in politics and on the socio-cultural plane. Among the various types of violence portrayed in the novel, the one caste which dominated other caste. The two dominant castes that lived in Chevathar are the Andavars, to which Solomon belonged and the Vedhar had a history of strife. The Dorai family had kept caste violence out of the village for generations. An ugly incident breaks out in Chevathar was two girls Valli, aged thirteen, soon to be married and the other a year younger on their way to the fair were attacked and raped and on the granite outcrop someone had scrawled: "remember the 1859 breast wars. If low-caste dogs do not know their place, their wives and sisters will soon remind them of it." (HBM 18)

The Chevathar caste clashed were typical of the time especially before the advent of World War I. Chevathar like any other village in the area, was rigidly ordered by caste strictures and traditions. Paraiyan (untouchable) who become Christians and joined the Anglican Church in the hope of being liberated from clutches of untouchability. The polluting classes would have to comply with the rules as far as possible. Their shadows would not fall on the upper castes; they would continue to take off their turbans in the presence of the superior caste fellows. They should not approach villagers of the highest caste closer than thirty-two paces, and their lunges should always be folded above the knee. The last strife that struck the town was the Breast War of 1859. The platform for this conflict was the dress code the castes had to follow:

One of the social customs to be challenged was the dress: hitherto tradition had ordained that the various members of the caste tree should bare their breasts as a sign of deference and subservience to those who perched higher in the branches.

Accordingly the untouchables went bare-breasted before the Pallans, the Pallans before the Nairs and so on until the Namboothiri Brahmins who deferred only to their deities. (HBM 19)

It was also a time when the Christian missionaries were promoting concepts like equality, which, in a way, awakened the sense of dignity in the non-Brahmins, which they never had enjoyed till then; and it also kindled an urge in them to resist the oppressive forces. At the urge of the Christian missionaries Andavar and Nadar women began to cover their breasts. This led to an outbreak of violence among upper castes. Andavar and Nadar women who clothed themselves were abused in public and beaten by upper caste people. Finally, unable to bear the torment the middle-ranking castes went too far. The land lord of Travancore had declared, 'We have a divine right to gaze upon your filthy breasts and you should be flattered that we do so. They are ours to enjoy. Whenever benefits your new faith bestows upon you, this is not one of them.' (HBM 19)

Such outrages acts of the men of the upper caste set up riots in the town. In retaliation, in Kilanadu, the Andavar women were disrobed by the men of the Vedhar community. Retribution was swift. A band of Andavar toughs went on the rampage, looting and burning houses in the Vedhar quarter. Riots tore through the area following the outrage. Despite the royal government stepping in to ease the situation but tension continued to simmer in the kingdom and in the adjacent districts of Madras Presidency, which shared a long, porous border with Travancore. In January 1859, violence exploded throughout Travancore. The authority of the state stripped some Nadar women of their upper garments. Rioting broke out and lasted for days. The next to be targeted were Andavar women in Melur, the capital of Kilanad district, who were similarly disrobed.

As if another link to this chain of violence, in the nearby town of Nagercoil, a mob of men armed with weapons attacked the

Christian Andavars by “burning and looting and stripping the breast clothes and bodices of the women (HBM 20)”. After immeasurable. Humiliation and bloodshed in various quarters, that the Travancore Maharajah would not be able to sort out the problem, missionaries and other concerned citizens petitioned the supreme authority in the south. The situation was brought under control by the British Governor who prohibited the stripping of women. The breast war provided an outlet for the affected communities like Andavar and Nadar, which were seething with anger at their humiliation. The infamous war had to be fought to thwart the custom that had taken a very deep root in tradition. Since the evil seeped through the communal tiers of the society, and since, no community was fit to set the system right, the interference of an external agency became essential to control the situation put an end to the humiliating practice. The memory of the 1859 Breast Wars was burned into the minds of all those castes that were affected. Now it seemed that someone was trying to revive those terrible days.

After the Breast war, Chevathar enjoyed peace for some time. Nevertheless, the place was prone to caste violence and contained a lurking disquiet. The new road proclamation had increased the problem between the Andavars and the Vedhars. At first everyone in Chevathar had welcomed the idea of a pukka road, except Solomon who very well knows about the problem caused by new road. Muthu Vedhar, Vakeel Perumal and the priests of the Murugan temple argues for the importance of road. To find a solution for this, Dipty Vedhar had summoned representatives from the major caste groups – the tiny Brahmin community, the Andavars and the Vedhars to a meeting. The Paraiyans as always excluded from the meeting. Finally Solomon agreed to construct a new road and the road would pass through the Vedhar quarter, and also skirt Vakeel Perumal’s house and the Murugan temple. Solomon mulled over the various problems created by the new road. All through the summer of its construction he had felt a sense of foreboding. Within a year of its inauguration, there were at least a couple of incidents directly linked to the road.

During the Pongal festival, a group of young girls had been molested by drunken youths who had crossed the bridge and wandered into the village. And four months later, a Paraiyan had been almost to death by some Vedhar men for daring to stroll through their quarter, blithely smoking a beedi, with his turban firmly on his head rather than around his waist as was customary in the presence of the higher castes. Solomon had lived on this land all his life, as his family had for generations before him, and he respected its customs and traditions. He always kept Chevathar from of caste conflict. This situation was exploited by Vakeel Perumal to instigate the second bout of violence. He had a couple of reasons to trigger off the clash. He had the vested interest to promote himself to a significant position in the village; and secondly, he wanted to avenge the Vedhars for humiliating the Andavar men who tried to enter the temple. He made his first attempt on the Panguni Uthiram day and when this failed, Vakeel Perumal converted himself to Christianity with a cunning plan. Also with a heinous intention, he consecrated a small shrine of Chris opposite to his house on the other side of the road. On the day of Chitira Pournami festival, he blocked the path of the procession by putting up a pandal across the road connecting the Jesus shring and his house. This lead to the most violent outbreak in Chevathar.

Again the caste conflict arise when the upper-caste Muthu Vedhar insults Solomon, the thalaivar of the village in public

meeting during the Chitra Pournami procession by spitting on him thus giving vent to his old hostilities and jealousies. Solomon quietly absorbs this public insult and refuses to retaliate. Yet Muthu Vedhar lunges upon him for a physical assault and it is only now that Solomon acts, maneuvering to get an upper hand and by telling him:

You big black buffalo, for all these years I have tolerated you and other jackals that work for you because I have tried to keep the peace. You have insulted me before the village and for that you will pay. I will give you and all those who owe you allegiance a month to leave. If you haven’t gone by then I will personally make sure that you’ll wish you had never emerged from your prostitute mother’s womb. (HBM 78)

Once Solomon hurls the challenge at his adversary, Muthu Vedhar in the heat of the moment, the latter not only turns belligerent but snarls back: “I said I would reduce you to dust and I will you to dust. I am not leaving this village, it’s you and your stinking family who will leave or be destroyed.” (HBM 78) This was the moment of destiny and subsequently the destructive consequences become an inevitable corollary. It is now a question of personal honour and dignity for both, and however much Solomon wished to reverse the course of events in the interest of peace in the village and he is powerless to do so. Now for both the sides’ survival of family and community can only be at the cost of the other. It is essentially an either/or situation rendering co-existence impossible. Attempts to mediate peace by the reverend priest, Father Ashworth, or by the District Collector have no effect in reversing the situation. In all this it must be observed that it was Solomon who had shown utmost forbearance and that he was reasonable all through. And the cunning people like Vakeel Perumal who fan out conflagration from the smouldering embers. Solomon Dorai, the village headman, is helplessly caught in the conflagration in spite of his deepest concern for peace.

On 6 June 1899, the most devastating riots had exploded. The Presidency had ever seen ravaged the town of Sivakasi in the neighboring district. Tensions escalated once more in Chevathar. Muthu Vedhar sent Solomon Dorai an ultimatum, “He should leave the village by sundown on 15 June or he would feel the wrath of the Vedhars” (HBM 80). Solomon’s response was to thrash the messenger until he could barely stand. He was then told to repeat the ultimatum to his master in slightly altered form – “if Muthu was in Chevathar after 15 June, he would regret it” (HBM 80). This was the response Muthu had expected and he began to make preparations. Emissaries were sent to the various caste groups who supported him in the neighbouring villages – the Marudars, Pallans, Thevars – to come and join him. Muthu also had a stormy meeting with his kinsman, Dipty Vedhar and warned him to not invene the conflict.

Through the past sixty four years, a rivalry between the leading family, the Dorais, and the one that challenged it for supremacy, namely, the Vedhars existed. The attempt by the two Andavar men to enter the Murugan temple, retribution in the form of the rape of the Andavar girl, her subsequent suicide, the Chitra Pournami confrontation, and the impending battle scheduled for 15 June conflict. As the Collector commented, “They lived together for generations, grumbling away like an old couple, and occasionally there’ll be a little scuffle that allows both sides to let off steam”(HBM 91).Further, “Muthu is not the only problem. A general sorrow has come over the land. Drought, taxes, unrest. It seems as though the evening of the world is

upon us..." (HBM 102). The people must purge themselves of all these pent up emotions. The lurking animosity between the two individuals reached its maximum intensity. It must now explode and ramify into a caste war, through which either of them could establish his supremacy afresh. But at the end of the war, there was the disintegration of Chevathar. However, this decade of deterioration seems to be needed to make both Andavars and Vedhars realize the importance of peace.

Lewis Coser in his book *The Functions of Social Conflict* discusses two types of conflicts namely, "realistic conflicts" and "non-realistic conflicts". To quote him,

Conflicts which arise from frustration of specific demands within the relationship and from estimates of gains of the participants, and which are directed at the presumed frustrating object, can be called realistic conflicts, in so far as they are means towards a specific result. Non-realistic conflicts, on the other hand, although still involving interaction between two or more persons, are not occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of at least one on them. In this case the choice of antagonists depends on determinants not directly related to a continuous issue and is not oriented toward the attainment of specific results (HBM 48).

The caste conflict unleashed on the Chitira Pournami day is a realistic conflict as well as a non-realistic one. The violence was triggered off by Vakeel Perumal to let off the steam he had contained regarding the humiliation of some Andavar men in the Murugan temple. When the initial attempt failed Vakeel set out once again with more determination mixed with his thirst for recognition in the new place. As with Muthu Vedhar, he had to take the challenge thrown by Solomon Dorai; and as with Solomon Dorai, he had to guard the peace of the village, he being the thalaivar. But for the Vakeel baiting them into the fight, both Muthu and Solomon would not have cared for a violent fight of the magnitude of the one that was fought. And also, there was general deterioration, a general frustration in Chevathar due to non-personal reasons. The death of the girl happened at a time, which would beckon outbreaks as Solomon rightly foresees:

Happening as it did, in an anxious time, in an idle time, before the fields could be prepared, in a desperate time when the entire land simmered with frustration and hate, her death transformed her from an insignificant girl without affiliation... into a weapon that would deepen the division and rancor within the village. (HBM 48)

Father Ashworth put all his efforts to stop the madness of caste conflict. He approached Charity, wife of Solomon Dorai, and tries to console her to prevent violence among Andavars. And Charity's reply for this really shook him. Charity says, 'When Valli was attacked, I was terrified. Not so much for myself but for my daughter Rachel. It could so easily have been her...' (HBM 107). And she says nothing is in her hand. Father Ashworth approached other women in the village to stop the impending conflict. But all his efforts become futile. He prays to Lord Jesus to prevent the conflict. And he says "Enter me, O Lord Most High, and show me in your wisdom what I must do to stop this madness" (HBM 110).

Finally the caste war began, Muthu Vedhar brings the Marudars who were dirty, malnourished and dressed in tattered lungis, banians and turbans but they were just what he needed. The Marudars didn't fight for the principle. All that fuelled them was greed. It was good thing they were on his side, not Solomon's. A child was the first person who enters into the

battle of Chevathar. He died the day before the actual fighting began. The Vedhar Children challenged the Andavar children to a game of goodu-goodu. In its classical version, each team would try and eliminate the opposition by one of two methods - either by attempting to tag as many members of the opposite team as possible while continuously chanting goodu-goodu or by capturing an attacker who enter their territory. The children who played in the game ranged from seven to twelve but the fury with which they fought would have done justice to their fathers. And for the first time, the teams were selected according to caste. This incident becomes a basement for huge controversy.

Vedhars once again assembled at the Murugan temple for their final prayer. Muthu Vedhar exhorted them to emulate the fearless warrior like Arjuna who had fought with no thought of friend, kinsman or neighbor. And he instructs to remember Lord Krishna said on the battle field to Arjuna:

"There is nothing more welcome for a warrior
Then a righteous war..."

Die and you will enter heaven

Conquer, and you will enjoy the sovereignty of earth..." (HBM 117)

Andavar and Vedhar community people ready for their conquer. At a signal from the Vedhar chief, firearms began popping, their sound rendered insignificant by the vastness of sea and sand. There was huge bloodshed in Chevathar. There were men dying on the sands, were Vedhar, Andavar, Marudar people who are all lived with, laughed with and worshipped in Chevathar. The death of Father Ashworth shocked and bemused the villagers. In the battle Muthu was dead before Solomon and Solomon who fell by the side of his great enemy. Their madness on caste made a huge impact on Chevathar.

After Solomon gets killed, his wife Charity and son Daniel went to their maternal grandfather's house in Nagarcoil. Solomon's Younger son Aaron stays back in Chevathar. Thus much of the hatred and hostility between the upper-caste Vedhars and low-caste Andavars in Chevathar could be traced to the generations of old caste prejudices. Solomon Dorai helplessly goes down fighting for their defense of their family home. This was the situation in Chevathar in the closing years of the nineteenth century. As someone who sanctioned the killing of other men just because they belong to another caste. This brings nothing to the world, but it only brings disappointment, sorrow and poverty alone.

To conclude, the caste violence depicted in *The House of Blue Mangoes* has performed a cathartic as well as catalytic function. Whenever the society or the individual was heaving with suppressed emotion as it happened in the case of Vakeel Perumal, Solomon Dorai, Muthu Vedhar and Aaron, they had let their steam off through violence. It had been indeed an annihilating experience. Nevertheless, the surge of discontentment and frustration would have naturally found an outlet. The best could be achieved in such a situation was the resurrection of Chevathar with great integration and internal solidarity.

References

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