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“We are Working for a Caste-free India”: An Interview with M. M. Vinodini

by Bonnie Zare

Abstract

The present interview with M.M. Vinodini extends the context of her two stories printed in this issue, “Block” and “Villain’s Suicide” and the contemporary context for Telugu Dalit women writers. It enables readers to consider the combination of factors that must align for a woman and therefore, a secondary citizen of a severely stigmatized community to take action and protest through activist organizing and creative storytelling. Discrimination, self-respect, and assertion are repeated themes in Vinodini’s body of work and here she discusses changing views of caste among young people, the reception of her work, the ongoing mistreatment of sanitation workers, caste’s operations in a Covid pandemic online educational context, and how anti-caste activism and feminism must come together.

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste, discrimination, feminism, women writers, protest literature.

Interview

The writer, scholar, and activist M.M. Vinodini was born in 1969 in Guntur, coastal Andhra Pradesh. Her grandfather was an agricultural laborer in the fields and he converted to Christianity. Her father was a teacher, and although her mother had not gone to school he taught her to how to read from the bible. Vinodini attended a Telugu medium school and was the 4th of 5 children. The rest were not able to finish their education, but she earned her doctorate in Telugu and teaches at Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa. Vinodini is married to artist Khaja Vinod Husseni, and they have one daughter.

Bonnie Zare

1 Bonnie Zare is a Professor of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on discourses of identity, feminism and activism in contemporary India and in South Asian women’s fiction. Zare’s articles have appeared in Women’s Studies International Forum, Humanity and Society, and South Asian Review among others. With Nalini Iyer, she is the co-editor of Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India. Founder of The Keep Girls in School Project, she collaborates with organizations to secure the future of low-income girls in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.
Vinodini has made a name for herself in Dalit-feminist literary circles and among activists. She is a multi-genre writer, including short stories, poetry and literary criticism that revises the classical Telugu literary tradition. Her most widely anthologized works include the poem “All Indians are My Brothers and Sisters” and the short story “Maria.” Her works including her play Thirst (Oxford University Press) are required reading at the University of Hyderabad (Telangana), Manonmaniam Sundaranar University (Tamil Nadu), and Mahatma Gandhi University, (Kerala). She has received many awards including the Somasunder Sahithhee Puruskaram award, the Potti Sreeraamulu Telugu University Literary Award, and the Andhra Pradesh government’s prestigious Ugadi Pratibha Puraskaram Award for Literature.

BZ: Let’s begin in ancient times with words passed down through the generations. The first reference to caste comes from an origin story found in one of the oldest known sacred texts, the Rig Veda: “From his [the divine spirit’s] mouth came forth/ The men of learning (Brahmins)/ And of his arms/
Were warriors (Kshatriyas) made/ From his thighs came/ The trading people (Vaishya)
And his feet gave/ Birth to servants (Shudra)…”
Tell me more about how this verse is understood by Dalit community members when discussing it today.

V: As you know, Brahman is the mouth of Purusha [God]. So we say Brahmins won’t work, just speak. Thighs only sit just as most merchants are sitting or squatting on the ground, doing the accounts and doing business with people. The shudra are feet. We need feet. We can’t receive wealth without walking, without someone to gather things. Thus the shudra are everyone’s very livelihood. It almost feels like, by contrast, the outcastes come from the genitals of the gods, from the waste and urine of the gods, so they must clean that up. The outcastes have to eat dead animals’ meat and are supposedly no better than these things you see because they are made of these things in the common imagination.

Since Dalits are as low as dirt in Hinduism, in areas such as Maharashtra there were mass conversions to Buddhism. In Andhra Pradesh, the lower castes are all Christian. Why? Because Jesus appears to be a lower-caste god. He stands with his head to one side, he weeps. Compare him with Ram, the warrior, with his arrow drawn, always ready for a fight.

BZ: That’s a really interesting comparison. I want to think about that some more in the future.
Of course, I know you’ve observed a lot of antipathy around you. I remember you sharing with me about how, growing up, you saw a lot of dominant caste people showing a disdainful attitude and poor treatment towards your community.

V: Yes, when upper caste people would enter our house they would shrink away as if we and our space are contaminating them. In rural parts there is visible discrimination; in towns and cities, the discrimination is present but less visible. We were raised with the separation of the classes – no temple entry, no services to our area, no access to the reliable nearby wells for water. That’s why we seek a post-Brahminical era.

BZ: You’ve obviously fought hard not to internalize this social exclusion. Tell me a bit more about how an older understanding of caste gave way to a new understanding of caste and more and more people have engaged in self-assertion.

V: I teach Ambedkar and this notion of freedom to my Telugu lit students. We are working for a caste-free India. So, yes, I am an activist both inside and outside the classroom. I fought untouchability practices for six years in villages in Telangana. I founded youth sangats/centers. I took activist youths and formed youth groups. I also formed non-Dalit groups to curb these practices. It took much time to talk to them to develop rational thinking, I arranged so many meetings. With non-Dalit people, the first step is to sensitize them. What actually happens when Dalits enter a temple?

BZ: As in, do lightning bolts come down?

V: Right. Nothing happens! Nothing. In my father’s generation, there was less resistance and more resignation because so many fell for Gandhiism. Gandhi is a thief. He mesmerized people and they bought into his whole system of thinking. In today’s time, it’s completely different. We have grown much bolder from Ambedkar’s writing. Filled with the spirit of Ambedkarism, naturally, most Dalit writers are also activists.

BZ: I know you’re an activist in your classroom as well as in the field. Will you elaborate for our readers?

V: Before I was a professor I was out in the field as an activist in Mahabubnagar, Telangana from 2000-2005. I worked as the head of an anti-discrimination project for nearly five years. There were two main issues, untouchability and the jogini system, which can be found across the state of Telangana but is quite prevalent in Mahabubnagar. The jogini ritual is that a young girl is selected to serve the goddess Yellama as per superstition that such a sacrifice is needed, but then for the rest of the year, she is forced to be a prostitute for the area near the temple. In these villages we used to perform songs and street plays regarding the sexual exploitation and vulnerability of the girl: we tried to show that this is nothing but a village setting up an official prostitute. Once the audience awakens to the issue, we then ask for their support to stop these practices. We would recruit volunteers from the audience and form a village committee from the crowd itself. This process was repeated across the whole district. I played a crucial part in designing and working on this program.
BZ: Of course, your writing also creates a desire for change, a belief that the current situation is unacceptable. Many of your stories, including the ones reprinted here “Block” and “Villain’s Suicide” critique the existing conditions of society. They speak truth to power. Tell me, what reactions have you received?

V: Honestly, for almost all my stories, I had to face difficulties. Any story that questioned the functioning of the society and the governance systems always draws a certain amount of flak. My main objective has been to point to the missing morality in the government, it's social functioning in contrast with what the Constitution of India promises.

Many attacks my works and stories on these lines by pointing out I’m from a Christian family. They demand to know why I write about the denigration of people I supposedly do not identify with, who are supposedly not my community. Actually, the absence of a bindi on our foreheads and the other ornaments of a traditional Hindu woman makes it easy for others to recognize us and subject us to Dalit caste identity. Though I identify myself as Christian, what this translates into for the average person I meet is that I am solely a Dalit. My Christianity does not prevent my Dalitness from being the salient factor “seen” by others.

BZ: Both these stories put us inside the minds of rural women who do grueling work outside each day. They contrast with the way village life is romanticized, whether by Bollywood directors or Gandhians, as being girls roaming around in green fields among fruit and heaps of grain.

V: True, my generation very much opposes that sort of imagery. Ambedkar specifically called to Dalit people to come out from villages to towns. Be a part of town life because discrimination is practiced less strictly there. He said villages were dens of superstition. 10-20% of life can be designed by you in towns, you have more flexibility as a low-caste person.

BZ: Villages are dens of superstition, and, as we see in “Villain’s Suicide”, places of rape. The villain of the title is a landowning farmer who behaves criminally towards the main character Devamani and since the food cultivator is often ennobled, many readers will not expect this. Is it based on something you watched growing up?

V: Not specifically. There are many stories like this across India in Dalit ghettos and farming areas. It’s not the story of one specific girl but a universal story. We come across hundreds and thousands of Devamanis.

BZ: I know you write with pen and paper first and only type later. What were you thinking of when you first put pen to paper for “Villain’s Suicide”?

V: A Dalit philosophical perspective and Dalit literature teach you it is legitimate to perceive the world from Dalit identity. I was thinking about how a person with Devamani’s experiences perceives the world around her. If you were in this situation, you would have constant questions about who and what you are. Your access to resources is so limited, and your sense of yourself is not just as a woman but as rural, as not able to read or write. All of these identities merge in Devamani. If Devamani thinks from this place, it will be clear to her who the villains are in her
life. This would be the farmer. The fact that the farmer is the backbone of the country is secondary to her. To the larger group, it is devastating that another farmer has ended his life, but for Devamani it is a great stroke of luck.

BZ: Now let’s consider the short story “Block.” It’s a one-of-a-kind story, and yet you tell me you’ve had trouble getting it published?

V: Yes, editors tell me, people don’t want to read about bodily processes like that – it’s too disgusting. They don’t have trouble with sensational stories about women who are raped but they don’t want to think about soil. I wrote the story “Block” because society still has a “block” about manual scavengers – they don’t see or register them. In the story that I’ve written, I’ve shown the most menial kind of employment that is possible for a Dalit Woman. Manual scavenging that takes place in an unsafe and unsanitary manner leading to a lot of health consequences, and I tried to capture this.

BZ: What do you think is most important for readers to take away from “Block”?

V: The reader must answer that question. But it brings to us the unimaginable circumstances and kind of work this woman is doing daily. It is despicable toil – using your right hand, with which you bring food to your mouth, to remove someone else’s feces and then carrying the dripping remains to your head and moving to the next place. That is the kind of degradation a Dalit woman must face in a country like India. That is the most important part to convey to the world. I want the reader to see how the country has established this caste or varna system that puts people in this place, and I want people to see her as similar to themselves.

BZ: That’s exactly how I felt about it. I was moving alongside her, gathering the soiled clumps, stooping over.

V: Yes, and I had to expose the cruelty people show to one another, in this case, women from the Dalit community. For example, 10 or 50 rupees (68 cents in USD) is not much to many dominant caste people. Yet despite having a comfortable lifestyle, people still bargain with the helper or the vegetable vendor on the roadside. This becomes even more explicit when they interact with the most marginalized sections of society. Even if a maid does not show up for one day, people try to deduct from her salary even though she is only getting one thousand rupees ($13 in USD) a month. In the case of a toilet cleaner like Jilakaramma, we see this habit takes on a vicious hue. Beating her, tearing money out of her hands, ripping her clothes. We must not look away from the exploitation of these workers.

BZ: What are the various other professions that are available for Dalit women in India? What work do you see opening up for Dalit women now and in the future?

Other jobs are sweepers of roads and canal sewer cleaners; above that are agricultural laborers. There are also unskilled industrial workers. All of these people work in dust and sand and hazardous areas. They constantly work at tiring labor in dangerous work environments yet the general society doesn't see this work as onerous or as needing respect. On the contrary, the upper
castes see these jobs as degrading. This is the current situation of Dalit women. If the Brahminal mindset continues, which sees Dalit women as naturally occupying these positions, rural Dalit women will continue to end up in these kinds of jobs in perpetuity.

BZ: Continuing to consider how these workers are denied dignity, can you comment on the pandemic conditions? I know there has been a push from the government on a national level to create awareness and respect for the professions of front-line workers, care providers, essential non-technical services like sweepers, cleaners, and so forth. In this context, have you seen people changing their attitudes towards these professions and the Dalit women doing this work?

V: The Central government has tried to create awareness about the frontline workers in recent times. But the intent behind this is important. Given the desperate need for this work to be done, they were not left with anything to do but admit the importance of these workers. It’s superficial, rather than being motivated by mindset change. For instance, often the entire hospital staff, which includes medical workers but also cleaners, are honored with flowers in a photo opportunity outside the front of the hospital, but if you look behind the scenes the workers receive nothing while they are doing the labor itself. Those who are inside sweeping the hospitals once outside would not be given a sip of water if they were thirsty. Worse, these people were looked at as synonymous with the disease. From the beginning, they have worked with trash and the minute Covid-19 entered this only added another burden, another layer of germs and dirt for them to contend with, and that also became associated with them.

Let me give you another example of how this works. Beginning in March 2020, the lockdown was called overnight. It was very abrupt and alcohol sales were instantly shut down for three months. When the state governments reopened them, in great need of the alcohol tax money, for the first few days, the lines were very long. The police were told to monitor the lines to keep order. But they needed more personnel so the K-12 teachers were reassigned to help the police control the crowds. At this time a huge amount of sanitation work had been left undone, but teachers were not assigned to do this work. Emergency cleaning is always in a different category altogether. We cannot forget this. This kind of work done by Dalit people is seen as part of their duty given by Manav Dharma Shastra [the sacred Laws of Manu], not as work democratically distributed.

BZ: Recently Aishwarya Reddy’s suicide made headlines. This young woman from Telangana, as you know, was studying mathematics at Lady Sri Ram College of Delhi and took her own life after she could not get a place in the hostel or a reliable phone to do her work despite being a student on an INSPIRE scholarship from the Indian government. Have you seen many similar problems as an instructor?

V: The core problem is that technology is not democratized. It appears as if everyone has changed to online and high-tech, but it is fundamentally the same old system: access is still very

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2 Manu Dharmashastra often referred to as Manusmriti and translated in English as The Laws of Manu, is a sacred guide to living. It is estimated that it was passed down from 500 BCE onwards. It, along with the Dharmasutras, has some of the starkest pronouncements about subjugating the lower castes and women. Famously B R Ambedkar burned a copy at the Mahad convention in 1927.
limited. While most people in Dalit communities have some access to mobile phones, it is difficult to gain productive use of them. Not all families can afford access to these devices and only a few members may have full or even partial access. There’s a kind of visible modernity: boys wear jeans and hold phones but that doesn’t mean their intellect is being stimulated. Of high concern is that girls don’t have access to smartphones, tablets, or computers. The phones are generally used by boys to access music or humor videos, sometimes porn, while they are working on construction sites or farms. For most, the phone is an achievement and a status symbol they can barely afford which brings them recreation, not a chance to expand their mind. Boys sometimes hold their families hostage to buy them a phone or threaten to steal money from their parents. The majority of girls suffer owing to a patriarchal mindset that believes girls must be protected from phones, from bad influences such as boys chatting online with them. Girls’ education is suffering simply because of their gender.

BZ: Are there also social consequences to the move to online education?

V: Yes, definitely. For example, when you are missing, others think your phone must have run out of data and you must be poor, and people look down on you. Before, coming to the college campus was a unifying factor. College offers people a different kind of language: not a drunk father and a shouting mother and an unreliable power supply. Now classes show us home backgrounds are very different. The upper caste students can look the same whether in class or online in terms of clothes and backgrounds whereas the Dalit students cannot. The daily wage labor awaits them before and after their studies but that is not the case with upper-caste students.

BZ: I’ve learned a lot from you over the years about which issues are worthy of time and attention. I know earlier when I interviewed you in 2013 you told me Dalit women must fight for their men to be equal first before taking up the feminist battle. However, I understand now you have come to see feminism as integral to anti-caste activism, is that so?

V: Yes. When I was still a student I saw them as separate. Despite what I said in 2013, thinking back to my college days I was more actually attached to feminist philosophy. We had easy access to it through Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. By contrast, people were not familiar with Ambekdar’s speech Annihilation of Caste in the same way. This was a short period in my life. Once we realized the social conditions, we came into the fold of Dalit philosophy and that’s because we live in Dalit neighborhoods or ghettos with Dalit men, and men must be incorporated in the movement for social change. To my mind, feminism is willing to put forward actions that do not take into account men’s presence. Yet we have to live with Dalit men in Dalit ghettos, not live with Dalit women.

BZ: Do you see a gender divide in activist communities and Dalit activist circles? Are there internal disagreements as to how much of a priority to put on feminism? For example, when the recent Hathras rape case occurred, people do become outraged and the patterns of violence against women are urgently discussed. But in lesser moments do you find the same attention?

V: India has had a tradition of labeling feminists as male-bashers. But over the past ten years, more ideas have circulated and there is a lot more clarity. Questioning both patriarchal and
casteist thought is what constitutes Dalit feminism. In recent times, a lot of feminists are approaching Dalit feminists to work side by side, to collaborate. With a case like Hathras, many feminists have come forward and recognized caste as the main perpetrator in this particular crime. Dalit feminists have played a huge role to bring the groups together and owing to this, a lot of progress has been made amongst feminists who were not aware of caste issues actively before. Even Dalit men have contributed to this shift by drawing prominence to caste issues so well.

Truly the change needs to come from the government’s side; however, Manu’s way of thinking is entrenched in the government’s way of thinking. The same dominant caste line of thought can be seen even in the states that are not run by the BJP or Hindutva ideology. Take the rape and murder of a Hyderabad doctor that occurred in December of 2019 when the perpetrators were then killed by the police rather than being brought to trial. Even though it was a case of vigilante justice, most people were happy. These perpetrators were from the lower caste. We find in many cases when the rapists are upper caste and the victim is lower caste, the perpetrators are not even arrested. In fact, rallies are held to defend their name, and the police actually protect people at the rallies, ordered by the government to do so. At absolute worst, women are merely “public space” for men to “relieve” themselves. Men feel that they have immediate access to Dalit women regardless of consent from the woman. This sort of hypocrisy and protection of caste privilege can be found across all the states.

BZ: In May 2020 George Floyd lost his life in the US at the hands of the police. This unleashed a new abolitionist struggle protest and far greater Black Lives Matter activism. Oftentimes the US struggle against racism or anti-blackness has helped to energize people fighting Savarna or dominant caste privilege with the Black Panthers in the 1960s and Dalit Panthers in the 1970s being one of the clearest examples. Recently, activism in India has gained momentum using #Dalit Lives Matter or other references to the shared struggle against systematic oppression enacted by police and others. As a Dalit activist, what have you observed about these parallels?

V: From my perspective, after the recent George Floyd incident, we have seen a lot of white people coming out on the roads in support of the black community. They have opposed the police treatment and desired justice so that the perpetrators will not be allowed to get away with his death. This proves a level of sensitization happening in American society. But you cannot see a similar kind of reaction happening in the Indian scenario. The composition of Dalit Lives Matter is not the same as what is occurring in Black Lives Matter protests. You do not see similar support across groups since there are still a lot of people following religious texts that sanction superstition and this stratification. Even now we see a lot of video content across WhatsApp and other social media that tells women they will gain religious merit by serving their husbands. It’s hard to imagine the kind of response you have seen in the post-Floyd protests relating to Black Lives Matter.

We don’t see even 1-2% of the upper caste people protesting in this way, and more people in the tier above the Dalits need to be involved too. It’s not enough for Dalits to protest atrocities – it is only once people who are educated come out in large numbers then we will perhaps see the fundamental change that is needed.
BZ: Over the past ten years many US universities have been investing in changing the campus climate by appointing a division addressing discrimination and offering programs on diversity and inclusion. This effort is neither perfect nor always deep, yet at least comparatively more attention is paid to addressing the thoughts of students who are mixing with a more varied community for the first time. Students are encouraged to recognize their degree of privilege and consider actions that build systemic patterns of discrimination. What are the chances of having a parallel set of actions or a University division to address caste inequality? Might this kind of proposal be successful?

V: It’s a good idea. There’s already sensitization happening regarding gender and we are able to convince a lot of people to move the needle in terms of their awareness of gender injustice. This is possible at many levels – at colleges, organizations, and institutions. People who request a workshop be given on gender are treated with respect. But when it comes to caste sensitization, the people demanding it are solely people who are victims of casteism. Making this request is scary because then their caste is exposed and could be a target on their backs. Disadvantages await them. There would also be a rebuttal from the institution for questioning their anti-casteism and implicating they are imposing a Brahminical framework.

BZ: Oh, I see. So you are suggesting it is similar to University administrators in the US unthinkingly upholding white supremacy.

V: Yes, and likely such a move in India would be limited by an uneven implementation. Caste sensitization only happens among the downtrodden people, and it fails to address the people who actually need to hear it.

The US push towards sensitization – I’ve seen a video from a United States church where all the whites got up to apologize for atrocities their ancestors had committed on their families in the past. It was a short but powerful video.

BZ: You don’t think that kind of situation would occur in India today?

V: No, I don’t think so. It would be ideal if this kind of program were implemented in India, and there are many modules addressing these issues. Even I try to create this in the classroom with various interactive methods but institutionalizing it would give stronger results. All institutions should take this up. Ideally, this would be a mandatory course.

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