

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Viramma

Introduction

Viramma belongs to the Paraiyar ('pariah') caste, the lowest of the low in the local hierarchy, who live in virtual bondage to the upper castes in her village. She and her husband have no land and almost no money. Nine of her 12 children die before her. Her hardship is leavened by the pleasure she takes in the oral and performance culture all around her. We also learn about the many forces that determine her life, including gods and goddesses, interactions between castes, modernisation and political initiatives to reduce poverty and caste inequality.

Viramma tells her own stories, or episodes, which the anthropologists who befriended her stitch together into a single narrative, which is then translated from French to English. The joins may sometimes show but not often and the result is a raw and vivid portrayal of a life lived by millions of Indians today.

Themes

social status and life-history; agency in oral autobiography; oral vs written autobiography

Essay Questions

1 Viramma told her story to two French anthropologists, one of whom also spoke her mother tongue of Tamil. They transcribed those interviews and edited them into a book, which they translated into French. You have read the English translation of that translation. To what extent has Viramma's story, as published in print, been influenced by its oral telling and by the process of its production?

2 Viramma is a Paraiyar (fem.Paratchi), an Untouchable or Dalit, the lowest level of the caste system. Throughout the book she interacts with other castes, especially the 'Grand Reddiar', who is the highest caste. Describe how this book helps you to understand the caste system in India.

3 Although Viramma and her family are dominated by others, both her husband and her son Amban rebel against domination. Outsiders and government schemes also represent scope for change. How does Viramma understand and cope with her situation? And what hope for emancipation from caste oppression is found in her story?

Reading

Viramma: Life of an Untouchable

Supplementary Readings

osine and Rosine, 'Beyond silence'

Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable*

Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Side of the Moon*

Anand, *Untouchable*