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Short Story: "Villain's Suicide"

By M. M. Vinodini¹
Translated by Afsar Mohammed²

Abstract

As B.R. Ambedkar stated in *Annihilation of Caste*, day laborers only suffer grueling labor on subsistence wages owing to their terror of punishment given to those who question it. This story reminds readers that so-called ritual impurity or untouchability has never stopped non-privileged caste people from being violated through touch and sexual abuse. The agitation over the 2012 Delhi gang rape and the more recent revelations of #MeToo occur amidst a long history of low-income Dalit women and girls routinely facing rape and other forms of repeated sexual assault from powerful landowners whose word can stop or start their wages. This story allows us to listen to the conversations and internal monologue of two day laborers, both of whom struggle on a non-living wage. Devamani waits for her abuse to end, hoping the next generation will not be treated as a spittoon for men's bodily fluids. Meanwhile her friend Suguna finds the only way possible to feed her extended family.

Keywords: Dalit women, Sexual assault, Day laborers, Delhi gang rape, Caste

Short Story, "Villain's Suicide", M.M. Vinodini

Devamani straightened up her right knee. She was glued to her rope-cot like a mud-covered sandal with several thorns stuck in it. Trapped and sleepy. Meanwhile, up above her knee, she felt something—that her entire body was flattened, and now someone was pushing it. She sat bolt upright.

Raghuram Reddi. Walking into the dark night. Like a sandal in a dog's mouth, he had her. The farming fields, being ploughed several times all day, were now in a deep sleep under a blanket of darkness. He saw her in the fields, and very quickly pulled out all his weapons—his mouth, hands, feet, fingers, and nails.

They're as sharp as any plough. A hefty and hungry dog had begun eating eagerly, spreading the prone body of its prey.

"Devamani!" called Revanth, the son of Raghurman Reddy. "My father wants everyone to be at the east field tomorrow morning by eight."

^{1*} The original story appeared in the early 2000s in several anthologies of Telugu writing, including a collection titled *Farmer's Stories* (personal communication, 2014).

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“You already told us this morning, right! Why do you need to come all this way at this hour of night to repeat the same words?”

“You might forget. Just thought of reminding you!” he said, watching Yesu Dayamma curiously. She was cleaning the dishes, and the water sloshed in the small tub under the moonlight.

“OK. We heard it and we’ll come. Go now. It’s getting late in the night. By the way, who is that man standing there?”

“Oh...him! He is my friend Bharat Reddy!”

Revanth Reddy wasn’t ready to go: his feet were almost glued there—as if his sandals had borne roots like nails, fixing him there. His feet were nailed, but so were his eyes: since seeing her last summer break, he now saw an older Yesu Dayamma, and the unbroken gaze was as if a paddy husk were gathering flame.

“Go, man! Go! It’s too late already. You got to eat your dinner, right?! We’ll be there in the morning for sure...go now!” Devamani pushed him to go.

He tried buying a little more time by barely inching forward. Of course, he took advantage of that little time staring at Yesu Dayamma.

“Like father, like son!” Devamani spat as soon as Revanth Reddy left. “Not even a trace of moustache on his face, and already dying for girls! These bastards fly around our houses to catch some free food! These beasts...they neither give feed, nor take care, they see the kids they father with us as some straying calves...they just want to fuck. Satan’s dirty sons!”

Finishing the dishes, Yesu Dayamma went inside the house and put the dishes in their place. After a while, she came out and straightened her rope-cot to sleep next to her mother.

“My baby,” Devamani said. “Not even eleven years old...And, this bastard is already out there, ready to catch her. This bastard knows very well that I was flattened under his father’s thighs. Bloodsuckers! Don’t even know what’s good or bad!” She fumed, her voice trembling, “That asshole...his father. He did the same. He eyed me when I was ten. These assholes are always on watch. These guys know very well when the crop would be ready and when they could grab the harvest. They just smell everything by one look. That’s why they’re called farmers, forever eyeing a good crop! These people they fuck all their life—do they even care if they can eat, or if they have enough milk? They don’t even bother if they’re happy or healthy or dying of hunger or ill health. They don’t care if that woman is young or old, baby or mother! Doesn’t matter if it’s day or night...”

She looked into her daughter’s innocent face, more painful even to imagine her life. She wiped away the tears with her sari-end. Her eyes had been dry, like a summer well, for so long not a droplet.

“Hey, Devamani! Did you eat your dinner?” Suguna, her neighbor spoke.

“Aaa...Just now...come here. Did you eat?”

“Just coming. I’ve to eat.” Suguna put down the plastic mug while sitting on Yesu Dayamma’s cot.

“Why did you go by yourself? I would’ve come, if you’d called me,” said Devamani taking a look at her plastic mug assuming that she was out to relieve herself.

“Devamani, it’s not a place we could go together. I didn’t go to the river for the toilet. I went to the highway.” Suguna had no secrets with Devamani.

“I thought you’re not going out there these days?!”

“You’re right! But today I had to. That’s it! Do you think you can simply walk out on everything, all the people who count on you? It’s just not possible. How am I going to feed a mother, three kids and two old people? Everything is awfully expensive, even if you want to buy a little thing,

it's incredibly pricey. And the landlords in our village...they don't even talk about increasing the wage for labor."

"Yes, it's true!"

Meanwhile, Suguna shoved her hand into her jacket and pulled out a folded hankie. She unfolded the hankie and took out rupees in different denominations—hundred, fifty, twenty, and ten. She picked up two one-hundred-rupee notes and put them in Devamani's hands, saying, "Go, get rice and lentils from the store tomorrow morning. You still have that doctor's prescription. Right? Get the pills. That part about bleeding too much? It's extremely harmful."

Reluctant to accept money, Devamani withdrawn her hand from Suguna's.

"No...no money. Keep it! I've money."

"What? What do you've? Who gave you money?"

"I got my wage. Don't worry!"

"Hmm... wage? Who would give you money but that bloodsucker?! He. That bastard makes you work all day in his fields and when you come home in the evening, he appears here too, with all his diseases! Did he really pay you money worth your work? Never! He never said, 'You're working really hard. Here, some money!' Never! You keep breaking your back all these years working for him. Did he ever check if you're eating or not? Never! Ok, then, is he happy just sleeping with you? Never! If he eyes any women, did he leave them? Never! He slept with several women at several places...the past twenty years of diseases he's given to you."

Dumbstruck, Devamani was quietly watching Suguna. The entire Dalit neighborhood was in deep sleep just as her daughter was.

Suguna softened her voice.

"Look here! Just one hour...one hour! I got up to the highway and earned this much! And that bloodsucker didn't leave you at least for one day. Then, how much should *you* earn? All the customers I get on the highway are truck drivers. They're away from their wives for weeks and weeks. They work hard, always on the road. They're not landlords like our bloodsucker. Those truck drivers—they don't make a woman work for free. They pay wholeheartedly and fully. What's this bastard? Has a wife at house, and yet moves out of sheer lust! And, you too! Never said 'NO' to him, even when you're sick! Don't you've the guts to say NO?"

"What's the use? Can't take the loss. Right from the early morning, he's cranky. Continually hisses like a snake. Doesn't even care when people are around. He throws abuses. Chucks out all kinds of sickening words. Then when it's pay day, he always tries to hold back half of the money! It's the same every time! When he looks at me I just piss off as fast as possible. No way I'd dare to say something!"

"OK, then! Got to go now! I think all my family would be fast asleep by now. I'm hungry too. I will go and stuff something into this belly." Suguna shoved the hanky with money into her jacket.

"Yeah. With this money, I gotta buy rice, books, and footwear for the kids, buy some rope and make cots for father and mother, and finally get my medicine."

Suguna grabbed her mug and got up. She quietly slipped some money under Devamani's pillow. Devamani noticed it after a while and tried calling Suguna back.

Suguna purposely ignored her and left off.

For Devamani and Suguna, this village was a home. But both had gotten married in the neighboring village. When Suguna's husband died in an accident, having fallen from an electric pole, Suguna had to take care of her three kids and her parents too.

Even before her puberty, Raghuram Reddy had shown up, in the nearby palm groves, forcing Devamani's legs apart. He was still unmarried then.

Devamani's parents failed to find her a good husband, and finally they forced her to marry her uncle, who was universally known as a dumb good for nothing. After two kids, one morning they found him dead in his sleep, and they moved back to her parents' home. Six months later, she lost her father too. Her older son was in a neighboring town in a hostel to continue his seventh grade. While she was still mourning the death of her husband, the very day when she returned home, Raghurami Reddy dropped in. He boasted he would make her the boss of the laborers and many other things. That day too, he forced her to sleep with him. Even on the night of her father's death ceremony, he wouldn't leave off. Grieving had become an impossible luxury.

The very days when she was under an unbearable burden of sadness, this man would appear. She thought to herself, "Holding his loincloth above his knee, he would land on me just to show off his naked body and its manliness. He would put all that stuff on my head...like a crown...a crown of naked balls!"

Very clearly, he never cared for her. If she shamelessly asked for a pound of rice, he never even listened to her. Money...he never let go a single coin; always chanting about his unpaid loans and endless money issues. She never asked him for more, she took whatever he gave and quietly returned to her home. She remained like a cow on the leash but even a cow may make a sound. Would she ever come out of this silenced life?! Her face was far older than her actual age, pain making lines.

That morning Suguna was almost yelling at everybody:

"That bloody bitch, what has she to do with my daughter? First, she should worry more about her daughter, isn't it? If that woman even utters my daughter's name next time, I will see her life's end."

With a container of boiled green leaves, green chili, a pinch of salt, onion, and garlic, Devamani walked to the stone grinder in front of Suguna's home. Suguna's daughter Bula was standing up there with a long face. She was in seventh standard.

Josephine, from four houses away, was sitting on the cot. Devamani could clearly hear the boiling hum of the tea on the stove. And Suguna was even more simmering than the tea.

"Hey, Josephine! What made you come all this way this morning?!" Devamani asked, cleaning the grinder with water.

"I went to the Bhushanam's grocery store to buy cucumbers. Bula was there buying tea, and then Tulasamma dropped in there to sell green leaves. Soon she saw Bula and oh, did she insult her. 'Hey girl! Why aren't you covering up with a half-saree long before this!? No shame at all! You hang around the roads and streets showing off everything! Anyhow, it's not your fault! This is all because of your stupid mother... stupid woman! She knows pretty well that these boys go around the village all the time, yet your mother never cares for you!' Going on and on...!"

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!" said Suguna. "Hey, Devamani, have you seen Tulasamma's elder daughter? That one brags that she is going to college in Hyderabad. She landed in the village with four of her buddies. With a tiny pants and a baby shirt, she wandered in the

village. People could see at least half of her boobs and her belly button. And the shorts she was wearing were so tiny that when she bends down a little, anybody could easily see her butt cheeks. But you're not supposed to say anything. They're the landlords and they can do anything! And we...we're just living in the ghetto...and lower castes...we got to remain humble and be all covered up—doesn't matter either kids or the oldies. If not, this Rama-like village would become a place for lusty dogs! We people are living with no food or water, and those upper caste women ride on our girls like racing horses and call us shameless!"

"Let it go, Sugunamma! They reap what they sow!" Devamani replied.

"I let it go this time, but if she's going to repeat it, I will hack her into two pieces like a cucumber!"

"The other day I went to work wearing my father's shirt. I carried the cement bags, did all the road work and got back home," Josephine said. "Soon my mother pushed me to go to the grocery for the rice. I was in a hurry. Moreover, my jacket had tears right under the arms. I had no option but to wear the same shirt. That lady Tulasamma and Parijatham were sitting there and chatting. They saw me in a men's shirt and started making fun. 'Heee...! Wandering in a male shirt! Also, wear pants and get your hair cut!' When they're having their fun, I'm holding back tears."

Tears did begin to leak down Josephine's face. She continued: "You know, I got another piercing on my ear. They made fun of it too... 'Hey...how many holes do you need? If you want to deck all those holes, you need money, right! Anyway, the government is giving you work and food to skip the work in our fields...go, go! Looks like you're earning a lot...and also using fragrant soaps...So, you're cleaning all *those* parts!!' they sniggered. It was hard to be near them."

Suguna said, "Did you see, these two same women were on the TV news? They're shown as model female farmers. Are they really women? If so, how could they talk so filthy about other women? Their men speak better words than they do. These women make little kids work hard in their fields and give four or five green leaves as a wage..."

Devamani finished her grinding and left as Suguna was going on and on.

The audio speakers from the church were blaring the songs. Soon the Sunday worship service would begin. Her daughter had already left for church.

"Hey...Devamani...please give me your Bible, I'll return it after the service. There's also food service today!" Suguna appeared now with a happy face. Looks like Suguna had had a head bath, and she was looking fresh in her white saree. Devamani handed over the Bible to her.

"Suguna, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah...go ahead! I share everything with you...just with you!"

"You been to the highway last night and now you're ready for church. Don't you feel bad?"

Suguna only stared at her, wordless.

"Isn't it a deception? Don't you think Jesus would be unhappy?"

"The Lord asks us to have a pure heart. Am I going on the highway just because I don't have a husband, or my desires are not fulfilled...?" Suguna asked. "No...not at all! You know, the other villages are paying wages well, but the wages we get in our village are not good, can't even rely on getting salt and chili every week. Or even a soap bar. I'm not going on the highway for sex or to buy a car. See, my feet are bare because the sandals I had fell apart. If I get enough money to buy my groceries, I won't wait more than a minute there, I just rush to my house. All the drunken men who come there, they smell, I can't even stand that smell. I feel like throwing up...and the body would be like a wound...so tired and injured...moreover, the body becomes a storehouse of all types of diseases! Sex...it's not a happy thing anymore...you know!"

Devamani welled up and saw Suguna's eyes fill with tears too.

“You see, those sexually hungry women who roll their bodies in the fields, haystacks and don’t even care with whom they’re sleeping, they’re the ones whoring, not me! They’re the sinners, not me! I’m doing right, I’m not a whore, my heart is pure...see, it’s as pure as this Bible!”

Suguna took the Bible to her chest and kissed it. Her eyes were quiet and incredibly peaceful and confident. Smiling. Devamani found a smile on her face as well.

“Suguna, you should keep up this laugh forever! Feels good to see you laughing!”

“Don’t you! You look wonderful too. Okay then, got to go...worship time!”

Meantime, Bujjammay dropped in, looking for Devamani.

“Hey, what’s up, Bujjammay?”

“Just wanted to share a word. We are boycotting work today. The landlords’ behavior makes us sick. Last time too, he didn’t let me breastfeed my child and abused me with words such as ‘It’s work time, not milk time!’ Babies were crying for milk, and we had to keep working. We hate it there...you may be the only one going to work today!”

Bujjammay left in a huff with her baby in her arms.

Without a word, Devamani packed her lunch with rice and green leaf pickle. She had to pick up everyone for work at the center of the village and lead them to the fields of Raghu Ram Reddy. He hates his workers coming late, and if late, an ocean of abuse would come at you. Unimaginable swear words. A common phrase would be “How many men did you fuck on the way, you whore?” When Devamani arrived at the center, the women were already waiting for her. From their faces, she could read clearly that they’d had intense debates and made a tough decision. Saramma walked over. “Devamani, our women are with Bujjammayi. They don’t want to do the work. But we’re here for you, we’re coming just for you. Not this Reddy, all landlords the same. They just want to squeeze as much money as they can, and they’re all awfully arrogant. We just asked him to raise our wage four rupees and oh my God the fuss! He didn’t let us even enter his fields and then he gathered all the landlords and forced them to say there was no work. And so we traveled on autos to neighboring villages, but there, too, he had done the same. Even before we arrived there, he had called them on his mobile. We had to beg them and yet they didn’t care. The lunch too had gone bad that day, and we had to throw all the food into the canal and return on empty stomachs. Whatever money we’d had, that was gone for the taxi charge. These Reddys they won’t raise our wages, but they get everything—seeds to fertilizers—on subsidized prices from the government. They get bank loans damn easily, and they can even get the payback date waived in a pinch!” Saramma could hardly breathe she was so angry.

“Let it be, Saramma! It’s already late. It’s a long walk, let’s hit the road!” said Devamani, while all the women followed her.

Meanwhile, the song from the church loudspeaker was abruptly interrupted with the announcement made by the local pastor.

“Dear Villagers, An important matter. We’re saddened to inform that Raghu Ram Reddy, son of Subba Reddy, passed away just now.”

Devamani was speechless. The women turned back to their houses along with Devamani.

People streamed into the village. Even the television channel trucks arrived. The news of Reddy’s death reached far and away. Lots of people were coming. Police, public servants, staff of the non-governmental agencies. The village was full of people.

“A farmer’s suicide due to debt. Raghu Ram Reddy committed suicide by consuming a bottle of pesticides. Reddy killed himself for not being able to clear his debts and having lost the entire investment he put on this crop.” The television channels were showing his pictures and updating the news story. The picture kept appearing: the man lying on a mat, the pesticide tin next to him.

An endless uproar rolled over the village until evening when Reddy's body was cremated. The village's mourning was a deep silence.

Devamani energetically took a full bath with a bucketful of hot water, she rubbed and scrubbed her body intensely and poured water several times. She put on a nice fresh saree and sat on the cot outside the house.

She asked her daughter to serve her hot rice and ate it with beef curry—every last morsel. She licked her fingers to cherish each grain of the meal.

After that, she laid on the cot, a cool moon of happiness. She spread her legs in two different directions. She slept happily, confidently, and peacefully. She slept as if she were dead. Never knew how long she slept.

After a while, she heard something...the sound of a hard blow of a man sitting on the cot next to her.

It's the son, Revanth Reddy...No...no...it's his friend Bharath Reddy! He was getting up slowly from the bed of her daughter Yesu Dayamma. Startled, Devamani rubbed her eyes to see him clearly. He ran fast then!

Devamani's heartbeat escalated, her eyes filling with fear. An endless fear. She was staring. Yesu Dayamma was in a deep sleep, but Devamani could sleep no longer.