www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 4.727 (SJIF)

Modernity of caste: Reading Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*

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Abstract
This paper analyses *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, the autobiography of Sujatha Gidla, to trace the complex entanglements of caste, selfhood, gender and political existence that emerge through the narrative. As autobiography is generally considered as the recollection of the personal and private existence, the complexities associated with the trajectory of modernity in the subcontinent allows for an autobiographic attempt which is at the same time a commentary on the social and political existence. Following the transactions between the desire to construct a modern selfhood and the experience of marginalization and oppression in the text, I suggest that caste is not a pre-modern category in this narrative. Rather, it has the double function of interrogating entrenched notions of the dominant modern at the same time as it allows for the enunciation of the emerging modern, which in this case is represented by the increasingly audible voice of the marginalised sections. Drawing from insights provided by scholars in their discussion of the contradictions underpinning modernity and nationhood in India, I argue that the autobiographic form is here invested with the collective dilemmas emerging from the complex trajectories of political life and social identities in the subcontinent.

Keywords: Autobiography, Caste, Gender, Selfhood, Political existence

Introduction

Sujatha Gidla's autobiography *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* is the decades-long story of her own family. That historical material, facts and objective social conditions are discursively constructed and there is no fact that is unpolluted by the mediation of the politics of language is now a widely acknowledged idea in the academic world. In Sujatha's account, the history of a Dalit Christian family in the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh is staged along with the history of the Indian nation's arrival as a nation state and its tryst with modernity.

The title is intriguing because if one were to look at the deployment of key signifiers in it, 'untouchables' and 'modern India' loom large as two important ones at that. The making of modern India immediately carries with it the question who is the maker. What does the signifier modern India refer to? What is modernity? Is there a single, unified and monolithic idea of modern India which is not challenged by the contradictions of history? If we confine ourselves to these two signifiers of 'untouchables' and 'modern India', a range of

events of history should flash through our mind, from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's scrupulous interventions to inscribe the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity on the political imaginary of the emerging nation to the range of struggles waged by the oppressed masses across the subcontinent for equality, life with dignity and right to knowledge and progress. The religious conversions, the round table conference, debates around communal award, the subsequent Poona Pact and finally the Indian constitution come to our mind among many other things. It is not the intention of this paper to venture into these historical trajectories. However, this general historical background is mentioned here to suggest that the idea of a modern India as mediated through the combined agency of indigenous and colonial elites along with the attendant discourse of nationalism has never been a monolithic ideological force acting from above without any contestations. There had been a range of contestation on the question of both modernity and nationalism from the highly variegated population in the subcontinent, the majority of whom were subjected to the structural deprivation of rights and resources and heinous oppression at the social level.

Colonial Modernity and the Subaltern experience

Sujatha's account begins by noting that things happened to her family occurred to her as a story worth telling only when she made friends in a new country. This note tells us more than about a diasporic existence which compels one to recognize one's past in one's own land as separate from the present and to attribute it with literary qualities. It rather hints about history itself. The engagement with colonial modernity as manifested in many forms including missionary Christianity had actualized an occasion for the subordinated classes, slave castes and other oppressed sections in different parts of the subcontinent to be aware of their own oppressed conditions and to fashion a selfhood and identity which can be deployed to lay claim for equality from the brutal structures of caste oppression and slavery. Sujatha's grandparents belonged to the untouchable Mala caste in Andra. They converted to Christianity and were educated at Christian mission school. Religious conversions at various points in the history of the subcontinent had crucial social consequences for the society and the caste hierarchy in the sub-continent. While writing about the slave castes of Kerala and their engagement with missionary Christianity, Prof. T.M Yesudasan has made some fascinating points. He has introduced the term 'religious ascendance', rejecting the conventional term 'religious conversion'. If conversion signifies a change of affiliation from one religion to the other, ascendance refers to coming into being of religion. This is a significant reformulation if we take into account the fact that the caste society with its graded inequality and distance pollution rules never allowed any possibility of a shared religiosity. Contrary to the dominant assumptions about conversion as colonially motivated and resulting only from the material deprivation, the conversion could be seen as an attempt to redefine the society and the selfhood. Such an approach recognize the agency of those who participated in the process: Prof. Yesudasan writes:

> To prove that the slaves in Kerala embraced the religion offered by missionaries without careful thought or discretion, neither the missionaries nor the Hindu nationalist have enough proof in their hands. The two-directional process of religious

> ascendance was actualized as much as a result of the careful selection of slaves as of the enthusiasm shown by missionaries. Religious ascendance is not a process where people follow foreign Gods like those who followed the Pied Piper of Hamelin. It is a rejection of the current religious system and welcoming of an alternative one. It is quiet natural that anti-imperial view points, analyses stressing on mode of production and Hindu nationalist views are all turning a blind eye towards the creative role slaves played in their religious ascendance. This is because 'savarnas' find it difficult to believe that slaves have discretionary sense and rationality. (Yesudasan 35)

The enthusiasm for education and knowledge which permeates the lives of different generations in Sujatha's family can be historically located in the subaltern encounter with colonial modernity and the epistemological universe such communities invented out of it. The religious experience itself is variously appropriated in this process, an instance of which is the critique of religion itself where the foundational values and textual ethos are reaffirmed in tandem with the native experiences to interrogate the forces of domination acting within the domain of religion. This turns out to be a radical act given the fact that various faith traditions have been seriously afflicted by the social gradation of caste and the religious experience is underpinned by social experiences of caste, region and gender. For instance, Sujatha notes that she was never told by her mother that they were untouchables. All she had been told was they were Christians. It is from her encounter with the 'social' that she learns about her untouchable identity. Then she assumes that to be Christian meant to be untouchable. It is only when she encounters the superior Syrian Christians from Kerala in IIT Madras that she learns about the reality of caste which cuts through religious categories. The religious discourse of Indian nationalism was engineered by the caste elites across religious traditions to ensure that the political power remained within caste collectives of higher order, leaving the vast majority outside its pale. The attendant discourse of secularism insisted that oppressed majority across religions must accept the leadership of their caste superiors to enrich the ideal of a secular and modern India.

Nationalism, Communism and Hierarchy of Interests

The family story is woven around Sujatha's uncle and the central figure in the narrative K.G.Sathyamurthy, the renowned poet and activist who came to be known as 'Sivasagar. A voracious reader and committed comrade determined to change the social order through revolution, Sathyamurthy's evolution has different phases, starting with his encounter with the Telengana armed struggle when he was at his teen. He went on to embrace the communist movement with an unflagging passion for the suffering masses. When the party finds itself split, Sathyam (As he is called in the narrative) associates with the breakaway section CPI(M). When he realises that communist parties have forsaken the cause of armed struggle and have reneged on their progressive promises, he switches to the Naxalite movement led by Charu Mamjumdar, the suppression of which by the state compels him to form a new movement, namely People's War Group (PWG). However, Sathyam ends up realizing the caste factor within the movement and gets expelled for pointing to the same.

Here, many questions interest us. One is that of Indian nationalism and the formation of Indian nation state. The struggle against the oppressive rule of Nizam and the 'upper caste'

landlords by peasant guerrillas and the backlash it suffered at the hands of Indian state immediately after the defeat of Nizam. The following passage illustrates this:

> On September 13, 1948, the Indian army finally overtook a direct invasion of Hyderabad. In a shockingly short time, the Asaf Jahi Army was defeated. The Razakars surrendered. The Nizam had been deposed. The 224-year-old dynasty was no more.
>
> There was jubilation in Telangana. Many of the peasant guerrillas came out of hiding. The feudal order had been destroyed at last. The guerrilla heroes finally put down their precious rifles and went home to celebrate, to reunite with their families.
>
> But the Indian army did not put down its guns. It immediately turned them on the peasants.
>
> This has been its real mission all along. The Nizam was annoying to India, but a popular uprising against landed property was intolerable.
>
> While the operation to oust the Nizam had taken only four days, the occupation of Telangana went on for three years. Over two thousand fighters and their family members were killed. Three hundred thousand tortured. Fifty thousand arrested. Thousands more detained in concentration camps. Thousands of women were raped. Under the guns of the Indian troops, peasants were evicted. Under military and police security, the doras came back to their paraganas, and the land that peasants had seized from them was returned. The Telangana struggle was finally crushed and, but for the abolition of vetti, its gains reversed. (Gidla 140)

This points to the brutal force with which regional struggles of oppressed sections were suppressed with an iron hand by the centralised power of the post-colonial Indian political elites. The national integration has been a process which forcefully negated the egalitarian notions of nationalism active within the subcontinent and subsumed the various currents of regional struggles under the accumulated power of Indian state. G. Aloysius's famous work *Nationalism without a Nation in India* sharply reveals this process.

> Pan-Indian generalizations on culture, power, society and history of the pre-modern subcontinent are necessarily hazardous and such attempts could be faulted on numerous scores especially at a time when regional diversity is gaining recognition, both in contemporary politics and historical study. However the political unification of India and the subsequent emergence of several forms of social conflict specifically vis-à-vis this unified and centralized form of polity, have made such generalizations imperative, as a method of historical explanation. (Aloysius 41)

The celebrations of Indian independence from the British when Sathyam was in schools demonstrate for him the deep contradictions with cherished idea of Indian nation. As the celebrations gear up, he notices the difference between his dressing and others and between what is his best and what is others' best. In the fancy-dress context, a caste Hindu

girl comes dressed up like a Lambadi-a member of an impoverished tribe in the Telugu-speaking region- and wins the first prize. "Would a real Lambadi woman get this admiration?" Sathyam asks himself as the girl receives applaud. The gross deprivation of resources for the masses, robbing the tribal population of their right to land and life and the perpetuation of graded inequality all come to hide under the garb of a unified nation where hierarchy and deprivation become tropes to celebrate 'diversity' to boost the snobbish pride of the ruling class. One of the boys in the school comes up to Sathyam and asks him: "Do you think this independence is for people like you and me?"

This is a subaltern critique of the elite nationalism that came to symbolize not the horizontal solidarity and shared nationhood of people based on equity and share in power (Aloysius 21) but a vertical deployment of citizens where share in power, resources and capital are confined to a few while depriving the majority of any avenue for proper citizenship. A parallel can be drawn with the words of C.Kesavan, the anti-caste crusader and social reformer from Kerala who belonged to the erstwhile untouchable Ezhava community. He recalls his transition from a congress nationalist to a champion for social justice in his autobiography:

> The painful fact that I, being an Ezhava, am an untouchable and a wretched being struck my mind from Kollam high school and Ernakulam college which has been a fortress of caste. It was in those days that the filthy audacity and caste hatred contained in the abusive name callings such as 'Kotti', 'Chilanthi' were hurled at my body. Newspapers like *Keralamaumudi, Deshabhimani* etc. raised the rights of Ezhavas as a storm. But I was not interested in that. I found the solution for every disease in the growth of nationalism, India's independence and Gandhi's leadership. I found it disgusting that Ezhava leaders like C.V.Kunjuraman, N.Kumaran and C.Krishnan were waiting for the mercy of the government as the 'representatives for the dignity of slaves'. I longed for struggle and adventure. I thought that nothing less than adventurous courage would work with a dumb and insensitive government. Many incidents happened. Gradually I realised that I am not living in a state where social justice has any place. The knowledge that my nationalism and the nationalism of my 'savarna' (upper caste) friends are incompatible to each other removed the blind spots in my thought. (Kesavan 62)

We see C.Kesavan standing closer to Sthyam. Sathyam began as congress supporter soon to realize the hollowness of its nationalism and the vested class interest of its politics. He passionately embraces communist ideals of a society without exploitation and emancipation of the labouring classes and works day and night for that. This would also enter into a zone of conflict as the conflict of interest between the aristocratic class and the toiling lot surfaced in the movement. If the often repeated slogan of the Telangana armed struggle was 'Land to the Tiller', after the defeat of Nizam and the takeover by the Indian state, the prioritized slogan became a separate Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. It goes without saying that this demand was to ultimately serve the interests of land-owning castes

like Kamma, Reddy and Kappu who were in a position to capture the political power in a society which was now moving on to republican democracy.

It looks interesting that Sathyam interrogates the category of 'people' which often features in the slogans and themes of communist party. He could see that 'people' were not of the same class and social location and their interests differed on many counts. This becomes glaring when he attempts to start a theatre group for the party. The following passage shows this:

> Sathyam decided to give his troup a name that would set it apart from the People's Theatre groups sponsored by the party in other places. He no longer believed that all of the "people" were on the same side. As he saw it, two lines operated within the party, the feudal line and the proletarian line. He called his performers the Toilers Cultural Forum. (Gidla 115)

The reformulating of the 'people' into 'toilers' amounts to a critique of the class interests operating within the communist movement and its refusal to acknowledge the disparities in terms of caste. This can be seen in tandem with the reformulation of the category of 'Peasant'. As the 'upper castes' like Kamma, Reddy and Kappu were peasant castes with large tracts of land , the dominance of their interests ensured that there was no separation of the propertied class from the propertyless in the unified notion of 'people'. The traditionally privileged landowning castes could now arrive as comrades and march under the title of 'peasants' movement' ensuring that their leadership in society at large remains intact. There was however the pressure from below in the communist movements across the country as we see in the case of Sathyams effort to pull the party towards the interests of labouring classes. Sathyam organizes Pakis, the most detested and manual scavenging caste in Andra, for the theatre group notwithstanding the opposition from party's upper caste leadership. Though Sujatha records that Sathyam never emphasised on his Dalit identity nor centred the experience of caste oppression in politics, this cannot be taken as an instance of false consciousness or ideological blindness. Far from such simplistic notions about the resistance of subaltern sections, Sathyam's struggle could be seen as the agential interventions to pull the emancipatory potentials of Marxist ideology and communist programme to the advantage of the subordinated castes in a society where the national bourgeoisie, composed majorly of caste elites singularly hogged all the benefits of modernity and, through colonial mediation. enjoyed the control over various apparatuses of knowledge including ideologies like Marxism. This can be read along with the case of communist movement in Kerala, where, though 'upper caste' leaders controlled the movement at its inception, emerging mobility of lower castes resulted in them putting forth their claim, preventing a supra hegemonic structure in the realm of politics. Sathyam, at the end, embraces naxalism to be followed by his founding of People's War Group, the most effective organisation with a prospect of armed struggle in the history of the subcontinent. The Maoist and naxalite formations, though highly critical of mainstream communist formations, have not been able to overcome the blind spots which characterised the ideologies of the latter. Moreover, this revolutionary adventurism, though footed on the sufferings of masses, could easily be appropriated by the

deracinated caste elites who found in it an opportunity to deal with their own caste-deracinated selves in the modern era. Sathyam realizes this and gets expelled from the party for calling out caste-like division of labor in the underground activities of the party.

Autobiographies: Caste and Language

In his influential essay 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere', M.S.S Pandian has noted that in stark contrast with 'upper caste' autobiographies, autobiographies of the lower castes are generally located explicitly in caste as a relational identity (Pandian1738). The language of the lower caste autobiographies become suffused with the language of caste. It often happens that the very act of writing autobiography for a lower caste person becomes an act of talking and engaging with the issue of caste. Upper castes, on the other hand, could transcode their caste as 'culture', 'spirituality' and 'tradition' and bar the language of caste from politics and personal narratives. In this way, caste attains a muted appearance through other means or is neatly packed in euphemisms. This enables upper castes to be at arm's length with both modernity and tradition at once, transporting the question of caste into another time and other people. (Pandian 1740)

This insight provided by Pandian is significant in reading Sujatha's story of her family. The struggles of her mother Manjula to raise her three children amid miseries form a significant part of the narrative. Education and the enthusiasm to learn keep manjula's spirits alive as she navigates through the hardships and encounters a casteist educational system where caste kinship controls the order of the day. At the face of ill-treatment from her own husband and mother-in-law, Manjula prefers to endure everything because she preferred social respect above other things. This idea of social respect has been central to the anit-caste struggles across the subcontinent from colonial period onwards. Social respectability has been an indispensable part of any egalitarian project in a society plagued by a hierarchy that systematically excluded the vast sections of its population from dignity of life.

Another instance in the novel which relates to a larger politics in a nuanced manner is the description of marriage festivals among Dalit communities in Andhra. The role of food as a powerful signifier in the context of caste and social hierarchy is invoked here. She notes about the feast of pork that forms an important part of the marriage festivities. The following passage is fascinating:

> For days the pig would feed the whole colony. They'd make soup with its bones and curries out of its hooves and testicles. People would swear how divine it is to eat pork fry while drinking. "Chicken is nothing," they'd say.
>
> But the affair of the pig is more than its taste. It is the circus of hunting it, the feasts of the men. It's heroic, it's romantic, it's erotic. It's a metaphor, it's rhetoric. It is deeply philosophical. But these are all mere superstructures. At the base, it's economic.
>
> "The cheapest meat for the cheapest man on earth." (Gidla 155)

This is suggestive of the politics of food in the subcontinent where the food resources of the marginalized sections have been grabbed from them by way of the grabbing of land

and disenfranchisement by other means. Confining the fruits of modernity within a tiny section of the ruling classes came at the cost of the deprivation of majority who continued to languish in the caste economy of the village. Added to this was highly valorised discourse of vegetarianism where the cheaply available meat resources of marginalised sections where either scorned or one meat privileged over other ones according to their proximity/distance with the lower caste life. Pork, in this context becomes metaphor for subaltern life world. The very act of hunting the pig and conquering it become gestures of heroism and masculinity. Pigs being very cheap to feed and rear make it closer to the subaltern life. Interestingly, Sujatha hints about the elite-subaltern distinction among animals just as there is among the people. She talks about the European pigs that are pink in skin colour and hairless and smooth. They are raised on farms and fed a calibrated rise. They are never let loose in the streets. They are distinguished from the filthy native pigs which are lower caste in status and are associated with wretched life. She notes amusingly that once someone tries to raise one of these foreign pigs on his own, it pretty soon loses its caste and turns into an ordinary Indian pig. This reference to distinction among animals could be seen as suggestive of the politics of pet culture where the pet animal and the stray one become associated with distinctions among people.

Conclusion

Personal memoir can function as political commentaries in situation where the personal authorhood has not established a domain of its own independent of the entangled relations of social and political factors. The trajectory of our modernity in which bourgeoisie cultural revolution has not accompanied the constitutional and juridical forms of bourgeois republican state get inscribed in the literary forms it produces. *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* can be read as an autobiography that registers the complex entanglements of caste, selfhood, gender and political existence in the subcontinent. As caste emerges as point of departure for conceptualising the fault lines of Indian modernity, it also gets placed into a modern domain where experience, including that of oppression, has narrative significance for constructing a modern selfhood and identity. Caste is no longer a pre-modern category in narratives like this. Rather, it has the double function of interrogating entrenched notions of the dominant modern at the same time as it allows for the enunciation of the emerging modern, which in this case is represented by the increasingly audible voice of the marginalised sections.

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