

Caste, Religion and Dalit Liberation A Reading of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*

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Abstract

The notion of Caste, in the Indian context, denotes an intricate system of social hierarchy characterised by various strata, which further serves as a significant divisive element within Indian society. Caste, unlike religious identity, is not acquired by choice but instead comes with one's birth. Like food, language and clothing, Caste is a core component of Indian culture. It is purely Indian in origin and spirit and found nowhere other than India. However, it has been disseminated in other countries, wherever the Indians have migrated and settled down. For the established, it is a matter of honour, dignity and a great source of acquiring economic prosperity, religious and political authority, whereas, for the Dalits, it is a marker of wretched or oppressed, exploited, humiliated and ostracised identity. The origin and roots of the caste system can be traced and discovered from the Hindu religious texts. The Hindu religious texts provide sanctity to the caste system and preserve it as an essential and divine asset for the caste-privileged people. The proposed paper attempts to show the rigid and vigorous nature of the caste system, which continues to oppress and exploit the Dalits for centuries and does not allow them to be freed from its possession after their religious conversions and even from the eternal truth of death.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit Women, Religion, Dalit Liberation, Memory, Patriarchy, History.

About the Author and the Book: Sujatha Gidla is an Indian-American author. She was born as an untouchable in 1963 into a lower-middle-class family in Khazipet in Andhra Pradesh. She did her graduation from the government engineering college, Warangal, and later, for two years, she worked as a research associate in applied physics at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. Later, she moved to Colombia University in the USA in 1990 for her master's degree programme when she was twenty-six. She could not complete her master's degree programme and left the University in the middle of her course. Moreover, she started working as a computer software engineer for two years. She lives in New York and works as a conductor for the city subway. The Canadian missionaries educated her family and later converted to Christianity. After conversion to Christianity, their untouchable identity could not be wiped out from the Indian psyche. Today, they are known as untouchable Christians. Her parents were college lecturers. In spite of being graduates, the author and her mother had

been constant victims of caste humiliation and insult. The author constantly thinks about the relationship between religion and Caste, Caste and social status and wealth.

Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and Making of the Modern India, by Sujatha Gidla, is an eye-opening and historic document of a South Indian Dalit Christian community (*Madiga*) to which the author herself belongs. The book is a family memoir that deals with numerous caste oppressions that the author's mother, uncle, and the author herself suffered during their struggles with education, career, family, self-dignity, and self-respect. The author endeavours to record family experiences from the perspective of Caste, gender and religious identities. It is her first book published in paperback in the United States of America in 2017 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. It was first published in hardback in India by Harper Collins Publishers Private Limited, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, in 2017.

Ants Among Elephants portrays the lives of women from the point of view of the patriarchal structures, the personal and wretched history of her mother, grandmother, and the author herself, who had been continuous victims of domestic violence and patriarchy inflicted upon them by their husbands, brothers and fathers. Apart from being a memoir, the book combines several other genres, such as Dalit history, literature and ethnography. It questions and explains the complicated relationships between caste and religion, caste and Caste consciousness, Caste and marriage, Caste and social status, social status and wealth, women and Caste, Caste and talent, Caste and untouchability, women and patriarchy practised within and outside the house, women and domestic violence, Caste and politics, Caste and poverty, purity and pollution. It grapples with issues in Marxist ideology and its application in various methods to address the caste question and abolition of the caste system in the Indian context.

The author believes that the Dalit struggle against the established social order is not their struggle; rather, it should be the struggle of all the oppressed people of the country who have been denied equal rights and equal access to natural resources, and collective participation in it is a must. It enhances the growing list of works by Dalit writers who have refused to be narrowed into the "marginal literature;" instead, they tell sensitive and compelling stories about society, love, and life. Primarily, the book was meant for the Western audience. However, when it was published in India, the author was surprised and overwhelmed by their responses. People kept writing to her, saying it had revealed Caste to them, that they had never encountered caste oppression before. Gidla's writing has appeared in the Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writings.

Introduction

Caste is the basic unit of Indian society, which automatically refuses an individual's right to betterment in the social order and right to social justice because one is born in a low caste. The low-caste born is told from the very beginning that they are inferiors and that due to their

low birth, they have to submit to the rules and wishes of the upper-caste people. It leads to a hopeless situation for the uneducated and generally poor Dalits who live their lives devoid of any access to social justice and individual upliftment. Thus, Caste is a system which firmly believes in the principles of gradation, where each Caste is hierarchically interlinked with others in unequal measures of social, religious, economic, educational, and cultural rights.

There had been many anti-caste movements in India. Starting from the Buddha, Kabir, Ravidas, Periyar, Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar have raised their strong voices against the caste system, but it could not be annihilated. Even today, the marginalised lead several anti-caste voices, but the expected results are negligible. V.T. Rajshekar, in his introduction to *Caste: A Nation within the Nation*, makes the readers more aware of the existing nature of Caste, its future, the stands of the upper caste Hindus and their relation with the Caste in India. He further writes, "Caste has survived more than 50 years of the anti-caste campaign. In fact, it is going strong. Upper castes led by Brahmins are the most vociferous advocates of a 'casteless society' and also bitter critics of the caste system. But they do not say how to abolish the caste system. They are convinced that the caste system is another word for their Hindu religion, and abolition of the caste system will result in the destruction of Hinduism, for which they are not prepared" (Rajshekar, Introduction x).

Caste kills the public spirit and disassociates the Dalits from their fundamental human rights. Caste identities dominate the entire public life in India. Caste and the vested interest in it by the dominant groups create an unequal distribution of resources, and this unequal distribution process gives birth to social exclusion. In India, the print and electronic media, social system, administrative system, economic resources, land, markets, defence, industries, and religious and academic institutions are all mostly dominated and controlled by the upper Caste Hindus only. It is the overall picture of the nation, which the Dalits have mostly experienced and seen in their day-to-day lives. In this caste-dominated nation, Dalits cannot hope for equal distribution of natural and human-made resources. They cannot hope for social dignity, self-respect, cultural and religious freedom. They cannot think of equal employment opportunities and good education for their future generation. They cannot hope for fair and speedy justice against the number of injustices committed against them by the upper-caste Hindus. Dr B. R. Ambedkar, in his book *Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech (1936)*, published by Arnold Publishers in 1990 and edited by Mulk Raj Anand, argues that "This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster. It is a pity that Caste even today has its defenders" (Ambedkar 47).

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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in *Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech (1936)*, again argues that Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire, which

prevents the people from coming close to each other. Caste is a notion; it is a state of mind, and the destruction of Caste does not, therefore, mean the destruction of physical barriers, which means a notional change. Caste may be bad; Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognised that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste. If this is correct, then obviously the enemy, you must grapple with, is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of Caste" (Ambedkar 83).

Nobody puts any effort into obtaining a caste identity in India because it is achieved by birth. It is next to impossible if one wants to be freed from its grip. However, it is not the same in the case of religious identity. Religion is like a dress or clothing; that means one can change it whenever one wants. It is an identity based on one's choice and not on birth. In the context of India, Caste and religion are profoundly interconnected, and hence they are inseparable. Suppose the upper caste people wish to convert to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism or any other religion and want to maintain their caste status; they will not face any discrimination based on their high caste identity. Their conversion may be to get better opportunities. In contrast, for the Dalits, it is a quest for human dignity and freedom from the Hindu caste oppressions and their low caste identity. However, there, too, they are treated as Dalits or untouchables only, and they are constantly reminded of their previous caste identities. Hence, the conversion of the Dalits into another religion cannot liberate them from their past identities.

In her interview with Ranjitha Gunasekaran, Sujatha Gidla explains the relationship between Caste and religion and concludes that "Caste has nothing to do with religion. It only looks like that, but it is really a social institution. If you look at America, race is not a religion, right? So it is the same way. Except that Caste looks like Hinduism because Hinduism is tailor-made to support the Caste's social system. It is basically a prop for the caste system with some mysticism added. Islam and Christianity were born elsewhere, not in a caste society, but when they came to India, they had to fit themselves in. One can see Caste among Syrian Christians and Konkani Christians. And there is Caste among Muslims, Sikhs and even Parsis" (The New Indian Express, 11th February 2018, Accessed on 30th March 2024).

The primary purpose behind the idea of writing Dalit history is to question the hegemony of the established, its hierarchical caste system and the practice of untouchability and transferring them and their future generation from the grips of their bygone days. By questioning the established through their writing of history, they attempt to reclaim their space, power, and fundamental human rights, which were denied to them for centuries, so that they could live with self-respect and dignity. Also, they want to replicate their day-to-day lives, struggles, movements, work, and culture. The author articulates her distress that the history of her entire community, in particular, and the Dalit history in general, would be wiped out if a person like her does not write it. This is what makes her tell us her family

story. She is confused when she recollects the first time she was made aware of her Caste. She writes, "No one informed me that I was untouchable. It is not the kind of thing that your mother would need to tell you. What I was told was that we were Christians. Christians, untouchables- it came to me the same thing. All Christians in India were untouchable, as far as I knew (though only a small minority of all untouchables are Christians. I knew no Christian who did not turn surville in the presence of a Hindu. I knew no Hindu who did not look right through a Christian man standing in front of him as if he did not exist. I accepted this. No questions asked. I saw our Hindu neighbours passing us by without even registering our presence. I knew the cross-eyed, drooly-mouthed man was fucking my aunts, making children with them, but not marrying them because they were Christians. I knew a Christian boy who was pushed in front of train for falling in love with an uppercaste girl. Christians are lowly. Hindus are superior. Christians are week. Hinuds are powerful" (Gidla 3-4).

In **Ants among Elephants**, many untouchables from the Yanadi clan, including the author's maternal grandparents, embrace Christianity, expecting to get an education to live a respectable life. Furthermore, it remained the only alternative for the poor Malas and Madigas. The author argues that her ancestors' conversion to Christianity did not help them get out of their untouchable identity; instead, it created a new division or a category called Dalit Christians among the Christians in India. The Indian Christians did not assimilate them as Christians because of their Caste of Hindu origin. Also, it has not brought any freedom except that they (her mother's family) could attend school and get an education. Dalit Christians are neither allowed to live among the caste Hindus nor the mainstream Christians. They are still living in untouchable blocks.

Indian villages and small towns are considered the epicentres of the practice of casteism and untouchability. The author further writes, "Everyone knows everyone else. Each Caste has its own special role and its own place to live. The untouchables, whose special role- whose hereditary duty is to labour in the fields of others or to do other work that Hindu society considers filthy, are not allowed to live in the village at all. They must live outside the boundaries of the village proper. They are not allowed to enter temples. Not allowed to come near sources of drinking water used by other castes. Not allowed to eat sitting next to a caste Hindu or to use the same utensils. In your own town or village, everyone already knows your Caste in your own or village; there is no escaping it. But how do people know your Caste when you go elsewhere, to a place where no one knows you? There they will ask you, "What caste are you?" You cannot avoid this question. And you cannot refuse to answer. Or you can lie. If they don't believe you, they will try to find out your true Caste some other way. If you get them to believe your lie, then of course you cannot tell them your stories, your family's stories. You cannot tell them about your life. It will reveal your Caste. Because your life is your Caste, your Caste is your life. Whether they know the truth or not, your untouchable life is never something you can talk about" (Gidla 2-3).

The economic division of labour divides and creates divisions among the labourers. In Brahmanic socio-cultural society, everyone has a fixed place in the caste order to live, work and be buried or cremated after death. The caste one is born into regulates the kind of work one does. The untouchables and the outcastes are assigned to perform the filthiest tasks than the Shudra castes. Thus, being landless labourers, the untouchables are forced to be segregated from mainstream society. The author further observes, "Outcastes are also called untouchables because they are supposed to be so ritually unclean that the slightest contact with them will defile even low-caste Hindus. Untouchables cannot share meals with others, much less intermarry with them, are made to live apart from the rest of the village in a segregated colony on its outskirts. Sankarapadu became the untouchable colony of Polukonda, albeit an unusually remote one" (Gidla 15).

Ants Among Elephants, emphasises the fact that untouchability, hunger and caste violence force Dalits to abandon their homes and migrate to other areas. Generally, people migrate for better livelihood options, but Dalit migration occurs for different reasons. Once Dalits leave their village, they generally do not appreciate any sense of nostalgia about their abandoned homes. For them, village life has never been an ideal place to inhabit. Dr Ambedkar's statement is very much relevant here as he had insisted that Dalits leave villages and move to cities in order to escape caste-based violence, untouchability and hunger. As in the book, the author's maternal grandparents "Prasanna Rao and Maryamma, could not stay in a village such as Adavi Kolanu under the thumb of caste Hindus. They decided to move two hundred miles away to Visakhapatnam, one of the few large cities in Andhra" (Gidla 18).

Conclusion

To conclude the paper, the researcher believes that the notion of Caste cannot be eliminated and annihilated because it is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. Therefore, the destruction of Caste means the destruction of the whole spirit of Indianness. It is such a dangerous disease that it continues to remind and haunt the marginalised about their caste identity in all matters of their everyday life. Even if they migrate from rural to urban, India to abroad or achieve economic prosperity or political representation, they will consistently be recognised by their previous caste identities only. Thus, the religious conversion of Dalits from Hinduism to Christianity or any other, as in the case of the author's ancestors' conversion to Christianity, could neither liberate them nor their present generation from their low caste identity. Hence, Sujatha Gidla's community is known as Dalit Christians, not Christians. The reason why Caste does not leave is because dominant castes have their vested interests in it. Therefore, they do not support the marginalised's movements against the annihilation of Caste. *Ants Among Elephants* emphasises the fact that the fundamental nature of the Indian caste system and its deep-rooted connections with daily affairs of life is such that the persecutors will continue to oppress and exploit the Dalits as long as the idea of Indianness will exist.

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