

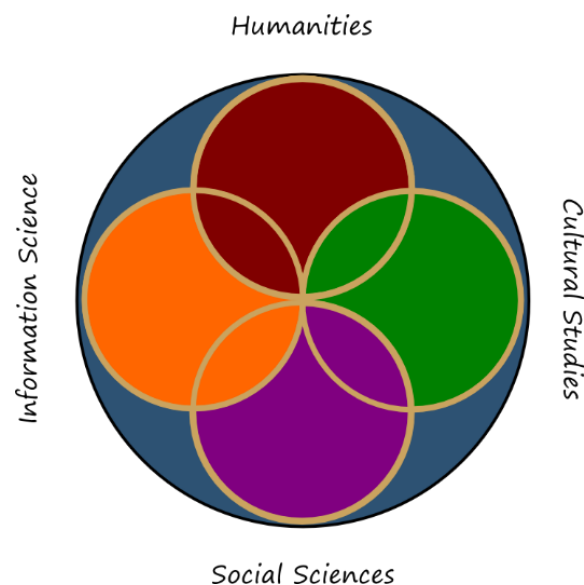
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Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, Dalit Women and Humanity

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ABSTRACT

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, published in 2017, is considered one of the most important texts about the Dalit struggle in contemporary India. Gidla takes the life of her maternal uncle (mother's brother), the renowned KG Sathymurthy, to write a Dalit historical narrative about the social and political struggles that ensued in post-independent India. The memoir is however not just about her uncle, but also about the life of her mother, a Dalit woman, attempting to be educated and live the life of an employed woman in the South Indian regions of Andhra and Telangana.

Keywords: *dalit, women, humanity, struggle, etc.*

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Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* is a fascinating account of the shifts undergone by Communist politics during the time; an account recorded and written specifically from the Dalit perspective. Gidla's writing therefore chronicles the formation of the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (CPI (M)), and eventually the People's War Group, of which her uncle, Sathyamurthy, was one of the founding members. Each shift is marked by political resentment and dissatisfaction, and what Sathyamurthy identifies as revisionism, leading to a breakage towards the formation of something new, something that "promised" to remain aligned to the "original" radical Marxist thought and practice. Gidla makes it a point to define these historical breakages in terms of caste and the kinds of dissatisfaction that the logic of caste and caste privileges produced. According to a Times of India article (2012), written after Sathyamurthy's death,

Sathyamurthy, famously known as SM, formed the PWG in 1980s along with the legendary Kondapalli Seetaramaiah. PWG was formed as an armed guerilla force to wage war against landlords. He played a vital role in bringing the splinter groups of Marxist-Leninist parties, following the failure of the Srikakulam armed struggle and Naxalbari movement, in to one fold by conducting a meeting at Guttikondabilam in Guntur district...SM was directly involved in the Srikakulam armed struggle and was arrested in connection with Parvathipuram conspiracy case." According to old-timers of PWG, SM was known as 'Ho Chi Minh' of the Indian revolutionary movement...SM used to talk about Ambedkar's teachings and caste discrimination within the party. Sathyamurthy became aware of his caste background and how it impacted other cadres within the revolutionary party...SM differed with the PWG leadership and decided to bring together Ambedkar's philosophy and Marxism. The ideological differences between him and KS led to a crisis in the party and SM was expelled from the party in 1987. Sathyamurthy raised his voice against massive militarization in the

party. He believed that only massive mobilization of people and their involvement would bring change in the society...Sources said he focused all his energy in his last years talking about the need to tackle the caste factor in Indian society. (TOI 2012)

The above passage is a highly condensed yet useful narration of KG Satyamurthy's role in the Left movements. Gidla's work also shows the tremendous political education that SM received, so much of it under his own initiative, curiosity and rigor, and lot of it under the guidance of leaders and comrades, who he adored, respected and supported.

This paper will however, depart from the story of KG Satyamurthy's struggles and struggles as a revolutionary and cultural figure as documented in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants* and will instead engage with the ways in which she documents the life of her mother, an educated, employed Dalit women in post-independent, modern and caste society of India. The book is a poignant Dalit memoir of a community, a family and individuals and how they struggle with a society whose progress and evolution is blocked by the reactionary logics of caste and gender. Within such a setting, it is very significant to take in to account the life of Manjula, Sathyamurthy's sister and Sujatha Gidla's mother. Before we embark in to the arguments put down in this paper, it is important to know who is Sujatha Gidla. Sujatha Gidla was born and brought up in Andhra Pradesh. She moved to the city of New York at the age of 26 in 1990 where she studied further. She is known to have been an employee of the Bank of New York, where she worked as a software application designer. Later, she was hired by the New York City Subway as a conductor. She was the first Indian woman to be employed as a subway conductor. In 2017, her book, *Ants among Elephants* was published. While, the memoir received praise and recognition from across the spectrum, Chinnaiah Jangam's review, "How to not write a Dalit memoir" was marked by brutal criticism. Jangam writes:

In both form and content, Dalit life narratives mirror counter-cultural narratives and provide a window in to the everyday experiences of Dalits as untouchables. They help us gauge the intensity of epistemic and ontological violence inflicted on them...Ironically in Gidla's narrative, the passionate and empowering struggles of her family turn out to be dizzy and depressing. As a historian specializing in the history of Dalits in Telugu speaking areas and my familiarity with the people who figure in the memoir, I feel that Gidla—in her ahistorical presentation and lack of empathy with the subjects involved—is engaged in a self-defeating exercise...the book's factual errors, deliberate mis- or non-representations of Dalit and non-Dalit figures,

negative portrayal of the Telangana movement and the dehumanization of Dalit experience, including that of Gidla's own blood relatives', not only dashed my hopes but left me disturbed. (Jangam 2018)

This sounds like a surprisingly scathing indictment of Gidla's work. The title of Jangam's article, "How not to write a Dalit memoir" sets the tone of the criticism, one that is riddled with a sense of normativity on how to write an "ideal" Dalit memoir. It is clear from the rest of the article, the Jangam sets his arguments against specific notions. Firstly, he argues that Sujatha Gidla over-romanticises her uncle's role in the then Communist movement and in the process erases the work and contribution of other figures. Jangam refers to other Dalit and non-Dalit figures and their significant contributions to the movement, thereby arguing that Gidla's,

ahistorical portrayal of Dalit lives not only erases the real heroes but is a gross injustice to activists...Sathyamurthy walked in to a canvas of communist politics led by Dalits in their respective spheres and radicalized Dalit communist activism. Gidla's portrayal of Sathyamurthy as the pioneer of communist mobilization among Dalits, including Pakis, is factually inaccurate and tantamount to the erasure of history of Dalit activists who sacrificed their lives to emancipate their brethren. Even though caste Hindus monopolized visible positions of power within the CPI, the spade work was done by Dalit activists. In this way, the communist movement in the coastal Andhra districts was built on the back of Dalits such as Nambury Srinivasa Rao, Bethala Yesudasu, Gunturu Bappanayya and Thupakula Simhachalam. (Jangam 2018)

Jangam has gone to accuse Gidla of dehumanising the people that she speaks about her in the book, including her own relatives. It would appear that Jangam expects Gidla to have the merit of a historian and locate her narration in the context of a history, which veritably is much more complex than what comes across in her writing. However, it would also appear that Jangam fails to take in to account that Gidla herself is not a trained historian. He also fails to take in to consideration the literary genre of her work, that of a memoir, and the limits of writing within such a genre. A memoir is a narrative written from a personal standpoint, and one expects it to have a subjective-emotional undercurrent, and in that aspect Sujatha Gidla does not disappoint. Gidla's work focuses on a few aspects of KG Sathyamurthy's life, and in particular that of his political career. She also writes at length about his struggles as a Dalit activist in the post-colonial moment. One may argue that the objective of the book is to produce a "partial" history of the Communist movements in

postcolonial Andhra and Telangana regions through the life of a Dalit man, who had an instrumental role to play in it. A part of the book clearly aims at placing the Dalit subjectivity at the center, but through the life of an individual, or several individuals. Moreover, right at the beginning, Gidla details the various sources and the difficult process of her material collection. Gidla writes:

When I first started looking in to the story of my ancestors, I knew I had to get in touch with SM. He was still hiding but was now at least reachable. Being older than my mother and more in touch with earlier generations, he knew even more about their history. He told me much more than I could fit in to this book, fascinating stories that I hope to preserve someday. And naturally he had his own story to tell. By the time I contacted SM, he was a fallen angel. He liked the idea of someone's writing about his glorious bygone years...Compiling the material for this book has been a race against death. The people I needed to speak to were old, many of them also impoverished and in poor health. Getting everything I needed from them before it was too late became an obsession of mine. (Gidla 7-11)

The above passage contains important indications of the material limitations of Gidla's process, mainly that of age. Many members of the older generation who were the source of her story were at the edge of life and death and it was as if she was racing against time. It must be also remembered that the book is not only an expression of Gidla's opinion and politics but she is also informed by the ideology, emotions and subjectivity of the people she was interviewing and speaking with. Gidla is a known Ambedkarite as well as Marxist, and at the end of the book she makes her own political position clear. Moreover, she also writes about her own experience with revolutionary politics and the three months that she had spent in prison as a result of it. In addition to that, her family, primarily her mother, who was close to KG Sathyamurthy until he went underground in the 1980s was close to her brother and new well about his activities and those of the movements that he had been a part of. Gidla writes:

At a time when Andhras across the region were fleeing or hiding, Maniamma [Sathyamurthy's wife] calmly went out to shop for groceries. The shop owner joked with her, Amma all your Andhra people are leaving everything and running away. You must have guts to be walking around in the street! She replied, Andhras may be fleeing but we Andhras here have the business of organizing the Telangana agitation. If not for us Andhras, where would you be? This whole movement is ours, my old man is working for it day and night. Why would we flee?

And about this specific passage, Jangam writes:

These lines reflect regional arrogance and historical ignorance. Gidla does a great disservice to Satyamurthy because as an ideologue and an activist, he was not only sensitive to the historical and cultural humiliations of the Telangana people, but also wrote fascinating poetry about Telangana village life and the people's commitment to the establishment of an exploitation-free society. (Jangam 2018)

It is quite interesting how Jangam chooses to read this passage as an expression of Gidla's own opinion and politics. It is clear that in the former passage, Gidla is citing the words of Sathyamurthy's wife Maniamma. In fact, Jangam fails to understand another aspect of Gidla's writing, the one where she opens up the deep vulnerability of the "characters" in her memoirs, their complex and imperfect political and moral positions, and in doing so does the same to herself. The question that one can raise to a critic like Jangam is whether the writing of the ideal Dalit memoir requires censoring political positions, if they are deemed to be problematic in a given context.

Jangam further writes:

In this context, as Satyamurthy's family story demonstrates, the perpetual existential struggle of Dalits is to prove themselves humans, equal to everyone – and protect and preserve their own selves (humanity) against all odds. Dalit life narratives, in this endeavour, straddle between the counter-narrative to Brahmanical dehumanisation which emptied Dalit selves, and positive Dalit stories as a way to construct humanity at large. Seen from this perspective, Gidla's narrative fails as a human story because of its lack of empathy. Her dehumanisation of the Dalit experience begins with her own aunts...It is true that Dalit women are sexually abused and exploited but making her illiterate aunts' (who are still alive) private lives, public, is titillating and dehumanising. Surprisingly, except for Gidla's mother, Manjula, all the characters in the memoir are portrayed negatively, including her maternal grandmother Marthamma, who raised the orphaned children. Gidla accuses her grandmother of robbing Prasanna Rao to help her son Nathaniel. (Jangam 2018)

Jangam's allegations appear to be constituted by a certain amount of emotional excess and moral excess. It is certainly excessive to accuse Gidla of alleging that her maternal grandmother Marthamma stole from her paternal grandfather Prasanna Rao. Sujatha Gidla describes in quite a bit of detail, the kind of familial dynamics that existed between the matriarch and patriarch. At no point does her narrative imply that Marthamma was stealing. Instead, she was able to show, quite empathetically, the diverse range of emotions and

behaviors that emerge in the spectrum of humanity. It is not clear why Jangam goes to the extent of alleging that Sujatha Gidla had dehumanized her characters, when in fact she has sketched a rather vivid and complex canvas of the Dalit experience. The question that remains to be asked then, is the Dalit subjectivity to be expressed only within a narrow moral tunnel. Is the Dalit experience without any foibles and fallibles and should only be upheld in the highest moral regard? Would that not be dehumanization of the Dalit subjectivity?

Gidla has also written about the sexual dehumanization of her aunts, something to which, yet again Jangam objects. While Jangam raises the very valid question of whether Gidla had taken the permission of her aunts before “exposing” their experience to a global reading public, it is also important to consider these narrations within the larger context of the themes that her book is undertaking. For instance, one of the overarching themes of the book is the kind of caste and gender-based dehumanization that the women of her family had faced throughout their life. Gidla writes about the systemic oppression that her mother faced while studying in a central university and the many years of struggle she underwent as she attempted to secure a permanent job for herself while single-handedly trying to raise three children, including Sujatha. Gidla does not conceal the fact of father’s violent behavior towards Manjula, and the kind of systemic patriarchal attitude that her mother-in-law was perpetuating.

It must also be remembered that Gidla does not present any of the characters in a one dimensional manner, either in terms of villainy or heroism, except her uncle and her mother. The following poignant description suffices to explain the kind of pain that shaped Manjula’s every day life in the presence of her husband, mother-in-law and children who was already overworked as a lecturer and a mother:

A hand grabbed Manjula by her hair, lifting her right out of bed and onto her feet. Prabhakara Rao was standing there like a dragon spewing fire. Then he slapped her face. Manjula screamed. The children woke up. The scene that day is burned in to Sujatha’s-into my-memory. The terrified woman—her mother—disheveled, her hand wounded, utterly naked, running to save herself. The man—Sujatha’s father, her beloved father—chasing after her mother, who, desperate, ran out of the house. Her father went after her. Sujatha’s mother ran around to the other side of the well. Her father followed. He pretended to start chasing her mother in one direction, and when she tried to run away, he turned around and caught her from the other side. The children’s grandmother stood looking on with pride at her son’s display of manliness. (Gidla 281)

Jangam can in fact be questioned for not taking in to account Gidla's exemplary contribution in upholding such deeply complex imagery. The above passage shows up a deeply painful experience of her mother, and if taken out of context it would appear that Gidla is vilifying her grandmother, Rathnamma. If we move on to a later section of the book, we find yet another painful description, that of poverty and the ways in which Dalit communities were surrounded and immersed in it. Gidla describes a particular memory of a starving woman who crawled up to their kitchen, one day, looking for food. She writes:

I was skipping rope in front of our house. When I saw her come through the gate, I stopped and stared wide-eyed at the sight of her in her rags, her wrinkled skin hanging from her skeletal frame, her hair wild and dry like a straw, with tears pooling in the folds around her eyes, desperate, crawling like some crushed and oozing creature. She continued around the side of the house toward the kitchen in back to beg for some food from my grandmother. My grandmother, catching sight of her, was shocked and started weeping with helpless compassion and yelling at her in a trembling voice, abusing the poor woman presenting us with such a bizarre and pitiful spectacle. (Gidla 294)

This passage is not only a picture of the poverty and dehumanization that the Dalit community had to encounter in their every day lives but also paints the contradictions of Rathnamma's personhood who sees the pain of a fellow human being and does not know how to respond to it. In conclusion, this paper would argue that Sujatha Gidla's work should be taken within the context that she presents and the contradictions of her narrative be understood as part of the specific genre of narrative that she is constructing.

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