

DALIT MEMOIR AS SOCIAL HISTORY: CASTE OPPRESSION, EDUCATION, AND POLITICAL ASSERTION IN SUJATHA GIDLA'S *ANTS AMONG THE ELEPHANTS*

Dr. B Venkat Rao

Associate Professor, Dept of English Literature, The EFL University, Hyderabad, India, Venkatraoboddu@efluniversity.ac.in

ABSTRACT

*Dalit memoir has emerged as a significant literary and political genre in modern Indian literature, documenting caste oppression, social exclusion, educational struggles, and the assertion of Dalit identity. By transforming individual and familial experiences into narratives of collective suffering and resistance, Dalit life writing challenges dominant representations of Indian society and recovers histories marginalised in conventional historiography. Although Marathi Dalit autobiography developed prominently under the influence of B. R. Ambedkar's emancipatory philosophy and the Dalit Panthers movement, Telugu Dalit life writing followed a distinctive trajectory shaped by Christian missionary education, Gandhian nationalism, Communist politics, and regional social movements. Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among the Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) offers an important contribution to this tradition. Through the experiences of three generations of her family, Gidla examines the relationship between caste, land dispossession, education, religion, nationalism, communism, and gender in colonial and postcolonial India. This article analyses the memoir as a form of social history, arguing that education enabled Dalit individuals to challenge inherited restrictions while exposing the persistence of caste discrimination within religious institutions, educational establishments, political movements, and families.*

KEYWORDS: *Dalit memoir, Christian missionaries, nationalism, gender, Telugu literature*

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction: Dalit Memoir and Historical Representation

Dalit literature occupies a distinctive position in modern Indian writing because it challenges the social structures and cultural assumptions through which caste inequality has been maintained. Emerging from communities historically subjected to untouchability, exclusion, and systematic deprivation, Dalit writing transforms experiences of suffering into a critique of the institutions and ideologies that reproduce social hierarchy. Among its various forms, autobiography and memoir have acquired particular importance because they enable writers to narrate experiences that dominant accounts of Indian history have frequently ignored.

Dalit memoir is significant not merely as a record of individual lives but as a means of reconstructing collective histories. Narratives of childhood, education, employment, family relationships, and political participation reveal the everyday operation of caste through access to resources, institutional opportunities, public spaces, and social recognition. The individual self becomes a point of entry into a broader historical world. Consequently, Dalit autobiography challenges the conventional understanding of life writing as primarily a celebration of personal achievements. Instead, it situates individual experience within structures of domination, exclusion, and resistance.

B. R. Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa*, written in the 1930s, provides an important precedent. Through a series of autobiographical incidents, Ambedkar documents the humiliations he experienced because of his Mahar identity. His childhood encounter with discrimination during a journey, difficulties in obtaining accommodation after returning from higher studies abroad, and denial of drinking water demonstrate that caste exclusion operates across different social contexts. His educational accomplishments did not protect him from discrimination. Rather, his experiences exposed the contradiction between modern educational achievement and the denial of basic human dignity.

Ambedkar's narrative established a powerful model for Dalit life writing: the representation of personal experience as evidence of structural injustice. Subsequent Dalit autobiographies, particularly in Marathi, Kannada, Gujarati, and Tamil, developed this relationship between personal testimony and political assertion. The Dalit Panthers movement, which emerged in Maharashtra in the early 1970s, further strengthened the association between literary expression, Ambedkarite politics, and radical opposition to caste hierarchy.

Telugu Dalit literature developed through a different combination of historical influences, including Christian missionary education, Gandhian nationalism, Communist mobilisation, agrarian struggles, and anti-caste activism. Its contributions to poetry, fiction, drama, and political writing have been substantial, although extended autobiographical narratives became particularly visible at a later stage. Y. B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Baliah* (2011) and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among the Elephants* (2017) are important contributions to this tradition. Both demonstrate how family history can illuminate the relationship between caste, education, labour, and social transformation.

Gidla's memoir traces the experiences of her grandparents, mother, maternal uncles, and other family members across colonial and postcolonial India. Their lives intersect with missionary institutions, nationalist politics, Communist movements, higher education, and revolutionary cultural activism. Through these experiences, Gidla examines how individuals from a historically oppressed community negotiated the opportunities and limitations of modern institutions. This article argues that *Ants Among the Elephants* functions as a work of social history by connecting familial

experience to broader transformations in Indian society.

The article examines five related themes: land dispossession and caste formation; missionary education and Dalit subjectivity; the contradictions of nationalism and communism; educational mobility and gender; and the significance of Dalit memoir as an alternative historical archive. The central argument is that education and political participation created opportunities for Dalit assertion but could not independently dismantle caste hierarchy. The memoir reveals that caste continued to operate within institutions and movements that publicly advocated equality.

2. DALIT MEMOIR AS SOCIAL HISTORY AND POLITICAL ASSERTION

Conventional histories of India have often prioritised rulers, political elites, religious authorities, and nationalist leaders. Although these histories remain important, they frequently provide insufficient attention to communities whose labour sustained the economy while their social status remained subordinated. Dalit memoir challenges this imbalance by documenting experiences that official records and dominant historical narratives may inadequately preserve.

These experiences include exclusion from educational institutions, denial of access to common resources, humiliation in public spaces, discriminatory employment, and restrictions on housing, clothing, occupation, and social interaction. Such accounts demonstrate that caste is not merely a system of abstract social classification. It is a material and institutional structure reproduced through the unequal distribution of dignity, resources, and power.

Ambedkar's *Waiting for a Visa* illustrates this function of autobiographical writing. His experiences demonstrate that caste discrimination persisted despite education, professional achievement, and international exposure. The narrative distinguishes individual advancement from collective emancipation: an educated Dalit may acquire qualifications and professional competence without receiving the social recognition routinely accorded to dominant caste individuals.

Dalit life writing also challenges the authority of dominant groups to define Dalit identity. It reclaims the power to interpret experiences historically represented through the prejudices of others. As scholarship on Dalit literature has emphasised, literary expression is inseparable from the struggle to challenge imposed identities and assert the dignity of historically marginalised communities (Limbale, 2004; Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2013). At the same time, a memoir is also not an unmediated reproduction of the past. It involves selection, retrospective interpretation, inherited stories, and the arrangement of personal experiences into a meaningful narrative. Its historical value lies in the way it connects remembered events to broader social structures and makes visible dimensions of experience that conventional archives may overlook.

Gidla's narrative exemplifies this relationship between memory and history. Her family's experiences become a means of examining changes in landownership, religious affiliation, educational access, political organisation, and social aspiration. The family serves as a historical unit through which readers encounter the contradictions of modern India from the standpoint of a community subjected to caste oppression. The memoir also emphasises intergenerational memory. The consequences of caste do not disappear with an individual's death or the attainment of educational qualifications. They persist through inherited poverty, social discrimination, institutional exclusion, and family experiences. Yet memory transmits resistance as well as suffering. Later generations inherit the determination of their predecessors to secure education, dignity, and political recognition.

Dalit memoir thus functions as an alternative archive. It documents the structures of oppression while recording the intellectual, cultural, and political resources through which oppressed communities have challenged them. Gidla's work is particularly important because it examines multiple ideological traditions without assuming that any one of them provides a complete solution to caste inequality.

3. LAND DISPOSSESSION, LABOUR, AND CASTE EXCLUSION

The narrative of *Ants Among the Elephants* begins with Gidla's ancestors and their settlement at Sankarapadu. This history establishes the material foundations of caste oppression before the memoir turns to education and political mobilisation. According to Gidla, her ancestors initially lived in a forested region near the Khammam area. Colonial administrative intervention associated with teak plantations displaced them from their original settlement. They subsequently moved to an area surrounding a lake, cleared land, and established a village called Sankarapadu. They cultivated the land and developed a community whose livelihood depended on agriculture.

Their relative independence, however, was undermined by unequal economic relationships with dominant caste groups. Gidla recounts how loans and small necessities, including seeds, salt, and clothing for weddings, drew her ancestors into debt. When they could not repay, dominant caste groups appropriated their land. The original cultivators were reduced to agricultural labourers working on fields they had cleared and cultivated themselves.

This episode demonstrates the relationship between economic exploitation and caste hierarchy. Land dispossession deprived the community of independent subsistence and increased its dependence on those who controlled agricultural resources. Economic subordination subsequently reinforced the imposition of caste-based occupations and restrictions.

Gidla observes that the dominant caste landlords did not establish their own homes in Sankarapadu because the surrounding environment was unhealthy and dangerous. They lived on safer, elevated ground several miles away while

retaining control over the land cultivated by the Dalits (Gidla 2017, p. 14). The arrangement exposes a fundamental inequality: those who performed agricultural labour were compelled to inhabit an environment avoided by the landowners who benefited from their work. The experience also challenges interpretations of caste as an unchanging system sustained exclusively through religious belief. Gidla foregrounds historical processes such as displacement, indebtedness, land appropriation, occupational restriction, and residential segregation. Caste hierarchy is reproduced through these material arrangements as well as through ritual distinctions and cultural practices.

When the inhabitants of Sankarapadu entered more sustained relationships with surrounding caste society, they were classified as untouchables and expected to perform occupations considered polluting. They were required to live separately from other villagers and were denied the social recognition available to dominant groups. The segregated settlement consequently became a material expression of unequal access to land, housing, resources, and public life.

Gidla does not represent her ancestors as passive victims. Their experience of dispossession occurred while their sense of collective autonomy remained comparatively strong. Although they suffered exploitation, they had not entirely internalised the inferiority imposed upon them. This distinction is central to the development of Dalit subjectivity. Oppression does not automatically produce submission, and resistance does not necessarily overcome structural inequality. Communities may challenge discriminatory practices while remaining constrained by limited access to property, education, institutional support, and political power.

The history of Sankarapadu establishes the conditions against which later generations pursue education and new forms of employment. Their aspirations cannot be separated from the dispossession experienced by their ancestors. Education becomes significant partly because landownership, social authority, and inherited status have been denied to the community.

By beginning with land and labour, Gidla situates the struggle for dignity within a material history. Her narrative suggests that emancipation requires more than symbolic recognition or individual advancement. It must also address the unequal distribution of resources and the social relationships that reproduce economic dependence.

4. CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES, EDUCATION, AND DALIT SUBJECTIVITY

Christian missionary activity occupies a central position in Gidla's reconstruction of her family's history. Mission schools and religious networks provided opportunities for literacy, professional training, and employment beyond agricultural labour. However, the memoir does not present missionary activity as an uncomplicated process of liberation. It examines both the opportunities created by Christian institutions and their limitations within a society structured by caste.

An important episode concerns the arrest of men from a neighbouring marginalised community after a member of the community is implicated in a theft. The villagers are unfamiliar with legal procedures and unable to secure their release. Canadian missionaries working in the region intervene by arranging legal assistance. The episode introduces the community to an institutional network capable of challenging the authority exercised by colonial police. The missionaries become associated not only with religious instruction but also with practical assistance and educational opportunities. Some members of the community subsequently convert to Christianity and send their children to missionary schools.

The missionary-run schools offered access to literacy that had historically been restricted for many Dalit communities. Nevertheless, missionary institutions did not always challenge caste discrimination consistently. Missionaries sometimes attempted to attract dominant caste converts and compromised with local social conventions. Their relationships with Dalit converts developed within the wider constraints of colonial society and local power structures. The significance of missionary education therefore lies neither in an uncomplicated celebration of colonial intervention nor in a dismissal of religious institutions. For particular Dalit communities, these institutions provided educational and professional resources that could be used to challenge inherited restrictions.

Gidla's great-grandmother, Marthamma, illustrates this process. A poor Dalit widow, she struggled to support her children through agricultural labour and the processing of rice for dominant caste households. A missionary woman noticed her singing ability and invited her to participate in church activities. Marthamma initially declined because she needed to work to feed her children. When her economic circumstances became more difficult, she approached the missionaries and began singing Christian hymns. Her participation subsequently developed into a more sustained relationship with the church. She received religious training, learned to read and write, and obtained employment as a Bible woman, travelling between villages to communicate Christian teachings. Her children were admitted to mission schools, creating educational opportunities that profoundly influenced the family's future.

Marthamma's experience demonstrates how women's cultural abilities could become resources for economic survival and institutional participation. Her singing did not immediately remove her poverty, but it opened a pathway to training, employment, and education for her children. She emerges as an active participant in the creation of opportunities for subsequent generations. Her daughter Maryamma and Maryamma's husband, Prasanna Rao, were educated through

Christian institutions and eventually became teachers. Their professional identities represented a significant departure from the agricultural labour and social exclusion experienced by earlier generations.

Gidla associates their advancement with changes in clothing, public appearance, and social confidence. Maryamma wore a sari and blouse, while Prasanna Rao adopted Western-style clothing. These practices were not simply personal choices. In a society where clothing and bodily presentation could be regulated by caste, the ability to dress with dignity challenged expectations about the social status of untouchables. Maryamma's experience of hostility after wearing a new sari illustrates this contradiction. Her appearance provokes dominant caste observers who interpret it as a violation of the social position assigned to Dalit women. The conflict demonstrates that caste hierarchy is maintained not only through control over land and employment but also through the regulation of public dignity and social visibility. Prasanna Rao and Maryamma eventually move to Visakhapatnam, where they secure better-paid employment in Christian educational institutions. Their relocation illustrates the importance of urban space and professional employment in creating opportunities for an emerging Dalit middle class.

Notwithstanding these changes, the couple must conceal their caste identity when renting a house from dominant caste landlords. They also modify dietary practices because foods associated with Dalit communities are stigmatised. Their experiences demonstrate that education and professional success do not automatically eliminate caste prejudice. Social mobility may change an individual's occupation, income, and cultural resources without removing the discrimination attached to caste identity.

The family's advancement is subsequently disrupted by Maryamma's death in 1941. After contracting tuberculosis while caring for an orphaned relative, she dies, leaving her children without their primary caregiver. Overwhelmed by grief and debt, Prasanna Rao temporarily abandons his children, who are taken into the care of relatives and their grandmother. Marthamma assumes responsibility for fulfilling her daughter's wish that the children receive an education. She takes them to Gudivada, enrolls them in a government school, and rents a modest room in the Mala colony. Her decision becomes a decisive moment in the formation of the next generation.

Marthamma's determination demonstrates that education was not simply a service provided by missionaries or the state. It was a family project sustained by sacrifice, collective responsibility, and the desire to overcome inherited disadvantage. Her actions connect the educational opportunities of the colonial period with the aspirations of the postcolonial generation. Gidla thus presents missionary education as one important element in the development of Dalit self-assertion. It created opportunities for literacy and employment, but its transformative potential depended on the agency of individuals and families who used those opportunities to pursue dignity and independence.

5. COLONIALISM, NATIONALISM, AND THE MEANING OF INDEPENDENCE

The childhood and adolescence of Gidla's maternal uncle, Gnana Satyamurthy, referred to as Satyam in the memoir, provide a perspective on the relationship between caste, nationalism, and political consciousness. His experiences demonstrate how the Indian independence movement could inspire Dalit participation while leaving unresolved questions about social equality.

Satyam grows up in Mandapadu, a Dalit settlement in Gudivada. The community includes agricultural labourers, Christians, supporters of the Indian National Congress, and people attracted to Communist politics. This environment exposes him to competing visions of national freedom and social transformation. Gandhi's call for the British to quit India in August 1942 initially appeals to Satyam. He associates colonial rule with the extraction of wealth and believes that independence could improve his family's circumstances. However, his admiration becomes complicated when Gandhi suspends the movement. Satyam subsequently becomes more interested in Subhas Chandra Bose, whose militant nationalism appears to offer a more uncompromising challenge to colonial authority.

Satyam's changing political commitments reveal that Dalit participation in nationalism was neither uniform nor ideologically predetermined. Members of marginalised communities could support independence while disagreeing over the methods, leadership, and social objectives of the nationalist movement. Communism offers another framework for understanding inequality. Its emphasis on class exploitation and agrarian transformation appears relevant to the experiences of landless labourers and oppressed peasants. However, the Communist Party's support for the Allied war effort after the German invasion of the Soviet Union places it at odds with the Quit India movement. Satyam's response reveals the difficulties of reconciling national liberation, opposition to fascism, and revolutionary social transformation.

The achievement of independence in August 1947 intensifies these questions. While studying at Andhra Christian College, Satyam participates in celebrations marking the end of British rule. Yet he notices that the public events are dominated by the children of wealthy Hindu families, while people from backgrounds like his own remain largely absent from the visible representation of national achievement. A question posed by another student—whether independence is truly intended for people like them—captures the uncertainty surrounding the social meaning of freedom. Political sovereignty has been achieved, but the distribution of power and opportunity remains unequal.

This episode challenges celebratory narratives of nationalism. Gidla does not deny the significance of independence; rather, she examines it from the standpoint of those who continue to experience caste discrimination after colonial rule has ended. The transfer of political authority does not automatically transform the social relationships through which wealth, education, and influence are distributed. Satyam's educational experience further exposes these inequalities. Despite his intellectual interests and political involvement, he struggles to pay for books, examination fees, laboratory records, and food. His father, Prasanna Rao, experiences agricultural losses that prevent him from providing regular financial support.

These difficulties demonstrate that access to higher education depends on material resources as well as academic ability. Formal admission to an institution does not guarantee the practical capacity to benefit from it. The costs of accommodation, food, and study materials can become substantial barriers for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Satyam's encounter with Telugu literature broadens his political imagination. He discovers poetry and prose that represent ordinary people and contemporary social realities through accessible language and innovative literary forms. His reading of writers including Gurram Jashuva and Sri Sri encourages him to recognise ordinary people as legitimate subjects of literary representation.

Literature becomes a means of connecting personal experience to collective injustice. Satyam's intellectual development demonstrates how literary expression can cultivate political consciousness and challenge established hierarchies of language and social value.

The transition from colonialism to independence therefore appears in the memoir as a process of both achievement and continuity. Political freedom creates new opportunities, but caste and class inequalities continue to restrict the distribution of those opportunities. Gidla's account insists that national liberation must be evaluated alongside the unfinished struggle for social equality.

6. COMMUNIST POLITICS, AGRARIAN STRUGGLE, AND THE CASTE QUESTION

Communism becomes a decisive influence on Satyam's political development. Through discussions with fellow students and lecturers, he encounters Marxist interpretations of class relations, ideology, and social transformation. He becomes particularly interested in the Telangana agrarian struggle against the Nizam's rule and the power of feudal landlords.

The Telangana struggle provides Satyam with a framework for understanding the relationship between landownership and political domination. Peasants and agricultural labourers challenge systems in which powerful landholders exercise economic and social authority over rural communities. The movement demonstrates the potential of collective organisation to challenge entrenched forms of exploitation.

Satyam learns about the role of Communist organisers and the Andhra Mahasabha in mobilising peasants. The participation of activists from marginalised communities strengthens his conviction that revolutionary politics could provide an avenue for social transformation. His engagement with Marxist theory and revolutionary poetry further connects intellectual inquiry with political action. However, Gidla's account reveals that Communist politics was not free from the contradictions of caste society. The emphasis on class struggle could create the impression that caste oppression would disappear once economic exploitation was abolished. Yet the experiences of Dalit activists demonstrated that caste possessed a social and institutional force that could not be reduced entirely to class relations.

These contradictions become visible when Satyam organises agricultural labourers in Telaprolu, where wealthy landowners exercise considerable power over poor Dalit workers. Although Communist organisations advocate agrarian transformation, sections of the local leadership remain connected to landowning interests. The persistence of the paleru system, through which agricultural workers remained dependent on landowners, exposes the limitations of the party's egalitarian claims. Gidla identifies a caste dimension to this relationship: dominant caste landlords retained authority over workers who were predominantly drawn from oppressed caste communities.

The contradiction raises a fundamental question about revolutionary politics. A movement may advocate the redistribution of land and the abolition of exploitation while tolerating practices that preserve the subordination of its most disadvantaged members. When the interests of landowning supporters conflict with the demands of landless labourers, ideological declarations of equality may give way to political compromise.

Satyam's disillusionment emerges from this conflict. He becomes critical of leadership decisions that prioritise electoral participation or tactical retreat over the demands of exploited peasants. The debate over whether to continue armed struggle reflects wider disagreements about the relationship between revolutionary objectives and political strategy.

For Satyam, the issue is not simply whether a particular tactic is effective. It concerns whose interests determine political decisions. If a party refuses to challenge the domination of landowners over Dalit labourers, its commitment to social revolution remains incomplete.

The episode illustrates the need to analyse caste and class as interconnected but distinct structures. Class analysis explains landownership, labour exploitation, and economic inequality. Caste shapes the social valuation of labour,

occupational expectations, and the vulnerability of particular communities to exclusion and coercion. The two systems interact, but neither can simply replace the other.

Satyam's experience therefore represents a movement from general ideological commitment towards a more explicit recognition of the caste question. His participation in revolutionary politics exposes the limitations of organisations that proclaim universal emancipation while failing to challenge the privileges of their own members. Eventually, Satyam becomes committed to a revolutionary strategy influenced by Maoist thought. He believes that social transformation requires organised peasant struggle rather than exclusive reliance on parliamentary politics. His later involvement in the development of the People's War movement represents the culmination of this radical trajectory.

Yet Gidla does not present revolutionary commitment as an uncomplicated achievement. Satyam's political choices have consequences for his family relationships and personal life. His decision to prioritise revolutionary activity reveals tensions between collective political objectives and familial responsibilities. The memoir consequently offers a critical assessment of Communist politics. Revolutionary movements provided a language of resistance to exploitation and organisational resources for oppressed communities. Nevertheless, their emancipatory promises were limited when caste discrimination remained inadequately addressed. Gidla demonstrates that political movements must confront the internal inequalities of their own institutions if their claims to social transformation are to be credible.

7. EDUCATION, SOCIAL MOBILITY, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Education functions throughout *Ants Among the Elephants* as a means of challenging inherited restrictions and acquiring new forms of social power. However, Gidla does not suggest that education automatically produces equality. Educational advancement remains shaped by caste identity, economic resources, gender expectations, and access to institutional networks. The experiences of Prasanna Rao, Maryamma, Satyam, and Manjula illustrate different dimensions of this process. For the older generation, missionary schools provide literacy and access to teaching positions. For Satyam, higher education creates opportunities for intellectual exploration and political engagement. For Manjula, academic achievement offers a route towards professional independence while exposing her to the restrictions imposed on Dalit women.

Prasanna Rao's professional success is particularly revealing. His reputation as a capable teacher attracts wealthy Reddy landlords seeking private instruction for their children. Although these families possess land and economic power, they lack some of the educational qualifications and English-language skills available to educated Dalit Christians. Prasanna Rao's expertise enables him to earn additional income and improve his family's circumstances. This reversal complicates conventional assumptions about caste and social authority. The teacher possesses knowledge and professional competence that dominant caste landlords value, even as the wider social order continues to subordinate his community. Education creates a form of cultural capital that can challenge established hierarchies without entirely displacing them.

Satyam's experience demonstrates that educational access depends on more than merit. His intellectual ability and political commitment cannot eliminate the financial difficulties that threaten his studies. Educational institutions may formally reward achievement, yet students enter them with unequal access to money, social networks, and familial support. Education also cultivates critical consciousness beyond professional qualification. Satyam's engagement with literature, philosophy, and political theory encourages him to question established social arrangements. He learns to interpret caste oppression and economic exploitation as structural problems rather than individual misfortunes.

Manjula's trajectory offers a complementary perspective. She achieves academic distinction, obtains advanced degrees, and pursues a professional career. Her intellectual development demonstrates that Dalit women could attain substantial educational success despite social constraints. Nevertheless, professional achievement does not protect her from caste discrimination or patriarchal expectations.

The family history therefore challenges a simple narrative of educational progress. Education can expand employment opportunities and strengthen individual agency, but it does not automatically transform social relationships. An educated Dalit may remain vulnerable to discrimination; a woman may achieve academic distinction while confronting gendered restrictions; and a revolutionary intellectual may criticise exploitation while participating in institutions that reproduce caste inequalities. Education is consequently a necessary resource for many forms of emancipation but not a sufficient condition for equality. Its transformative potential depends on broader changes in social relationships, institutional practices, economic opportunities, and political representation.

8. GENDER, FAMILY, AND DALIT WOMEN'S AGENCY

The political and intellectual development of Satyam is inseparable from the experiences of the women whose labour and decisions sustain the family. Marthamma, Maryamma, and Manjula occupy different positions in its history, but their lives reveal the interaction of caste oppression with poverty and patriarchy.

Marthamma's story demonstrates the importance of women's labour in family survival. As a widow, she secures food

and income through precarious work. Her decision to approach the missionaries, develop her singing abilities, and accept employment demonstrates her capacity to respond strategically to difficult circumstances. Her responsibility for her grandchildren after Maryamma's death is equally significant. By ensuring that they continue their education, Marthamma transforms an individual commitment into an intergenerational project. The children's schooling depends on her willingness to move away from familiar surroundings and organise their lives under difficult conditions.

Maryamma's experience reveals the precarious relationship between educational advancement and social recognition. Her work as a teacher offers a degree of independence, yet her public appearance becomes a source of conflict when dominant caste observers interpret her clothing as a challenge to caste boundaries. The episode shows how caste regulation is gendered: women's clothing, mobility, bodily presentation, and public conduct become sites through which social hierarchy is enforced.

Manjula's experiences bring these questions into the postcolonial educational sphere. Her academic success and professional career challenge stereotypes about Dalit women's intellectual capacities. Yet she continues to encounter caste discrimination and family pressures. Her educational qualifications do not automatically transform domestic power relations or free her from expectations concerning marriage and family responsibilities.

The memoir suggests that patriarchal values persist not only in dominant caste society but also within Dalit families and political movements. A community may oppose caste discrimination in public life while maintaining gendered expectations within the household. This contradiction demonstrates why the struggle against caste must include a critical examination of patriarchal authority.

Dalit women's experiences cannot be treated as identical to those of Dalit men. Although both encounter caste oppression, gender shapes the forms of discrimination they face and the resources available for resisting it. Women must often negotiate caste restrictions alongside unequal domestic responsibilities and expectations about respectable femininity. Gidla's account therefore broadens the meaning of resistance. Resistance includes revolutionary activism and public political organisation, but it also encompasses the everyday decisions through which women secure education, sustain families, pursue professional careers, and challenge social restrictions. By documenting these experiences, the memoir demonstrates that emancipation must be assessed through women's autonomy and opportunities as well as through the achievements of male intellectuals and political activists.

9. TELUGU DALIT LIFE WRITING AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

The significance of *Ants Among the Elephants* extends beyond the history of one family, particularly through its contribution to Telugu Dalit life writing. The memoir also serves to bring regional experiences into a wider discussion of caste, modernity, and political transformation.

Dalit literary traditions have developed through distinct historical processes. Marathi Dalit autobiography has been strongly associated with Ambedkarite thought and the radical literary politics of the Dalit Panthers. Kannada and Tamil writing has also engaged with caste, religion, education, and social representation. Telugu Dalit literature has drawn upon a complex combination of anti-caste activism, Christian educational networks, agrarian struggles, Communist mobilisation, and literary experimentation. These differences should not be interpreted as a hierarchy in which one regional tradition possesses a more authentic Dalit consciousness than another. They demonstrate that political assertion takes different forms depending on the historical and institutional resources available to particular communities.

Gidla's memoir is distinctive because it refuses to organise her family's history around a single ideological tradition. Christianity, nationalism, communism, and education contribute to the family's development, but none provides a complete resolution to caste oppression. Each creates possibilities for transformation while remaining shaped by historical limitations and internal contradictions.

The narrative also challenges modernisation theories that associate colonial education and postcolonial development with the gradual disappearance of traditional inequalities. Modern institutions can facilitate social mobility while reproducing exclusion. Schools, colleges, workplaces, housing markets, religious organisations, and political parties are not outside caste society; they are among the spaces in which caste relations are contested and reproduced.

The memoir's intergenerational structure makes this argument particularly effective. It begins with ancestors who lose their land and become subject to caste exclusion. It follows relatives who gain access to missionary education and teaching employment, then examines a generation that enters higher education and radical political movements. The experiences of women reveal that educational advancement does not necessarily eliminate discrimination or patriarchal authority. Historical change consequently appears as uneven and contested. One generation may achieve professional mobility while remaining economically insecure. Independence may end colonial rule without eliminating caste discrimination. Revolutionary movements may mobilise landless labourers while preserving inequalities within their own organisations. Educational institutions may expand access while continuing to privilege students with greater economic resources.

Gidla's account also demonstrates the value of family memoir as a method of social history. Major events—including the Second World War, Indian independence, the Telangana agrarian struggle, and the development of revolutionary movements—acquire meaning through their effects on everyday life. The memoir further challenges the marginalisation of Dalit participation in the making of modern India. Its subjects are not merely recipients of social reform or political mobilisation. They actively interpret ideological debates, organise communities, produce literature, pursue education, and challenge the institutions in which they participate. Gidla's own migration to the United States extends the narrative beyond national boundaries. Geographical mobility does not necessarily erase inherited social identities or the consequences of caste. Her account invites readers to recognise that caste discrimination may persist in new contexts, even as its forms and institutional settings change. As a result, *Ants Among the Elephants* is both a historical record and a literary intervention. It recovers the experiences of individuals whose lives illuminate the contradictions of modern India, challenging accounts of national progress that overlook the continuing struggles of oppressed communities.

10. CONCLUSION

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among the Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* is a significant contribution to Dalit life writing because it connects familial experience with the wider social, political, and intellectual transformations of modern India. Through three generations, the memoir examines the relationship between caste oppression, land dispossession, missionary education, nationalism, communism, gender, and social mobility. Its central achievement is to demonstrate that modern Indian history cannot be adequately understood without examining the experiences of communities whose participation in its making has frequently been marginalised.

As a work of social history, *Ants Among the Elephants* recovers the experiences of individuals whose lives illuminate the contradictions of Indian democracy. As a Dalit memoir, it transforms familial memory into political assertion, challenging dominant accounts of national progress. It demonstrates that Dalit individuals and communities have actively participated in the making of modern India even when their contributions have received inadequate recognition.

Ultimately, Gidla's narrative establishes the continuing relevance of Dalit life writing as a means of documenting injustice, preserving intergenerational memory, and challenging unequal structures of power. The persistence of caste within religious institutions, educational establishments, political movements, families, and diasporic contexts demonstrates that emancipation must extend beyond individual achievement. It requires a sustained transformation of the social relations through which dignity, opportunity, and power are unequally distributed.

REFERENCE

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1990). The untouchables: Who were they and why they became untouchables? In V. Moon (Ed.), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches (Vol. 7, pp. 233–382). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1993). Waiting for a visa. In V. Moon (Ed.), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches (Vol. 12, pp. 661–691). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.
3. Anand, M. R., & Zelliott, E. (Eds.). (1992). An anthology of Dalit literature. Gyan Publishing House.
4. Beth, S. (2014). Hindi Dalit literature and the politics of representation. Routledge.
5. Bhukya, B. (2014). Being Dalit, being modern: Caste and culture in Hyderabad State. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.
6. Brueck, L. (2017). Bending biography: The creative intrusions of “real lives” in Dalit fiction. *Biography*, 40(1), 77–92.
7. Charsley, S. R. (1998). Caste, cultural resources and social mobility. In *Challenging untouchability: Dalit initiative and experience from Karnataka*. Sage Publications.
8. Charsley, S. R. (2002). Evaluating Dalit leadership: P. R. Venkataswamy and the Hyderabad example. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(52), 5237–5243.
9. Chinna Rao, Y. (2015). Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh: A historical outline of a hundred years. *Indian Historical Review*, 42(1), 113–139.
10. Dangle, A. (Ed.). (1992). *Poisoned bread: Translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature*. Orient Longman.
11. Gidla, S. (2017). *Ants among the elephants: An untouchable family and the making of modern India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
12. Gupta, C. (2017). Speaking self, writing caste: Recovering the life of Santram BA. *Biography*, 40(1), 16–43.
13. Jadhav, N. (2003). *Outcaste: A memoir*. Penguin Books.
14. Jangam, C. (2017). *Dalits and the making of modern India*. Oxford University Press.
15. Limbale, S. (2004). *Towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature: History, controversies and considerations* (A. Mukherjee, Trans.). Orient Longman.
16. Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. Sage Publications.
17. Rawat, R. S., & Satyanarayana, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Dalit studies: New perspectives on Indian history and society*. Duke University Press.
18. Satyanarayana, K. (2014). Dalit configuration of caste: Representation, identity and caste. *Critical Quarterly*, 56(3), 46–61.

19. Satyanarayana, K., & Tharu, S. (Eds.). (2011). No alphabet in sight: New Dalit writing from South India. Dossier I: Tamil and Malayalam. Penguin Books.
20. Satyanarayana, K., & Tharu, S. (Eds.). (2013a). Steel nibs are sprouting: New Dalit writing from South India. Dossier II: Kannada and Telugu. HarperCollins.
21. Satyanarayana, K., & Tharu, S. (Eds.). (2013b). The exercise of freedom: An introduction to Dalit writing. Navayana.
22. Satyanarayana, Y. B. (2011). My father Baliah. HarperCollins.
23. Shah, G. (Ed.). (2001). Dalit identity and politics: Cultural subordination and the Dalit challenge (Vol. 2). Sage Publications.
24. Shankar, S., & Gupta, C. (2017). "My birth is my fatal accident": Introduction to caste and life narratives. *Biography*, 40(1), 1–15.