

How Not to Write a Dalit Memoir

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In 'Ants and Elephants', Sujatha Gidla misrepresents or ignores legendary Dalit figures who built the communist movement in Andhra, distorts the struggle for Telangana and dehumanises the Dalit experience.

The shrouded lives of 'untouchables', also known as Dalits, in the form of life narratives are emerging as a niche genre in the Indian public sphere. This is because Dalits have emerged as a formidable political force, challenging their marginalisation and demanding social equality, dignity and right of representation. Even though historically, the anti-caste motif of Dalits as rebellious subjects existed for centuries in the form of everyday resistance, their access to writing culture under colonial rule added a new dimension to their politics of resistance.

While contesting dehumanisation by the Hindu Brahmanical caste system, Dalits are writing personal and family narratives of experiences of subjugation as a way to represent themselves and recuperate stolen humanity. These accounts are testaments against Hindu Brahmanical philosophy which justifies inegalitarian social relations and valorised them as religious *dharma*.

In both form and content, Dalit life narratives mirror counter-cultural narratives and provide a window into the everyday experience of Dalits as untouchables. They help us gauge the intensity of epistemic and ontological violence inflicted on them. For example, Bama's *Karukku*, Viramma's *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, and Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Baliah* narrate stories of existential struggles and triumph against untold miseries. They also narrate the indomitable courage with which the protagonists strived and fought to sustain and build their self-identity and carved paths of emancipation. The recently published semi-autobiographical memoir of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* adds another leaf to the collective narratives of suffering and emancipation.

Sujatha Gidla's narrative is centred on her maternal uncle K.G. Satyamurthy's life. He was one of the founders of the [People's War Group](#), the major faction behind the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh in 1980. Satyamurthy was popularly known by his pen name, Shivasagar, in Telugu public life. His legendary political life as a Naxalite is equalled by his revolutionary poetry which challenged the status quo and inspired millions.

A family's history

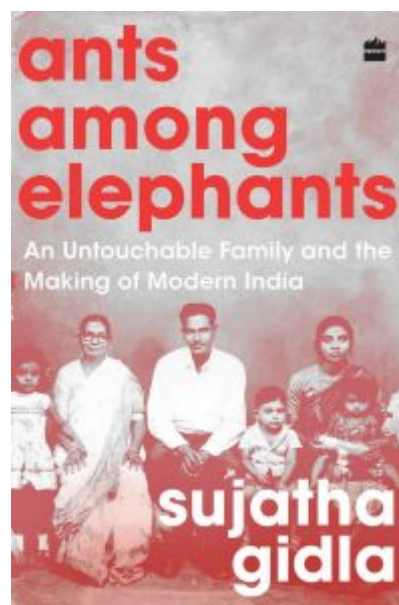
The counter-intuitive achievements of Satyamurthy obviously encourage one to dig into the history of his family. Gidla, being a blood relative, is awed by the aura of his life and politics. She rightly asks how Satyamurthy, from an inconsequential untouchable family, ended up founding an organisation which sent shivers down the spine of the state and its apparatus. In pursuit of an answer to her uncle's elusive political life as a communist revolutionary, Gidla begins with the roots of her family and the fascinating journey it made to escape from the inescapable stigma of untouchability.

Historically, Satyamurthy's family odyssey is similar to that of many of the coastal Andhra Mala Christians whose lives were entwined with the colonial state and Christian missionaries. Early Protestant missionaries, after their failed attempts at converting caste Hindus, turned towards the untouchables.

By then, the untouchable Malas and Madigas were already immersed in the anti-caste movement of Pothuluri Veerabrahmam, a non-Brahman seer of the 17th century who had fiercely contested Brahmanical dogmas and preached social equality. Christian missionaries expanded their work by using the network of the anti-caste movement and offered Jesus Christ as an egalitarian God and the church as a social space of equality. Moreover, educational and employment opportunities provided by the missionaries helped the Dalits to escape from caste bound occupations and villages, and further strengthened their ties to Christianity.

Satyamurthy's father, Prasanna Rao, and his mother Maryamma's access to education - and their careers as school teachers and the subsequent journey - follows this very familiar Dalit Christian trope. Sadly, the untimely death of Maryamma, leaving three young children behind, derails their journey and rocks their precarious lives. A shocked Prasanna Rao abandons his family to pursue a career in the army during the Second World War and the children were raised by their maternal grandmother, Marthamma.

According to Gidla, Satyamurthy, from an early age, was influenced by the nationalist movement and was inclined towards political activism. This uncanny interest of Satyamurthy twists the story of the family and leads it away from the standard Christian convert's narrative. Most Dalit Christians with missionary education and secure employment develop an apolitical and God-fearing submissive attitude. As Gidla narrates, Satyamurthy strayed away and pursued communist politics, this involving enormous sacrifice and ethical commitment on his part.



Sujatha Gidla,
Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017

Ironically in Gidla's narrative, the passionate and empowering struggles of her family turn out to be dizzy and depressing. As a historian specialising 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. A brief note about my own context will throw some light on what I write afterwards.

I was born in Nizamabad district and schooled in Adilabad; these two districts were the epicentres of the [Naxalite movement](#) in the 1980s and 1990s. I grew up seeing police camps all around and the corpses of Naxalites as though they were dead flies. I witnessed people from villages lined up and herded like cattle to police stations. Moreover, as a research scholar I was also fortunate to have spent time with Satyamurthy. Given my scholarly interests and my personal connections, I waited with excitement to read Gidla's memoir.

However, the book's factual errors, deliberate mis- or non-representations of Dalit and non-Dalit figures, negative portrayal of the Telangana movement and the dehumanisation of Dalit experience, including that of Gidla's own blood relatives', not only dashed my hopes but left me disturbed.

It forced me to read the book at least three times to make sure that I was not misreading or misunderstanding what was written. Since the book will remain as a historic testament and will be read by thousands, I feel - as a scholar in the field - that I must provide a perspective to correct the factual misrepresentations and critically assess the contribution of the text to the larger Dalit life narratives of experience.

Dalits and the communist movement in coastal Andhra

Since Satyamurthy's life is enmeshed in communist and Maoist politics, it is important to understand the historical context which brought him there. Gidla's presentation of Communist party politics and Satyamurthy's involvement misrepresents and grossly ignores legendary Dalit figures who built the communist movement in Andhra. Even though Dalits remained invisible in the mainstream communist party histories and were a mere social base as labourers and workers. A perusal of Telugu newspapers from the 1930s to the late 1950s as also secret reports of the police department reveal that Dalits were the vanguards of the communist movement as political and cultural activists.

For example, Nambury Sreenivas Rao from Machilipatnam in Krishna district was a famous balladeer and organised Dalits and other marginalised sections. He travelled extensively. Inspired by his songs and performances, people in many villages looted the houses of landlords in Krishna, Guntur and Godavari districts. The Madras police department formed a special police battalion to capture him and failed. Only after independence was he jailed and released after he gave a written undertaking to disassociate himself from the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Bethala Yesudas, a Dalit Christian from Tenali, organised Dalit agricultural labourers as part of the communist movement. He was also considered an outlaw by the Madras government and arrested after independence. Even in Vijayawada and Gudivada, much before Satyamurthy's time, Pakis, also known as Rellis (manual scavengers), were organised by Thupakula Simhachalam, a Paki himself, into the Municipal Workers Union under the Communist Party in Vijayawada. Simhachalam's moving autobiography, *Nenu Communistunetlaina: How Did I Become A Communist* (1946), provides the history of political mobilisation of the Paki community and also narrates the mistreatment of the Paki community even by fellow untouchable Malas and Madigas in the Vijayawada and Gudivada areas. Surprisingly, without even a scant reference to Thupakula Simhachalam, Gidla eulogises Satyamurthy as the pioneer in organising Pakis in Vijayawada. This ahistorical portrayal of Dalit lives not only erases the real heroes but is a gross injustice to activists.



Communist revolutionaries in Telangana during the armed struggle in the 1940s included Dalit fighters too. Credit: TelanganaStateInfo.com

Gidla discusses Guntur Bapanayya, another communist leader who lived in the same Slatter Peta slum in Gudivada where Satyamurthy's grandmother, Marthamma, bought a dwelling for them. Bapanayya was an elected member of the Madras Legislative Assembly and also general secretary of the Andhra Provincial Agricultural Labourers Association. Given the age of Satyamurthy at that time, Bapanayya would have been a source of inspiration to him as Bapanayya's brother-in-law, Nancharayya, was a lifelong associate of Satyamurthy. In this context, by the time Satyamurthy came to Gudivada to study, the Communist Party already had roots among the Dalits and established leaders among them.

Satyamurthy walked into a canvas of communist politics led by Dalits in their respective spheres and radicalised Dalit communist activism. Gidla's portrayal of Satyamurthy as the pioneer of communist mobilisation 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 monopolised 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 backs of Dalits such as Nambury Srinivasa Rao, Bethala Yesudasu, Gunturu Bapanayya and Thupakula Simhachalam.

Another thread of negative description related to the communist movement extends even in relation to the Naxalite movement. Gidla's negative portrayal of the Naxalite movement makes one wonder if she has a basic understanding of the movement or of the prison conditions she purportedly describes. She writes,

When members were recruited, they were assigned duties according to their caste. Barber caste members were told to shave their comrades' chins, and washer-caste members to wash their comrades' clothes. Untouchables, of course, were made to sweep and mop the floors and clean the lavatories... When they joined, they were not given a gun. Instead they were handed a broom and told to sweep the floors (p. 302).

It is true that communists including Maoists, refused to recognise caste-based oppression for long and emphasised the concept of the class enemy, but it is sheer fantasy to assume that the Naxalite movement recreated caste hierarchy in its organisational structures. Naxalites were not mainstream political parties with headquarters located in cities in large buildings. Naxalites had to run for their lives and were never stationed in one place for more than a few hours. Where then did they have lavatories to clean? Many times, Naxalites lived on food given by sympathetic villagers and tribal

communities. Accusing them of using the services of barbers and washermen is a sheer lie. Moreover, in the post-1969 Telangana movement, the Naxalite or People's War Group was built in Telangana villages by addressing the issue of untouchability, especially the two-glass system where untouchables Malas and Madigas in villages were not allowed to drink from the glasses meant for touchable castes. Glasses hung in a basket outside the tea shop and Malas and Madigas had to stand outside the tea shop and plead with a touchable caste person to pour tea without touching them. After drinking tea, they had to wash their own glasses and place them in the basket.

Before they emerged as Naxalites, most Dalit youth in villages who studied in social welfare hostels were organised into Ambedkar Youth Clubs which fought to end the two-glass system, the right to access to village ponds for drinking water and the right to walk on the main roads. I know countless Dalit youth who left their studies, joined the Naxalites and rose to become important leaders. So, Gidla's accusation against Naxalites is not only unfounded but is also a misrepresentation of facts on the ground.

Gidla also writes about Chandra Pulla Reddy, a guerilla leader as 'he arrived fashionably late, flanked by two glamour girls who looked like cinema stars (259).' Here, Gidla blatantly recreates familiar scenes from history - Gandhi being flanked by two of his young nieces and applies this to Chandra Pulla Reddy as though women in the Naxalite movement were mere dolls to hang around men as arm candy. Moreover, the negative portrayal of [Kondapalli Seetharamaiah](#) and his daughter Karuna and her husband Ramesh are far from the truth. Though Gidla is honest in acknowledging her anti-communist ideology, her portrayal of the communist movement and demeaning portrayals of individuals are farfetched. For example, she writes about a communist activist -

About the rapes, Satyam noticed, Pitchayya showed a certain excitement at the thought of rapes, which he was unable to conceal (P.61).

One wonders on what basis she is making these accusations against people who spent their lives to build a better world.

Negative portrayal of the Telangana movement



Sujatha Gidla. Credit: YouTube screengrab

As Gidla writes, Satyamurthy came to Telangana to work as a school teacher on the invitation of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, another founder of the Naxalite movement. In fact, Satyamurthy's ideological and political crystallisation took place on the soil of Telangana. His brother William Carey's marriage to a Telangana girl and his career as a physical education director at the Kakatiya Medical College in Warangal rooted them in Telangana. This is the reason why Gidla herself was

born in Warangal. Despite such an attachment to Telangana, Gidla presents the history, culture and peoples' struggles of Telangana falsely and from a colonial Andhra perspective. Her lack of a basic understanding of the social and cultural history of Telangana, including the [Telangana Armed Struggle of 1946-51](#), is apparent. She defines 'Vetti' thus:

Every untouchable family in every village had to give up their first male child as soon as he learned to talk and walk. They would bring him to the dora [landlord] to work in his house as a slave until death. (P. 42).

In her eagerness to draw North American parallels, Gidla equates Vetti to chattel slavery and writes,

Although based on traditional caste hierarchies, the vetti system was not a traditional system..... Like chattel slavery in the Americas, it was a modern product of the capitalist world market (P.45).

'Vetti' is caste-based free labour performed by untouchables and other marginalised castes. For example, untouchables work in the fields of landlords without pay and provide agricultural implements. Touchable castes such as shepherds, potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, washermen and barbers were bound to provide their services without pay. Given the caste hierarchy and the practice of purity and pollution, untouchables were not allowed to step into the living spaces of landlords and touchable castes. Gidla's reading of 'Vetti' is a direct application of the definition of chattel slavery of America to the Indian caste system and is an ahistorical application because 'Vetti' precedes the capitalist mode of production.

The ahistorical portrayal further becomes apparent in Gidla's identification of [Bhoomayya and Kishta Goud](#) [P.272] - (spelled as Gowda - a Kannada surname) - peasant revolutionaries hanged in 1975, as belonging to the Lambadis, a nomadic tribal community. It is obvious for anyone with even a little familiarity with caste that his surname makes it clear Kishta Goud was from the touchable middle caste of toddy tapper. Satyamurthy wrote glowing poetry on the martyrdom of these two revolutionaries, and we know that Gidla did not even read his poetry.

Gidla writes in chapter nine,

Even since Andhra and Telangana merged into one state, sentiment within Telangana had been turning against the Andhra migrants...Telangana people complained they could not compete with Andhras in any field.

This negative assertion not only speaks of Gidla's colonial Andhra attitude but also of her lack of understanding of the history of Telangana. Till 1956, the formation of the united Andhra Pradesh, Telangana's official language was Urdu. After the creation of a linguistic state, Telugu became the official language. Naturally, Andhra people took advantage of Telangana's lack of Telugu instruction, occupied all government institutions, started claiming a superior status to the Andhra dialect and denigrated Telangana accents and attire. She also writes,

A disgruntled Telangana Congress leader called on the people of Telangana to fight to separate from Andhra. So then sporadic attacks on Andhras living in Telangana turned

into systematic, government funded, police aided anti-Andhra pogroms - looting, rape, arson, murders...Carey was relatively safe. Not only had he married a Telangana woman, but also many of the Telangana thugs leading the anti-Andhra violence were his friends.... As long as Telanganas were killing and raping Andhras, government officials and police were content to join in the violence.

She also writes,

At a time when Andhras across the region were fleeing or hiding, Maniamma [Satyamurthy'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?

These lines reflect regional arrogance and historical ignorance. Gidla does a great disservice to Satyamurthy because as an ideologue and 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 peoples' commitment to the establishment of an exploitation-free society.

Moreover, Gidla writes that during the separate Telangana agitation, Andhra women were raped, Andhra people looted, and police and government officials supported the arson and violence. This assertion is not only a blatant lie but is also far from truth as scores of students from Osmania and Kakatiya universities were killed in police firing. It was the unhealed wounds that reawakened people to agitate for a separate Telangana state again. Finally, Telangana was formed on June 2, 2014.

Moreover, Gidla writes negatively about people who are marginal to the memoir, exposing their private lives. Even her understanding of the history of Telugu literature lacks basic understanding. She describes the writings of Chalam, a feminist writer in Telugu, as 'worse than pornography (p.53)' and also portrays Sri Sri, a seminal Communist poet very negatively.

Dehumanisation of Dalit experience

For centuries, Dalits lived with the stigma of untouchability and this normalised the internalisation of a negative self-image. One of the existential challenges for Dalits is to fight against everyday dehumanisation where the possibilities to build a positive self and escape from the oppressive caste system are closed, as Brahmanism denied education as a source of knowledge and consciousness and tied Dalits to occupations with no economic incentives.

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 -

I knew the cross-eyed, drooly-mouthed man was fucking my aunts (both of them), making children with them (p.5-6).

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.

Moreover, it is hard to believe Gidla's claims of her family's poverty. Both her mother and father had steady careers as college lecturers. College lecturers in India earn no mean salaries and can be counted as upper middle class with two salaries. Reading the memoir makes it clear that if anyone benefited from the family's struggles, it is definitely Gidla's mother. She was educated in a central university by the family, not a small effort in those days.

Ants Among Elephants is based on the subjective judgment of the author's mother, without even giving a benefit of doubt to other persons. According to Gidla, she wanted to strangle her uncle William Carey (Satyamurthy's brother) (p.12) because he was inarticulate in his old age. She accuses his wife of killing him. In the same vein, she accuses Satyamurthy's daughters of mistreating him and not getting him treated in time when he suffered a stroke.

After speaking to Satyamurthy's close associates, I gathered that Gidla's mother kept away from Satyamurthy and his family and did not have relations with her extended family members. In fact, after Satyamurthy went underground, his illiterate wife Maniamma raised the children on her own. Unlike Gidla, her cousins - Satyamurthy's sons - were not educated; one is a truck driver and the other a taxi driver. Satyamurthy died in miserable poverty.

All along, Gidla misrepresents known facts. Even her uncle Satyamurthy does not emerge positively from the memoir. For example, she says,

Ever since SM turned twenty, he had never been able to live without a personal aide to carry his things, clip his nails and so on. He did not even know how to shave himself (Pp.10, 84,113).

This depiction is far from truth because the Satyamurthy I knew never stood and watched when others worked. In the kitchen, he would cut vegetables, peel the beans and wash the plates. The portrayal of Satyamurthy as a grand seigneur might sound good but completely goes against the ethical and sensitive life he led. Even though the text has a powerful storyline, it goes against the purpose of providing a narrative of Dalit struggle and emancipation, because of the misrepresentation of facts and characters.

It is natural to have passion and be fascinated with characters, but this should not blind one to lose sight of facts, reason, rationality and sensitivity towards fellow beings. This is against the ethic of Dalit emancipatory struggles which aims to humanise humanity. Forgetting this ethic - which teaches fellow humans to make use of suffering to discover each other's humanity, rather than demonise others - is no way to write Dalit stories.

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The Wire

<https://thewire.in/caste/how-not-to-write-a-dalit-memoir>