

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and  
the Making of Modern India*

Author: Sujatha Gidla; Publisher: FSG, New York

## ANTS AMONG ELEPHANTS: AN UNTOUCHABLE FAMILY AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

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When I start to think/write/talk of anything (an event or people or places or a book or anything), I'm already confronted with the question: What is the relation of the author (me) to "anything"? After I express anything, it becomes something. Why do I need to express something? The anything merely gives an abstracted indication of positive possibilities that necessarily concretize or manifest or articulate themselves into finite somethings (Jaaware 2018). What Levinas writes about speaking is applicable in general, to all kinds of expressions. Writing becomes serious only when we pay attention to the Other and take account of him and the strange world he inhabits. As John Wild observes, "If communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given. I must be ready to put my world into words (or images or any form) and to offer it to the Other. There can be no free interchange without something to give. Responsible communication depends upon an initial act of generosity, a giving of my world to him with all its dubious assumptions and arbitrary features" ("Introduction," Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1979, p. 14). Writing a review is about writing a response to the words thrown at me; words are not merely words, but stories. More than that, as Sujatha says, "My stories, my family's stories, were not stories in India. They were just life" (p. 1)

The history of Indian society can be viewed and analysed as the

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history of the anti-caste struggle, resonated from the need for touch, communication and production. The framework for this perspective is not a tree, but a rhizome. A rhizome grows horizontally; when cut from the parent plant, the rhizome forms a new plant, unlike many roots that die. When a tree is a single vector aimed at a specific goal, the rhizome expands endlessly in any number of directions, without a centre. The book tells the stories not told by our textbooks. In a way, Sujatha, the writer and the recorder, couples together scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics for “revolution” or “the democratisation of our everyday life”. We have both a meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights or survivals. It was not the case that the communist party planned the Telangana rebellion (1946-1951), but the peasants forced the communists to take up the fight, to raise the slogan “Land to the tiller”. The tactics of Ailamma and the peasants, to form a cordon around her as she reaped the crop, was a turning point (previously the party’s activity was limited to adding members and submitting petitions), as it led to the formation of village defense forces, into which the women also joined. And the communists had been asked to take up the leadership of their struggle against the *doras* (feudal Lords) and the Nizam. That is an unknown part of our knowledge about history, the local memory, the unwritten. The book grows as new buds from the rhizome.

Sujatha did not intend to write the book, whereas she was desperate and curious to understand her and her family, how they became Untouchables; she started recording their stories, and later it became this book. There is a dominance of the written language over the spoken language, a kind of authenticity given to something recorded by means of text or images with references. If you search K.G. Satyamurthy on Google, you will end up with the news of his death. It is in that context that this book becomes significant; as the title itself suggests, this book is an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with our education system or all the knowledge systems sanctioned by the brahmanic state.

The known life of the family begins in the late 1800s, who were nomadic clans, subsisting on fruits, on roots, on whatever they could catch or snare. When the British cleared the forests for plantations, they moved into plains, settled around a lake and took up farming. They called the new settlement “Sankarapadu”. The local *zamindar* appointed by the British found the settlement, and started to levy taxes. He, with his family, and his caste moved near the settlement and also began stealing the land by force and through cunning means.

Eventually, the farmers or the producers were reduced to mere labourers in their own field. This is a phenomenon which continues even today in independent India. The national movement merely brought in a pause in the violence till the day of independence. Bourdieu's term 'symbolic violence' is apt to describe the practices of the national movement, which legitimated and naturalized the status quo, the caste system. It is often unconsciously agreed upon by both sides and is manifested in an imposition of the norms of the dominant social group on those of the subordinate group. A perfect example for symbolic violence is the situation when a brahmin, who is a disciple of Gandhi, says, "kill me before you kill each other." When Maryamma (Sujatha's grandmother) was insulted crudely by some uppercastes for wearing decent clothes, the Untouchable Christians of the village called off the Christmas celebrations and decided to demand an apology from the caste Hindus, which seems justifiable for us. And it was when the two groups gathered in the village square, that the brahmin disciple of Gandhi says so and asked the Untouchables to never again try anything that might provoke the caste Hindus. As the writer says, "this was the way his idol, Gandhi, always resolved caste disputes" (page) or contained the rage of untouchables or erased the violence against untouchables. And Gandhi became the father of our nation.

The book evolves around the lives of three siblings—Satyam or Satyamurthy, Carey and Manjula (Sujatha's mother), who were closely knitted together like a triad, but unique in their character. Satyam was a man who lived for revolution, for change, for a better world. "He saw himself as an uplifter of untouchables, not as an untouchable fighting for his own rights" (p. 63). He was always occupied with the question of how to make revolution in India. The call for "Quit India" drew him towards Gandhi, but the later withdrawal moved him towards Bhagat Singh and SC Bose. The college exposed him to radical Telugu literature and communist friends, despite the hunger and lack of money to survive. He believed that as a communist, one was supposed to think only in terms of class, and not of caste—which most of today's communists also believe. He was dynamic, even though it took time to understand the primary structure and form of exploitation or oppression in India—the caste system. His expulsion from PWG, on the allegation that he conspired to divide the party, (which was also a time of sharpening conflict between the landed castes and landless Untouchables, and of a growing Dalit consciousness) forced him to try organize untouchables and low-caste peasants on a caste basis as revolutionary vanguard.

The life of Satyam is not devoid of conflicts and contradictions, which also tells/traces the history of the communist movement in India. He was a member of the communist party, led the student strikes, organized peasants against landlords and the state. When the party split into two—CPI and CPI(M)—in the context of Indo-China war, he went with the CPI(M). When CPI(M) also renounced armed struggle in favour of a parliamentary path, he joined RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party) formed in the aftermath of the Naxalbari revolt. The Indian parliamentary electoral system legitimizes caste, with the territory divided into constituencies, which mostly consists of caste groups as vote banks. Ambedkar rejected the electorate system based on territorial constituencies, because the Dalits would then be in a minority and therefore deprived of representation. He then recommends “either to reserve seats, for those minority who can’t otherwise secure personal representation or grant communal electorates”—“separate electorates”; it has some similarities with the local soviets and the supreme soviets in the former Soviet Union. The RCP also split into two on the question of an immediate armed revolt in Srikakulam. He became the leader of CPI (ML) (CM)—for Charu Majumdar. The brutal so-called “encounters”, the killings and the torture crushed the Naxalite movement. Satyam and Seetharamayya launched another movement called “The People’s War Group” which became the CPI (Maoist) after 25 years. Fortunately or unfortunately, he was expelled from PWG. Interest, whether it be of the bourgeoisie or of the proletariat, is not the final answer; there are investments of desire that function in a more profound and diffuse manner than our interests dictate. As Deleuze observes, “There are investments of desire that mold and distribute power, that makes it the property of the policeman as much as of the prime minister; in this context, there is no qualitative difference between the power wielded by the policeman and the prime minister. The nature of these investments of desire in a social group explains why political parties or unions, which might have or should have revolutionary investments in the name of class interests, are so often reform oriented or absolutely reactionary on the level of desire” (Gilles Deleuze & Michel Foucault, *Intellectuals and Power*, 1972, p. 215)

Ambekdar in his 1916 paper, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, intertwines caste and class by saying “caste is an enclosed class”. Satyam was expelled from the party for raising the caste discrimination within the party. “Barber-caste members were told to shave their comrades’ chins, and washer-caste

members to wash their comrades' clothes. Untouchables were made to sweep and mop the floors and clean the lavatories" (p. 302). There is division of labour, division of labourers and division of comrades.

When Satyam was asked by Flora, the woman he admired, to enter her home through the back door, he didn't feel insulted or offended as he thought that he was entitled to respect their custom. Today, we make fun of ourselves and we make fun of our beliefs while continuing to practice them. We don't need to believe in anything for the belief to exist, somebody will believe for ourselves. Keep aside the Orthodox Hindus, in our officially atheistic, hedonistic, post-traditional secular society, where nobody is ready to confess his belief in public, the underlying structure of belief is all the more pervasive—we all strictly believe, by asking "why I am a Hindu?" or "why I am a liberal?". As Ambedkar says, "By brahminism I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of the Brahmins as a community. By brahminism I mean the negation of the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity. In that sense it is rampant in all classes and is not confined to the brahmins alone though they have been the originators of it" (*Times of India*, 14th February 1938). The story of Flora and her family intersects religion, caste and class. According to Ambedkar, the essence of caste is the absence of intermarriage—"endogamy". The idea of pollution or purity is not peculiar to caste or India; it is there everywhere in the world, through the division of race or gender or sexuality, etc. In the case of India, the idea of pollution originated among the priestly caste, the brahmins, and they enjoy the highest rank or privilege in the institution of caste. The rituals of widowhood, celibacy, *sati* and girl marriage came into practice, to dispose the surplus women and men of a caste (particularly women), and to maintain endogamy, the caste system and thereby brahmanic hegemony. "When brahmin girls widowed in their teens got pregnant, either through a secret affair or after being raped by relatives, the family would dispose of the offspring by leaving them at Christian orphanages" (p. 66). Flora's mother was one among those offspring, the father being an Untouchable Christian, but one who was in charge of a Canadian Baptist missionary. And that made her to reject the love of Satyam.

We must overcome the temptation to treat the "material basis" as the crucial part. What Marx was doing was not "political economy" but the "critique of political economy". The British colonial rule brought in multidimensional changes in terms of modernization, urbanization and industrialization. "What do you want? Coffee without milk or coffee without milk powder?"—like this, the liberal

modernization is giving choices, without allowing its citizens to change the framework of choice or to have a choice over the frameworks of choices. The nomadic clan converted to Christianity as a token of thanks for helping them get released from the jail. Then they began sending their children to the schools of missionaries. Sometimes the uppercastes were forced to take the educated Untouchable Christians as teachers in their school out of the necessity to educate their children. The missionaries, to an extent, maintained the caste system, even though they helped elevate the social condition of untouchables. As Anupama Rao says, the politics of caste became legible as a politics in the context of colonial capitalism, and the specific form of abstraction, to which capitalist society gave rise.

Manjula (also mother of Sujatha) is an exceptional woman, who worked hard, making herself proud, looked after her children, brothers, husband and sometimes the entire family. Her actions are termed by the author as “rebellion with obeisance” (page). She was not reactive in the sense that she didn’t look down upon herself as a victim, even though she faced violence because of her caste and gender, from her professors, college mates and husband. There are a lot of other people like Carey, Marthamma, Prasanna Rao, Maniamma and many others who provoke us to rethink and redo our lives.

Schedule Castes comprise 16.6 per cent (201 million) of India’s population, according to Census 2011 and Scheduled Tribes form 8.6 per cent (104 million) of the country’s population. The book underlines the problem of reservation policy, that “the untouchable Christians were excluded from this policy as a sort of penalty for having left the Hindu fold” (p. 62). It isn’t only the reservation, but many Constitutional provisions that exclude converted Untouchables. Thus, the space-time of the Untouchables or Dalits is larger than the politico-legal subject.

“Do you think this independence is for people like you and me?” The question was asked by a chubby dark boy, during the ‘once in a lifetime celebration’ on the morning after August 15, 1947, for which Satyam had no answer. “For weeks he (Satyam) had worked side by side with the other students, day and night, to help prepare these celebrations. But the solidarity he had felt was no more. Now that the common enemy was defeated, the differences between him and the other students came to the fore. He noticed he was not included in any of the performances” (p. 30).

Taking a cue from Richard Sennett, solidarity is a craft, not the product of rage or anger or injustice. Building a nation is also about

crafting solidarity, not only among the citizens but also among nations. The book *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* by Sujatha Gidla is a work of craft. It invites us to critique our everyday life, which is a prerequisite for understanding ourselves, the people around us, this nation, and the world. The title “Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable family and the making of Modern India” blurs the border between fiction and non-fiction, helps us to forget the temptation that all has to fit into a package. I believe that this book has a purpose, not to find the root of all problems, but to posit the history of struggle in Indian society in accordance with the need to explore and analyse contemporary tactics for liberation or revolution.

Presupposing a nation, the anti-caste struggle is always confronted with the conflict between the individual and the collective, the self and the Commons, the being and the world. Buddhism in the context of its being the religion of the first formed state in the Indian subcontinent and of the agricultural development had an emancipatory character, searching for the “interconnectedness of No self” in an ever changing process. Ambedkar was always in a effort to form a larger community, whether it be through the Independent Labour Party or the Scheduled Caste Federation or the Constitution or Buddhism or the Republic Party of India. The imagination or the idea of India as a nation is also evolving around the conflict between the individual and the collective, shaped by the entanglement of factors such as labour, gender, caste, capital, language, nature, religion, sex, sexuality, machine, digital and the state.

I wonder how the writer was able to accommodate the multitudinous nature of contemporary life in a book. Through a critique (I hesitate to call it merely a description, so I am calling it a critique) of herself and the immediate experiential space-time, the writer tries to locate it historically and analyse the strands of discourse and everyday-life practices of both the writer and her space-time. She disagrees with the programmes and tactics her uncle Ssatyam) followed both before and after his expulsion, including his different views on the strategic role of the struggle against caste oppression. As Richard Sennett says, the Left shouldn't have a programme, but should have a procedure. Not only the Left, all groups, communities and organizations should have a procedure that initiates the influx of subjunctive sentences into our language, the critique of the self and the immediate experiential space-time, or in more general terms, the democratization of our everyday life.