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Negotiating the National Space: Exclusionary Instincts of Modern India and the Dalit Resistance: A Reading of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and The Making of Modern India.*

Dr P. J. Sajin

This article examines Sujatha Gidla's book, Ants Among Elephants, through the lens of B. R. Ambedkar's perspectives on nation and nationalism. It explores the historical path of systemic exclusion of Dalits in Indian academia and politics. Gidla's book vividly portrays the journey of K. G. Satyamoorthy, a key figure in the Maoist guerilla movement of the 1970s, delving into his struggles, setbacks, and disillusionment. Through Satyamoorthy's story, the book offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics of caste oppression within Indian politics. Furthermore, it sheds light on the gendered and narrow-minded aspects of discrimination based on caste in Indian academia, illustrating the challenges faced by Gidla's mother as a college lecturer in her workplace.

Keywords: B. R. Ambedkar, Nation, Caste, Discrimination, Gender, Sujatha Gidla

For Ambedkar, India was a nation of acute disparity and fierce oppression. He experienced it all through his life and very clearly realised that caste was the detrimental institution behind it. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936/2007), when talking about caste's

pecuniary competence, Ambedkar wrote, "caste is, therefore, a *harmful institution* (italics mine), in as much as, it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules" (p.16). Later in the same book he again wrote about the autonomy enjoyed by caste and the stringency with which it prevented its exclusionary instincts. He writes, "there is no authority anywhere to compel a caste to admit a newcomer to its social life" (p.24).

The same perception prompted him to state in the Indian Parliament while submitting the Constitution on 25th November 1949 that the "castes are anti-national" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.46). For him, they were anti-national because "they bring about separation in social life. They were anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.46). Unlike many other leaders of those times, Ambedkar has no romantic fascination for the nation. His exquisite intellectual pragmatism in discerning the actualities of an otherwise varied civic society prompted him to say thus: "I am of the opinion that in believing that we are a nation we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation?" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.46).

However, he was not completely against the concept of a nation. He perfectly appreciated the significance of a "shared self-understanding [or] a collective self-consciousness" (Anderson, 1983/ 1996, P.20) and wholeheartedly supported it. His warning to the Indian people during the submission of the Constitution about the importance of being united in the social and psychological sense of the term nation aptly portrays this. He said, "sooner we realise that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the word, the better for us. For then only we shall realise the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realising the goal" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.46). It is important to note that he said this after doing whatever he could to protect the rights of the depressed and the minority classes of India in the newly drafted Constitution. The reservation system was solely an idea put forward by Ambedkar to accommodate these people. This shows that Ambedkar was not against the concept of a nation but it was the "ways and means for realising

the nation" that interested him the most. His struggles for the establishment of an inclusive policy that would help the nation become more democratic and compassionately impartial stand testimony to it.

During his deliberations with the caretaker Government of 1946 about the representation of depressed classes, Ambedkar said: "We like this country to progress as much as anybody else does. We do not want to stand in the way of that. All we want is that our position is safeguarded in future India" (Ambedkar, 2014C, P.238). Ernest Renan, the precursor to the field of nation and nationalism studies, had stated much earlier, "Forgetting … is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (Bhabha, 1995, P.11). Ambedkar was hinting at the same case of amnesia that the emerging Indian nation would practice on the depressed classes. He didn't want that to happen and strived to keep their case active in reminiscence. In his telegram to Mr Atlee, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain, regarding the inadequate representation of Scheduled Castes in the interim government for India by the Cabinet Mission, Ambedkar used the word "representation" multiple times and made it clear that "Representation to Scheduled Castes Congressman is no representation to Scheduled Castes" (Ambedkar, 2014C, P.224).

The position indisputably demonstrated his cognizance of the "appropriation" that could happen in the case of the depressed classes in India. All these make it unequivocally perspicuous that Ambedkar was not only interested in the semantics of the concept of representation but also in the syntax of its execution. In other words, it was more of a systemic rearrangement rather than a symbolic accommodation that Ambedkar envisioned. He stood for the pragmatic realisation of the material progress achieved through representation. Reservation was his solution for that.

But during the Hindu-Muslim divide in the 1940s and the consternation that resulted thereafter, Ambedkar had a different opinion. He argued that the people holding divergent opinions need to be acknowledged and we must accept the fact that they have a "perfectly legitimate right to exist and be recognised" (Ambedkar, 2014C, P.314). By advocating the idea of partition in his book *Pakistan*

or the Partition of India (1940), he was arguing, in realistic terms, for the apposite representation of Muslims within a nation rather than fascinating, in romantic parlance, about a unified yet politically unsettled and disputed land mass (Ambedkar, 2014d). But he never encouraged the Dalits to organize a similar kind of departure from the newly-imagined Indian nation. For them, he endorsed serious engagements and constant negotiations because Ambedkar believed that these are the only potential political weapons available for an otherwise fragmented populace to problematise the structure and idea of India and fight its deliberate amnesia. But this was not a new revelation for Ambedkar. He had realised it much earlier and the same understanding made him submit to Gandhi's obstinacy regarding the separate electorate for scheduled castes and signing the Poona Pact (1932).

After the Pact Ambedkar diligently focussed his time and academic calibre on achieving a deserving space for the "untouchables" within the national imagination. His fight to formulate a participatory democracy in India by embracing the Reservation System and incorporating it within the Constitution was one of the multiple negotiations of the national space that the Dalits had by then begun in India. His reliance on the powers of negotiation is all the more evident when he asks Indians to avoid the "Grammar of Anarchy" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.44)and resort to "constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.43). Writing to the Viceroy about the exclusion of the depressed classes from his council, Ambedkar noted, "I warn you that the Depressed Classes are not prepared to surrender their right to *representation* in the Council. I strongly urge you to *recognise* the same (both italics mine)" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.340). In an interview given to the British journalist Bevarali Nikolas, who praised him as one of the six best brains in India, Ambedkar said, "we are not a sub-continent of the Hindus but a *separate element* (italics mine) in the national life…. We are as staunchly nationalist as any of the Congress" (2014b, P.350).

So, the "separate elements" needed "separate consideration". Nothing less than that would satisfy them and no appropriations whatsoever, even if it is an alluring nomenclature like the "Harijan"

originally coined by Narasinh Mehta and popularised by Gandhi, would solve their issues. This was the ideological footing on which Ambedkar constructed his social outlook and this was in every sense unromantic. Therefore, he restricted all kinds of euphemisms from creeping into his thought process and it gave him the intellectual audacity to write thus, "I hate all the Mahatmas and firmly believe that they should be done away with. I am of the opinion that their existence is a curse to the nation in which they are born" (Ambedkar, n.d., P.66). But nothing of his strong disagreements did prevent him from engaging in debates and discussions with Gandhi and the Congress. He was not ready to sacrifice the real cause of his struggles, the emancipation of the depressed classes, for anything. Deliberations were made whenever possible to attain the same.

Looking at the history of the formation of Dalit identity in India, one could see so many such negotiations. Ayyankali did the same when he asked for equal social status, the right to walk on public roads and the right to education. His famous warning to the upper castes that "if you don't let my children enter the schools, no paddy but only grass will sprout in your fields" was a similar kind of negotiation. He was asking, of course in a harsh tone, for a legitimate share in public education so that the "lower caste" people could use it as a tool to engage with the nation. One of his dreams before his death was to see fifty graduates from his community. The only difference was that Ayyankali was engaging with the princely state of Travancore and Ambedkar with the British government first and the newly emerged Indian nation later. But both were negotiating for proper representation. The land struggles led by Adivasis and various other Dalit organisations all across India were also engagements with the nation. These struggles were for proper inclusion and democratic dispersal of public wealth. They were, in a sense, forms of engagement that the Dalits performed to negotiate with the national imagination.

Several instances of institutionalised murder, oppression, avoidance, annihilation and forced suicides of Dalits add to their struggles in India. Rohit Vemula, Vipin P. Veettil, Madhu, Indra Meghwal and the thirteen-year-old girl gang-raped in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh are some of the latest episodes in the long history of such

brutal incidents in India. The failure of the prosecution in producing believable proof and reliable witnesses in many of these cases cannot be considered natural or innocent. In most cases, the social capital enjoyed by the accused bears testimony to their innocence. Even courts pass judgements by giving leverage to the social location of the accused. But even then, the Dalits have no history of serious "anti-national" activities to their credit. The real faces of Dalit and Adivasi uprisal in modern India like Jignesh Mevani from Gujrat were asking for five acres of cultivable land for the scheduled classes. C. K. Janu, the late Laha Gopalan and the late Geethanandan from Kerala were also protesting for land ownership. Chandrashekhar Azad and his Bhim Army are running free schools for Dalit children in western UP. All these leaders and their protests are negotiations with the national imagination for space, recognition, and social capital, not a departure.

Other social platforms like political parties also exhibit the same separatist attitude towards the Dalits. In politics, avoidance is all the more evident but customary. Even in the twenty-first century, the number of Dalit legislators representing general constituencies in Indian law-making bodies is zero. One may say that the two recent Presidents of the Indian Union and another one a few years ago are from the depressed classes. It is true but if we look closely, we can see that their candidatures were just symbolic accommodations and not any systemic rearrangements which Ambedkar envisaged. Nevertheless, the depressed classes continue to involve in the democratic process of the nation and they constitute a major part of the vote bank of political parties in India. Earlier these conscious avoidances were overlooked under the pretext of merit. The upper caste leaders constantly argued that there is a huge vacancy for qualified candidates from these sections of society. But when the educated youth from the Dalit and Adivasi groups began to ask for proper representation, the caste leaders of the political parties began to raise the slogan of their casteless attitude and blamed the depressed classes for parochialism and inferiority complex. Thus, they succeeded in hiding their real intentions behind the blanketing term humanity. And again, during the 21st century, when their fragile logic began to crack under the massive pressure of Dalit politics, they started

accommodating the weaker sections into their fabric. Now it became a trump card for them to project their sincerity to the Dalit cause. But the enlightened Dalit intelligentsia no longer looks at it as anything promising instead, they go on with the problematisation of symbolic accommodation.

In recent years, several writers have come up with books depicting their or their relatives' experiences of caste discrimination. *Caste Matters* (2019) by Suraj Yengde, *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019) by Yashica Dutt, *I Could Not Be Hindu* (2020) by Bhanwar Meghwanshi and *The Weave of My Life* (2021) by Urmila Pawar are only a few among them. Sujatha Gidla's book *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) is a precursor to this stream of writing. By tracing the history of her family, Gidla portrays the trajectory of systemic Dalit exclusion in Indian academia and politics in her book. Born into a Dalit family in Andhra Pradesh, Gidla did her graduation from the Regional Engineering College, Warangal and she then joined as a research assistant in applied Physics at IIT Madras. Later she migrated to the United States and is presently working as a conductor on the subway. *Ants Among Elephants* portrays a searing account of caste-based discrimination in India. It is "[a]n Indian author's quest to understand her country's entrenched and debilitating caste system – and her family's place in it", writes Issac Chotiner (Gidla, 2017 b, n.p).

The book primarily focuses on the life and struggles of her mother Manjula, a college lecturer, and her maternal uncle K. G. Satyamurty aka Satyam, a political activist. Both of them are struggling to find a space within the national imagination of India. If it is to overcome the financial, marital, academic, and professional barriers for Manjula, it is the inequalities prevailing in society and politics that test Satyam till the end. Born into the "untouchable" Mala caste both of them had to face severe exclusions in their life. Gidla's uncle K. G. Satyamurthy is one of the principal founders of the Maoist guerrilla group in the 70s. Satyam enters into politics out of his conviction that a radical change in the social order is necessary for the common men to register their presence in India. He sees no scope in the conventional

political organisations of the times and decides to move into the terrain of left extremism. But this is not for any personal benefit. His struggles and creative writings – Satyam is also a poet – are all directed towards creating an egalitarian social order. All his struggles are focused on social change. But the very same political organisation that Satyam believed to help him achieve the aim fails him. At one point Satyam realises to his astonishment that his favourite comrades are also casteists. Their attitude towards him and his people is strikingly contradictory to what they preach. This is a great surprise for him and he becomes disillusioned. He tries to start a dialogue with the organisation hoping that a change in the ideology is possible. But he fails miserably. Gidla in her book records Satyamurty's struggles and his failure very vividly. This allows the reader an opportunity to delve deep into the intricacies of caste oppression in Indian politics.

Satyam once tells a newspaper reporter, "I am a Mala, an untouchable. Whenever I went for a bath, someone would leave something valuable in the bathing area to see if I stole it. They thought it was a caste habit and I guess they were testing me" (Das, 2020, n.p.). These "people" are his Hindu upper-caste party comrades! Gidla's extensive interviews with Satyam about his involvement in the party and finally his expulsion from it reveals a lot about casteism in India. Even an ideology that is built on the presumption of equality is being appropriated to cater to the intricacies of caste supremacy in this country. He reveals to Gidla that talking about caste inside the party was always taboo. Satyam slowly realised the fact that the grand narrative of communism is incapable of addressing the subtle nuances of caste discrimination in India. In 1987 Satyamurthy was expelled from the party for raising the issue of casteism and caste discrimination within the party. Ankita Das writes[:],

> But through Satyam's account, the history of shared deprivation amongst the untouchables could find expression, and through the innumerable instances of resistance against state oppression, the Dalit voice in post-independent India could be traced. The process though marked by failures reveals the relentless negotiations that the Dalit had to make; within the party, he had faith in restoring an

egalitarian society and the capitalist oppressive so-called developmental state (2020, n.p.).

When it comes to the case of Gidla's mother, the very narrative of caste-based discrimination becomes more gendered and parochial. Her mother Manjula, affectionately called Papa, was an ordinary girl. But her hard work and dedication finally helped her to become a government college lecturer. Manjula's struggles were for upward mobility in both economic and social status. She had to face severe and continuous discrimination in her workspace. Manjula was even harassed by "caste men" for wearing a modern saree in college. Her superiors enjoyed irking Manjula, a young mother of two children, for trivial reasons. But she was not ready to succumb. She negotiated for a space by constantly fighting against caste oppression within the academia and getting good education amidst severe financial crisis and the non-cooperation of her husband for her children including Sujatha Gidla.

Manjula's life is also an example of gender discrimination within the Dalit communities. Even when Satyam faces discrimination from his party and the society around him, he is accepted inside the family. But Manjula is facing discrimination not just from society and academia but from her family also. This is another area within the Dalit discourse where the question of the agency gets all the more problematised. Manjula's marriage is fixed by her family without even asking her permission. Her brother Carey beats her for having male friends and directs her husband not to be kind towards her. Manjula's husband also mistreats her and leaches off the money she makes from her job. Both Carey and her husband are the torchbearers of Dalit patriarchy in Manjula's life. But she is not ready to yield. She fights back and eventually turns out successful through her children. It is interesting to note that Manjula, even amidst all kinds of cruelty and harassment, refuses to consider the possibility of leaving her husband. Rather she stays back and negotiates. Her decision to continue in that unfavourable relationship is indeed an outcome of the societal pressure to comply with the conditions of family honour. But from another perspective, Manjula's decision to pursue the struggles by not leaving her husband can be seen as an act of negotiation with

the patriarchal structures of society. She doesn't want society to blame her for loose morality and risk the life of her children being bought up as deserted kids.

Sujatha begins her book thus: "My stories, my family's stories, were not stories in India. They were just life. When I left and made friends in a new country, only then did the things that happened to my family, the things we have done, become stories. Stories worth telling, stories worth writing down" (2017a, p.1). In India everyone is born into a caste. They also die in it. There is no escape from caste. As Ambedkar rightly pointed out, caste is not an arrangement or division of labour but "it is also a division of labourers" (2007, p.15). It is a "social division of people of the same race" (Ambedkar, 2007, P.15). All struggles for recognition and identity in India by the Dalits are premised upon this understanding of the caste. So, they primarily engage in dialogues and negotiations with the national imagination to release the rightful space arbitrarily withheld from them by the upper castes.

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