

**Book Review**

## **Struggles against Inequalities in ‘Ants among Elephants’**

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The title ‘Ants among elephants’ explicitly suggests the dissimilarities among the people. The spirit of human dignity would be dented when the noblest thoughts and deeds of a human being are weighed with prejudiced yardsticks such as caste, creed, race and so on. Reductionism, an off spring of the castiest mindsets, has taken the toll of many selfless Dalit activists in India. Therefore, it is the need of the hour for authentic Dalit narratives to rewrite and uphold the contribution of Dalits in social movements, Sujatha Gidla’s memoir, *Ants Among Elephants*, lucidly exemplifies it. This autobiography is not confined to depicting the family story as it is mentioned on the cover page but sheds light on larger issues which have been perpetuating in the Telugu States for decades. It reflects on the vibrant and conflicting political ideologies interlaced with the members of the authors’ family from the early days of the independence.

The author, Sujatha Gidla, is the niece of Kambham Gnana Satyamurthy, the co-founder of People’s War Group (PWG), popularly known as SM in the party, and as Shivasagar in Telugu literary circles. Initially, one can have a presumption about Ms. Gidla whether a techie settled in America with ‘high-fi lifestyle’ can write about social movements. But after going through a couple of pages, one can realise the seriousness in her treatment to the theme. Undoubtedly, this book will have along-lasting impression on the readers, particularly the readers who are well acquainted with the politics in the northern Telangana region. She studied at Regional

Engineering College (currently known as NIT) situated in Warangal and actively participated in student politics by associating herself with the Radical Student Union. Many senior journalists, professors and social activists would confirm how RSU was an easy tag used by the police to harass educated and politically active Dalit youth in Telangana region; she was also subjected to police brutality in her student life. Perhaps, this element plays a catalyst role in the minds of the readers to sympathise with the author.

The initial parts of this book talk about the transformation of KG Satyamurthy as revolutionary that was necessitate by his unquenchable love for literature in his college days. Reading of abundant literature had nurtured and nourished him with the sublime thought and invincible spirit to participate in social movements. A poem of Gurajada, a Telugu Poet, had an everlasting impact on him and that changed his perspective of patriotism; the lines are as follows:

*(Deshamante mattikadoy*

*Deshamante manusholoy)*

A Nation is not the soil

A nation is the people

These words explain how blind it is to believe that patriotism is worshipping the geographical features of the country without considering the existence of people and perils they face due to social and economic inequalities.

#### **OPERATION POLO: THE DAY OF BETRAYAL?**

The first portion of the memoir elucidates armed struggle in Telangana and tries to be in support of the betrayal theory when it comes to observing 17<sup>th</sup> September in Telangana, although the evidence was drawn from secondary sources from the memories of Satyamurthy. In Satyamurthy's childhood, one of his friends participated in Telangana armed struggle under the leadership of Comrade Puchalapalli Sundaraiyah. Satyamurthy could extract information pertaining to armed struggle whenever he met this friend. From that, he understood the bravery of Chityala Ailamma who fought against the arrogance of feudal lords who grabbed her land. Her bravery had fuelled motivation to the rest of the downtrodden communities to fight against different forms of exploitation like *vetti* practised by these feudal lords. Later on, this clamour turned into an armed struggle led by Communist Party of India with a popular slogan of 'land to the tillers'. As per the narration of

Satyamurthy's friend, lands were released from the clutches of feudal lords and distributed to the tillers in all the castes. No sooner they were jubilant; their lands were grabbed back by the feudal with the support of the Union government. Earlier, the zamindari system was reinstated by fizzling out the armed struggle. Satyamurthy conveys it was betrayal on the part of the state to defeat the interest of larger sections of people.

### **THE UBIQUITOUS CASTE DISCRIMINATION**

This memoir offers an outstanding account of caste discrimination, which has been a practice for centuries. When Satymurthy was a young boy, he was beaten by a Backward Caste boy for wearing knickers and compelled to wear loincloths. In this book, there is a vivid description of practices of untouchability within the Dalits too; one such example is when once Satymurthy was instructed by his own relatives not to meet people from another untouchable community, *Madigas* (Discrimination among the Dalits is the basis for today's MRPS movement for SC categorisation for an equal share of opportunities). Satyamurthy's dispassionate account of caste differences among Dalits and the way Dalits were humiliated by fellow Backward Communities describes the cruel existence of the caste in Indian social system.

Above all, Peoples War Group, once the brainchild of Satyamurthy, went on to expel him. Revolutionary parties, as alleged by SM, failed to annihilate caste within their organisation and humiliated all the lower caste comrades by assigning casteist works like a Dalit should take a broom, a barber should shave, and a washer man should wash the clothes of other comrades. He also said that before completing his argument in a central committee meeting, he was 'ruthlessly' handled by upper caste naxals.

The memoir explicitly emphasises on the juxtaposition between the objectives and practice of Revolutionary Parties and Christianity in India. As author puts forward they proclaimed to be the sources of emancipation but could not shed caste their prejudices.