

Caste, Impurity And Untouchability: Study Of Ants Among Elephants

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Abstract

Sujatha Gidla's autobiography, *Ants among Elephants* broadly discusses the idea of purity and impurity, and how it has dominated the age-old caste narrative. The memoir focuses on the lives of her parents, grandparents and their resultant inner turmoils. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the lives of indigenous people and their struggles in relation with caste hierarchy. This paper will examine the lives of lower caste Indians in the pre - independence era through the memoir of Sujatha Gidla.

Keywords: Caste, Gidla Impurity, Purity, Untouchability

INTRODUCTION

Caste system has been an indistinguishable part of the Indian society for ages. The rooted hierarchical structure of this system is the reason for evident struggle and suffering of the people placed vertically beneath in the social ladder.

Gidla's memoir *Ants among Elephants*, faced severe backlash from the critics based on its searing indictment of caste. Despite her autobiography having strong political undertones, it should not be overlooked as she herself comes from the tribal community. She mentions repeatedly in her memoir that her untouchability accompanied her like a dark secret, something she could never discuss with anybody. (Kumar 2017) Gidla's memoir joins the ranks of India's many indigenous writers who are telling their stories in order to be heard. (Bharathiraja 2019)

Beteille defines caste as a small group of people characterized by endogamy, hereditary and a specific way of life that includes the traditional continuation of a specific profession, usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system based on the concept of purity and pollution. (Béteille 2012; Paggi (2005))

Untouchability is a consequence of the ingrained hierarchical bias of this structure. One of the primary reasons of subjugation in caste system was the creation of a great divide that could not be crossed. A large number of lower castes were prevented from crossing the bridge due to the binary of purity and what is known as impurity, pollution, and contamination. (Guru and Sarukkai 2017, Lee (2021))

The concept of pure and impure forms the basis of this hierarchy wherein people placed at the top enjoy the privilege of purity, and those at the bottom of the social ladder are marked with signs of impurity and pollution. To such an extent that Gidla perceives this bias as a segregation of the village where the privileged shines with purity, while the underprivileged are treated like dirty dogs. (Gidla 2018)

Gidla holds the view that "Outcastes are also called untouchables because they are supposed to be so ritually unclean that the slightest contact with them will defile even low-caste Hindus." She further adds that Untouchables are not permitted to share meals with others, let alone intermarry with them, and are forced to live apart from the rest of the village in a separate colony on the outskirts.

Every caste has a hereditary occupation and specialization according to Varna parampara. This means that a group of people must follow their ancestors' professions, whether it is profitable or not. As a result, the Brahmins are supposed to be occupied with religious matters for saecula saeculorum while the outcastes were forced to work as sweepers, scavengers, cobblers, washer men, barbers, and so on. There is no room for individual preference or inclination. "This opposition underlines hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure: underlines separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate and underlines the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be separate." (Dumont 1970)

"The brahmins (who perform priestly functions), the potters, the blacksmiths, the carpenters, the washer people, and so on—they each have their own separate place to live within the village. The untouchables, whose special role—whose

hereditary duty is to work in the fields of others or to perform tasks which Hindu society considers filthy, are not allowed to live in the village at all. They must live outside the boundaries of the village proper.” Gidla laments how untouchables were forbidden to visit the temples, denied access to drinking water sources, while she was living in the outskirts of the village.

According to Gidla’s autobiography, the common issue faced by Dalits is a sense of shame and humiliation for belonging to a low and impure caste. Many Dalits’ only option for resolving this issue is to move away from their social group and to conceal their caste identity. To be accepted, they simply try their hardest to conceal their origins, which will compel them to tell lie after lie. Gidla shows this caste tension in initial pages of her memoir and says “You can tell the truth and be ostracized, ridiculed, harassed — even driven to suicide, as happens regularly in universities. Or you can lie. If they don’t believe you, they will try to find out your true caste some other way. They may ask you certain questions...If you get them to believe your lie, then of course you cannot tell them your stories, your family’s stories”. This concepts of repulsion and separation becomes the reason of segregation bringing into play the whole idea of purity and impurity.

Many Dalits in India assumed that converting to Christianity will be an appropriate solution to end many of the injustices and inequalities they endured. The misery continued as these new Dalit Christians, discovered that they are still discriminated against, both in society and within the church. Christian missionaries were more concerned with their ideology of saving souls rather than with the total liberation of Dalits. Gidla’s family was one of those whose ancestors converted to Christianity to avoid being harassed and killed by the police or to make ends meet. Gidla assumed that all Christians were poor like her family until she discovered that the caste system had infiltrated Christianity as well, and she belonged to the marginal section either way.

Gidla once asked a classmate why she was a respected Christian but Gidla and her family were not, to which the classmate replied, “We are brahmins”. She told Gidla that her family was from the Namboodiris Brahmin caste in Kerala... She explained that among the Namboodiris, the eldest son inherited all the property and was the only one allowed to marry. The remaining sons received nothing and were forced to marry lower-caste women or remain celibate. Therefore, as they converted, they continued to be “Brahmin Christian”. Even within Christianity, the Dalits remained at the bottom of the social ladder.

Untouchables had been prohibited from learning to read and write for a long time, but when missionaries opened schools, they welcomed even the untouchables, much to the angst of other sects. Therefore, to accommodate the local customs, the missionaries began to force untouchable students to sit on the floor, reserving the benches. By any chance, if the Dalits and untouchables managed to acquire education, they were always discriminated against.

Manjula, Gidla’s mother, has faced a lot of discrimination because of her caste, colour, and gender. Gidla cites numerous examples of teachers and their attitudes toward Dalit education. ‘Manjula feared another man: her history lecturer, Mr. Rama Prabhu. A dogmatic Brahmin who despised untouchables...Every day, every single day, he made Manjula stand up and scolded her in front of the class. “Why are you here? Education is not suitable for the likes of you.” All the students could see he was tormenting her for no reason. He always picked her to answer his questions. If she couldn’t do it, he would disparage her intelligence, and if she did answer, he would say, “So you think you know everything? You know nothing! A similar incident was narrated by Omprakash Valmiki in his widely acclaimed novel *Jhootan*, where in his initial school days, his teacher used made him clean the playground asserting that it is his work as an untouchable.

Manjula and others like her faced discrimination not only in their education, but also in finding jobs to survive. After seven years of temporary positions, night jobs, and oustings, Manjula finally received posting orders from the university board to report to Tirupati College. The principal there, Rajeswari, took one look at Manjula and said, “You have no job here. I won’t let you report.” Manjula could not believe what she was hearing.

M. N. Srinivas discovered in his research that, despite Christian missionaries’ efforts, conversion to Christianity in India only changed the faith but not the customs: the ranks of a Christian in the local community continue to depend on the caste from which he was converted. (Srinivas 2012) Dalit Christians face three types of discrimination:- discrimination by the government - discrimination by Hindu society - discrimination by high caste Christians.

A behavioural pattern observed among low caste people that has something to do with the infection of imitation has been studied by social Indian anthropologists: these low castes, or at least certain sections of them, attempt to change their status through a process known to social scientists as ‘sanskritization.’

Lower castes attempted to improve their status and move up the caste hierarchy by imitating other ritually superior castes through ‘sanskritization.’ This imitation-emulation can take various forms. A non-vegetarian lower caste may give up meat and become a vegetarian. This process does not significantly alter things and leaves the hierarchical system unchanged, but it does provide a reference model for the lower castes in their aspirations for status ascendancy.

Gidla's memoir contains numerous examples of her family attempting to adopt various caste behaviours in order to fit in. Gidla's grandparents pretended to be among the few caste Hindus who had converted to Christianity in order to rent a room in a Caste society. To maintain the charade, they stopped eating beef, which is only eaten by untouchables and Muslims in India.

Hindus consider meat to be impure, therefore the consumption of all kinds of meat is prohibited. Untouchables, on the other hand consumed even carrion beef—the flesh of cows that die by the roadside of old age or disease, thus considered impure.

The untouchable community expected a pork feast even when Gidla's uncle Satyam got married. A wedding in an untouchable colony is a festival, and the feast is at the heart of the celebration, and the pig is at the heart of the feast. When people assembled under the banyan tree to plan the feast, Satyam denied that there will be no pig... Satyam who grew up in a Hindu colony, under the influence of sanskritization stopped eating meat as a child therefore, he replied, "There won't be any meat." They couldn't believe their ears.

The Untouchables changed occupations, homes, and ways of life in order to improve their social standing and prove that they were more deserving of respect than their ancestors. Unfortunately, adopting new and more respectful lifestyles does not always assist low and outcaste people in removing the stigma of impurity and pollution from their lives. Instead of gaining respect, the mistreatment, violence and discrimination became part of their everyday lives.

This suppression and mistreatment took a form of internalized violence as they started accepting it as the ideal behaviour to be followed, which results in violence among themselves and in their domestic lives. Sujatha Gidla narrates the horrific incident that she witnessed as a child where "A hand grabbed Manjula by her hair, lifting her right out of bed and onto her feet. Prabhakara Rao was standing there like a dragon spewing fire. Then he slapped her face... The children's grandmother stood looking on with pride at her son's display of manliness".

The patterns drawn in the above paper showcase that how being an untouchable entails being mercilessly exploited, socially degraded and humiliated, passing on the internalized violence, being forced to live in unsanitary conditions, and frequently deprived of basic human necessities. Gidla and her family could not escape the clutches of caste system even through education and occupation, they remained engulfed in the paradigm of purity and impurity for their entire lives.

Conclusion: Gidla's memoir presents a subjective narrative which arrives from her observations and experiences as a woman from the lower caste community. Her narrative creates a dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed.

Gidla's personal experiences are significant when it comes to caste-based hierarchy. The caste system differs by the fact that the different castes do not form a horizontal series on the same plane. Gidla and her family lived through the system of gradation in which every caste has priority and precedence over some other castes except the highest and lowest.

The ingrained hierarchical thinking contaminated the lens through which the world was perceived, resulting in a world that could not exist without binaries. Even though tribals were not part of the caste system, the hierarchical pattern infests all aspects of their daily lives. The hierarchical stratification, with all of its implications and constraints such as impurity, hereditary occupation, education, job opportunities, unsanitary living conditions, and so on, greeted each untouchable at birth and followed him or her until death.

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