

***Ants Among Elephants* – Portrayal of the life of an 'untouchable' in
contemporary India**

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Abstract:

Ants Among Elephants is a compelling book written by Sujatha Gidla, which provides a nuanced and critical perspective on the anti-colonial movement in India and the subsequent attempts at decolonization. The book challenges the romanticized narrative often associated with these movements and sheds light on the complexities and challenges faced by marginalized communities, specifically focusing on the Dalit feminist experience. One of the significant contributions of the book is addressing the void within subaltern studies concerning the Dalit feminist perspective. While there has been extensive literature on the interventions made by marginalized groups in post-independent India, Gidla highlights a crucial gap – the exclusionary nature of the margin itself. In other words, despite the efforts to amplify the voices of the marginalized, there has been a lack of attention to the internal differentiation within these communities, particularly between the experiences of Dalit men and Dalit women.

Key words: Diaspora, Dalit Feminism, Naxalites, Marxists, Marginalisation etc.

Gidla emphasizes the need to recognize and understand the unique struggles faced by Dalit women, who occupy a distinct position within the broader context of marginalization. By bringing the Dalit feminist experience to the forefront, the author challenges readers to move beyond a monolithic understanding of the Dalit community and acknowledge the combination of identities within it. The book urges readers to appreciate the diversity of experiences and to recognize that the challenges faced by Dalit women may differ significantly from those faced by Dalit men. The emphasis on recognizing and understanding the unique struggles faced by Dalit women in *Ants Among Elephants* reflects a broader call for acknowledging the combination of identities within the Dalit community. Combination is a concept that recognizes that individuals hold multiple, interconnected identities, and these intersections shape their experiences and oppressions. In the context of Dalit feminism, it means considering not only caste but also gender as crucial components of one's identity.

Gidla draws attention to the fact that Dalit women occupy a distinct position within the broader framework of marginalization. While Dalits, in general, face discrimination and exclusion based on their caste, Dalit women experience an additional layer of oppression due to their gender. The book probes into the specific challenges, discrimination, and violence that Dalit women encounter, both within their own communities and in the larger societal context. The call to move beyond a monolithic understanding of the Dalit community challenges the tendency to homogenize diverse experiences. Often, discussions about marginalized communities oversimplify their experiences, overlooking internal variations. By bringing the Dalit feminist experience to the forefront, Gidla prompts readers to question stereotypes and preconceived notions about Dalits, emphasizing the need to recognize the complexity and diversity within the community.

Combination is a key theme in Gidla's work. The book encourages readers to appreciate that individuals within the Dalit community are not defined solely by their caste but also by other intersecting factors such as gender, class, and more. The experiences of Dalit women are shaped by the intersection of caste and gender, making their struggles unique and multifaceted. Gidla challenges readers to appreciate the diversity of experiences within the Dalit community. Not all Dalits face identical challenges, and the book underscores the importance of recognizing the varied social, economic, and political contexts that shape the lives of Dalit women. This nuanced understanding helps in avoiding simplistic generalizations and fosters a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of their experiences.

The book explores issues such as the prevalence of gender-based violence, discrimination within both Dalit and non-Dalit communities, limited access to education and employment opportunities, and the intersection of caste and patriarchy. By highlighting these challenges, Gidla urges readers to confront the complex realities faced by Dalit women and advocates for a more comprehensive approach to addressing their struggles. Gidla's work encourages readers to move beyond a one-dimensional understanding of the Dalit community, to recognize the combination of identities within it, and to appreciate the diverse and unique challenges faced by Dalit women as they navigate both caste and gender-based oppressions. *Ants Among Elephants* serves as a powerful intervention that not only critiques prevailing narratives but also highlights the importance of inclusivity within the discourse on marginalization. Gidla's work encourages readers to question existing frameworks, engage with the complexities of Dalit experiences, and underscores the urgency of differentiating between the experiences of untouchable men and untouchable women in the broader social and political landscape of post-colonial India.

Novelty in Form

Ants Among Elephants challenges and critiques the dominant and often romanticized narratives surrounding the anti-colonial movement in India and the subsequent efforts at decolonization. Gidla's critique goes beyond questioning established historical accounts and popular perceptions, aiming to disrupt any simplistic or idealized understanding of the events and their impact. The phrase "importance of inclusivity" refers to Gidla's call for a more inclusive approach in the discourse on marginalization. Inclusivity here means considering the voices and experiences of all members within marginalized communities, rather than focusing on a narrow or privileged perspective. The book advocates for a more comprehensive understanding that encompasses the diversity of experiences within the Dalit community.

Gidla's work prompts readers to question the existing frameworks through which they perceive and understand historical and social phenomena. By challenging readers to critically examine their preconceived notions, the book encourages intellectual curiosity and a willingness to reevaluate established paradigms that may oversimplify or misrepresent the experiences of marginalized groups. The complexity of Dalit experiences refers to the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by Dalit individuals. Rather than offering a one-dimensional portrayal, Gidla's work encourages readers to engage with the intricate web of social, economic, and political factors that shape the lives of Dalit people. This engagement fosters a deeper understanding of the nuanced realities they navigate.

The urgency of differentiating between the experiences of untouchable men and women underscores the necessity of recognizing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. Gidla argues that a comprehensive understanding of the Dalit experience

requires acknowledging the combination of caste and gender. This urgency implies a need for immediate attention to the distinct struggles of Dalit women within the broader context of post-colonial India. *Ants Among Elephants* is portrayed as a significant intervention that goes beyond criticism to advocate for a more inclusive, nuanced, and differentiated understanding of the Dalit experience. The book invites readers to question established narratives, embrace inclusivity, and engage with the complexities of marginalized experiences, emphasizing the urgency of recognizing and differentiating between the experiences of untouchable men and women within the social and political landscape of post-colonial India.

Gidla gives emphasis to the reflection of symbolic violence. The term "symbolic violence" typically refers to the subtle, often non-physical forms of violence that are embedded in social structures, institutions, and cultural practices. In the context of the book, this could involve the perpetuation of caste-based discrimination, exclusion, and humiliation that is not necessarily overt or physical but is deeply ingrained in the social fabric. The book seems to bring attention to the ways in which caste-based symbolic violence continues to affect the lives of Dalit individuals, particularly women. :

The book invokes the perspective of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's statement that "there is no caste but only castes in India" suggests a recognition of the diversity and complexity within the caste system. It challenges the notion of a unified caste identity and implies that the multitude of castes in India has contributed to the division rather than unity in the country. The assertion that "castes in India are the sole reality" reflects the argument that, despite efforts to promote a united India, caste divisions persist as a dominant and divisive force. This perspective contrasts with the Gandhian vision of a harmonious and united India, suggesting that the lived reality is far from the idealized vision.

The book touches upon the transformation of caste into class, suggesting that social divisions extend beyond caste lines to create economic classes. It also refers to the concept of "enclosed immobile classes," indicating a lack of upward social mobility and the entrenchment of social hierarchies that limit the movement of individuals across classes. The book highlights the existence of multiple patriarchies within the caste-ridden social structure of India. This likely refers to the combination of caste and gender, emphasizing that Dalit women face not only caste-based discrimination but also gender-based oppression. The reference to "untouchable bodies that find no language to fight Brahminism" suggests the profound challenges faced by Dalit women in articulating their struggles against the dominant caste structures.

The book notes the influence of Marxist ideas, particularly the arousal of class consciousness and armed struggle. However, it suggests that despite such Marxist influences, the narrative returns to the caste-ridden realities of India, particularly within the Nehruvian project of development. This implies a tension between class-based analyses and the deeply entrenched caste dynamics within the socio-political landscape. The concluding part of the book underscores the overarching theme of violence in the experiences of Dalit women. It suggests that violence, both perpetrated on and resorted to by Dalit women, plays a central role throughout the book. This violence is not only physical but also symbolic, reflecting the multifaceted nature of oppression faced by Dalit women. The book provides a complex analysis of caste dynamics, invoking Ambedkar's perspective, highlighting the lasting impact of violence on Dalit women, and navigating the interplay between caste and class within the broader socio-political context of post-colonial India.

This book discusses Sujatha Gidla's exploration of her identity and the complexities she faces in understanding it, particularly in relation to caste dynamics in

her village and the impact of religion on caste identity. It also probes into the experiences of her family, particularly her uncle Satyam and her mother Manjula, as a lens through which she uncovers untold histories of struggle, subordination, and exclusion. The book suggests that *Gidla* takes her readers through the perplexities she faces while reflecting on her identity. The disorientation mentioned implies the depth and complexity of the issues she grapples with in understanding herself. It suggests that her identity is not a straightforward or easily definable concept but is entangled with intricate layers of caste, religion, and social dynamics.

Caste as a Constant Identity

Gidla realizes that while religion could be used variably, her caste identity remains constant. In her village, the statement "caste is life, life is caste" underscores the inextricable link between one's caste and their entire existence. This highlights the pervasiveness and dominance of the caste system in shaping social relationships, individual identities, and life opportunities. The book explores the interplay between religion and caste. *Gidla* observes how, despite being Christian, her family's caste identity remains a significant factor. It highlights the internalization of exclusionary practices even within religious minorities, as they differentiate themselves based on caste for material gains. This reflects the complexity of identity dynamics in India, where caste often transcends religious affiliations. *Gidla's* family, including herself, stands at the peak end of exclusion. Despite their efforts to become upwardly mobile, they continually face exclusion not only from the dominant caste but also from various groups of untouchables, including their own. This speaks to the deeply entrenched hierarchical nature of the caste system, where mobility is challenging, and exclusionary practices persist even within marginalized communities.

Gidla traces the journey of her uncle Satyam and her mother Manjula, among other relatives, to uncover untold histories of struggle. The term "shit lily" in her university years suggests the derogatory treatment she faced based on her caste. Through her family's experiences, Gidla opens up histories of illegal subordination, pauperization, and extermination faced by the powerless, not only under the colonial state but also within the anti-colonial nationalist project spanning from Congress to Communists. The book implies that Gidla's family history reveals the challenges faced not only under the colonial state but also within the anti-colonial nationalist project. This challenges the idealized narrative of the anti-colonial movement and suggests that the struggle for independence did not necessarily translate into an equitable and just society for all. It sheds light on the complex interactions between caste dynamics and nationalist movements. The book underscores the intricate relationship between caste and identity, the intersection of religion and caste, the persistent exclusion faced by Gidla's family, and the revelation of untold histories that challenge conventional narratives about the colonial state and the anti-colonial nationalist project. Gidla's personal reflections and her family's experiences serve as a powerful lens through which she explores the complexities of identity and social dynamics in India.

Satire as a tool

This book highlights how the author, Sujatha Gidla, uses satire to draw attention to the absurdities associated with the identity of being a Dalit woman. It also emphasizes the careful examination of the processes that normalized these absurdities in Gidla's own life and the life of her mother. The text probes into the intersections of caste and gender, shedding light on the gendered nature of caste struggles within the broader context of Indian society. The use of satire by the author is a rhetorical device to engage readers by pointing out the absurdities associated with the identity of being a

Dalit woman. Satire often involves humor, irony, or exaggeration to critique and expose societal issues, making it a powerful tool to provoke thought and highlight injustices. The book suggests that casteism was normalized not only in broader Indian society but also within political parties like the Communist party. It critiques the acceptance of caste as a norm, even in political ideologies that claim to fight against social injustices. The author situates the struggles of Dalit women within the context of ghettoization and the filthiness associated with Dalit neighborhoods.

The book contrasts the recognition received by the author's uncle, who was a Dalit man involved in politics, with the unrecorded and unrecognized battles fought by her mother and other Dalit women. It underlines the gendered nature of recognition, where men's contributions are acknowledged more widely than those of women, even within marginalized communities. The intersection of caste and gender becomes apparent as the book explores how caste becomes gendered and gender becomes a qualifier of caste. The experiences of Manjula, the author's mother, illustrate how her caste identity influenced her life differently than that of her male counterparts. Caste consciousness among Dalit women takes a unique form as they navigate both caste-based discrimination and gender-based oppression.

Despite economic independence, the Dalit woman is not free from the unequal division of labor and the burdens of housework. This points to the pervasive nature of gender inequalities, even within marginalized communities. The book suggests that the agency of Dalit women is constrained, and they face challenges both within and outside their homes. The book discusses how Dalit women, in their pursuit of emancipation, may lose sight of immediate comrades and, instead, seek liberation within the confines of casteist practices. This reflects the complex dynamics of identity and resistance,

where the Dalit woman's struggle intersects with both caste and gender, often leading to divergent paths and responses.

Gidla takes her readers through the exploration of agency and finds it nowhere, not even in the Dalit female body. This suggests a profound sense of disempowerment and lack of agency for Dalit women, challenging common narratives that might romanticize or oversimplify the experiences of marginalized groups. This book highlights how Gidla uses satire to expose the absurdities associated with the identity of being a Dalit woman. It probes into the intersections of caste and gender, questioning the normalization of casteism, recognizing disparities in recognition, and exploring the nuanced struggles faced by Dalit women in their pursuit of emancipation.

Ants as Counter Narrators

Sujatha Gidla's narration in *Ants Among Elephants* traverses through the tumultuous history of Indian independence, the Telangana struggle, and the Naxalite movement. It draws attention to the atrocities suffered by minorities during these pivotal moments in Indian history. The author specifically focuses on the often overlooked aspects of caste oppression and gendered violence within the broader context of political movements and nation-building projects. The narrative floats through the bloody history of independence, Telangana struggle, and the Naxalite movement, shedding light on the atrocities faced by minorities during these turbulent times. By emphasizing these historical events, Gidla highlights the violence and struggles experienced by marginalized communities.

The book suggests that in the pursuit of political solidarity and larger nationalistic goals, the issues of caste oppression and gendered violence have often been overlooked. The author brings attention to the fact that the voices of those facing these specific forms of oppression have been silenced or marginalized within the historical narratives

of these movements. Gidla employs a feminist lens to provide a strong account of the voices that have been subdued in historical projects. Through this lens, she offers a perspective that highlights the experiences of women, particularly Dalit women, whose struggles have often been marginalized or ignored in mainstream historical narratives.

The metaphor of ants in the title *Ants Among Elephants* is used to describe the counter-narrators. The ants represent the untouchables who, despite their seemingly powerless position, become powerful counter-narrators. The analogy suggests that these marginalized voices, like ants, resist being trampled upon and, despite facing repeated oppression, find ways to sting back. The book concludes by asserting that history shall remember and be reminded of such resistance. This implies that the author aims not only to document the struggles and resistance of marginalized communities but also to ensure that these stories are not forgotten or overlooked in the broader historical discourse. *Ants Among Elephants* serves as a powerful narrative that challenges historical omissions, giving voice to the silenced experiences of caste oppression and gendered violence. The ants in this metaphor symbolize resilience, resistance, and the ability to make an impact despite facing overwhelming odds. Gidla's work contributes to reshaping historical narratives by centering on the voices that have been marginalized in the grander narratives of independence and social movements in India.

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