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Extended Commentary

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Gidla Sujatha, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. New York, NY: FSG, 2017, 306 pp., $28.00 (hardback). ISBN: 97808654781l4.

Manumarxism: Chronicles of Dalits in the Brahmo-Communist Movement in India

This is a coming-of-age story about the Kambhams, a genteel Dalit Christian family from Andhra Pradesh. It is about their coerced consciousness of being born into an oppressed group—an untouchable group/as untouchables. Having endured irremovable scars of tragedies and pains, and carrying sacrifices on their sleeves, this story is about Dalits' inescapable suffering and their isolation in the face of oppression. It charts the lives of the privileged who desire to strive for an egalitarian society, yet still maintain their oppression of others. This book chronicles the multistages in the harsh life of a family. This book shows how, in the spirit of encompassing revolution, Dalits earnestly work day and night to establish the order of equality so as to escape their harsh conditions. However, in this quest, they end up losing hope in ideologies that offer radical transformation. Satyam (SM), also known as K. G. Satyamurthy, and Manjula, SM's sister, are the hero and heroine of the book. SM is a self-boasting, proud man who never bothered to learn the basics such as cooking, shaving and buttoning his own shirt; in short, he had the air of a 'prince'. Manjula, on the other hand, is a bad ass radical and a forthright, staunch feminist.

If I had to choose between the two, I would easily vote for Manjula for her indomitable spirit and caring and nurturing heart that is felt throughout the book. A beautiful woman with charismatic confidence, she crosses the boundaries of the village, district and state, to get educated in the premier institutions of India in the Uttar Pradesh region, infamous for its hostility and notoriety against dark-skinned South Indians. Amidst the severe language barriers and caste and gender hindrances, Manjula does not give up, nor does she cow down to the bullying of the dominant-caste Hindu girls and professors. Concentrating on her studies, she not only excels but becomes an exemplar. After getting married to a

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man 10 years older than her, Manjula remains committed to the relationship and to her children. Suffering under the torturous regimen of her husband's violence and his loosening morale, Manjula dares to live a life of dignity in spite of the mountainous barriers heaped on her. She takes care of her job and infants single-handedly in the most adverse conditions. Her workplace is atrocious. The boss is anti-Dalit and this multiplies Manjula's grief. In the absence of her husband and any day care service, Manjula brings up her three children. Despite the problems at her workplace, her infants and poverty infected with caste–gender barriers, Manjula braves the odds and bequeaths one of the most important contributions that goes beyond SM, which is to be a self-reliant woman who is directing, supporting and birthing revolution. She lived a life of a revolutionary praxis. Giving her children the parental care they deserved and enlivening their spirits, Manjula becomes a woman like other Dalit women who deserve a place in the books of feministic diaries that transcend convoluted forms of gender-ascribed roles. Manjula in many terms represents the Dalit women of today.

The Kambhams have only miseries and torture to share in their life. They are rarely seen living the life of a normal family. They are constantly on the move. The story begins with the movement of the family from one location to the other. Each place they go to, they suffer as outsiders and untouchables. Their presence is not appreciated. Even the way they dress invites contempt. 'You untouchable son of a bitch! Who told you that you could wear knickers?' was the reaction when a young SM wore knickers over the loincloth deemed appropriate for untouchables. The simple act of wearing casteless clothes summons violence enacted upon their bodies. In the passages of mobility, the Kambhams represent the archetypal formation of untouchable livelihood. This presents Dalits as refugees within their own country.

The state, society, community and families are up against them. There is no peace and so much stress that one finds it difficult to survive amidst such a torturous life. The mother of SM, Manjula and Carey dies in their infancy. The father, Prasanna Rao, abandons his children when the children most needed fatherly parental care. SM turns into a layman by not dedicating his time to studies and instead ponders over the revolutionary dream that compounds his young life. The constant presence of police, violence, pain, displacements and irrecoverable debt animates the story of the Kambham family. Amidst cyclones of torture, how do they still manage to survive? The answer is found in the familial bonding and sibling affect that keeps the Kambhams alive. Carey is out there to help his elder brother SM and provide muscle and confidence whenever required. Manjula is there to support and take care of her brothers who are deprived of their motherly love. And SM, alongside dedicating his time to the people's struggle, derives energy from the assurance he receives from his siblings amidst unsheltered parental love. The sibling affinity is one of the strongest bonds in the familial condition of the untouchables. Similarity of experiences and nurturing of care have been the phenomenal attributes of the untouchables' lives that have kept them alive and moving ahead.

The reviews of this book in the Indian press are at times helpful and at others scornful. Had this book not been widely reviewed in the western hemisphere, it would face difficulty in making a noticeable mark, because caste as an issue would be part of everyday 'life' for the dominant caste reviewer to carry on with their active and passive oppression and not acquire a 'story' status worthy to pay enough attention.

Gidla has a unique descriptive style. It is emotional and arresting. She invites the reader to feel the sensation of a mother's tears who lies to her son about taking him to a fair and feeding him sweetmeat, and instead is enslaved under the *vetti, vetti* —an abhorrent slave system, in which one must give their first male child to the doras — "a class of great landlords" as soon as he learns to walk and talk. The parents 'kissed their son and held him *in their arms one last time*' (p. 42, emphasis mine). The flow of tears, embracing the baby for one last time, is as close as one gets to understanding the caste system. This 'one last time' has been the fate of slaves across the geographies.

The *dora*-like landowning groups, which eventually consolidated into a tight caste, grew out of colonial bootlicking and thuggery. The landowning castes in India were originally ass-kissers to the colonial or the monarchical powers. Their job was to collect revenue and keep records of lands (farms). The farmers mostly belonged to the Shudra and Ati-Shudra classes. Notwithstanding their duty, these employed classes of the governing structure opted to enter into mercantile activities. Setting up shops and offering conveyances alongside loans became their profit-making venture. Loans were the most winsome formula for these overseers to indebt the original owners of land. And thus, as Gidla puts it, 'unable to pay off these debts, the villagers gave up their land acre by acre. My ancestors, who had cleared and settled the area, were reduced to working on their old fields as laborers'. Once owners of land, the settled tribes were now enslaved on the fields of the overseers who notoriously owned the title of landlords, the one who controls everything on his lands—profits, people and labour.

Ugly Razakaars and the Hateful Church

Growing up in Nanded, a backward region of Marathwada, and ruled by the Nizam, we often heard stories of the riches of the Nizam. Having never been colonized by the British, there was less antipathy towards the British as there was towards the Nizam. The term Nizam was an honour as well as a crooked reference in people's description. As it goes, the Nizam was the richest king in the world. The *Time* magazine had put him on their 22 February 1937 cover (The Nizam of Hyderabad, 1937). I would often think of the Nizam's wealth being held high by the monarchical and aristocratic class of the world and his influence over Indian politics. However, in this very kingdom of riches, adored by the world, families like mine were heaped into inescapable marginalization. The elite Mussulmans were immigrants from the Middle East and from Western Asia who settled as rulers of the land. These converted Mussulmans carried their caste sensibilities and ensured the system remained intact. I heard about a conflict in a Muslim neighbourhood over marriage. If there is a conflict surrounding the issue of marriage, it is often a Hindu–Muslim marriage. There is a curfew, and law and order is called to broker peace. These are everyday instances in our regions. However, this time it was not a Hindu–Muslim marriage, but a marriage among the Muslims. Many were confused by this. The Mussulmans kept the issue confidential, within a small circle, so as to not present Islam in bad light. However, the oppressed-caste (Dalit) Muslims revolted and shed light on the heinous caste system in the Marathwada region. Many liberal and radical Muslims had little avenue to express their secular politics in the hate-driven communal politics of India. So it was always a bipolar argument. If you are Muslim, you had to follow the dictums dictated by the mullahs, and if you chose to do otherwise, social ostracization was the outcome. In the segregated households of the Muslims, the Nizam pride brimmed as it subscribed to a pan-Islamic world. This was experienced by a prominent freedom fighter of the area Swami Ramanand Teerth. For more on this and the elite-non-elite discussion of the Hyderabad state see, Varshney (2002). The subaltern-caste Muslims who were placed alongside Dalit ghettos had filial spite against the Muslim elites and as well as the Brahmanical Hindu elites.

The Nizam's rule maintained the profligacy of the landlords. It boosted Brahmanic Hindu oppression and managed to keep the untouchables in the lower positions of civil hierarchies. By marginalizing the poor converted Muslims, and subsiding the Sikh religion, Nanded became an epicentre of India's most flammable communal spots that continues to react to every situation, be it Dalit violence, Sikh movement, Hindu–Muslim riot, tribal struggle or the violence against transgender people.

The Nizam surrogated casteism, communalism, landlordism, autocracy and Brahmin–mullah supremacy. The Nizam had patronized subaltern subjectivity. He offered paltry support to the People's Education

Society (formed by Ambedkar) by offering land and some monetary assistance. In addition, he opened up space for Dalits to occupy positions of power. D. Shyamsunder emerged as one of the most important Dalit leaders of the Marathwada region. The Nizam's subaltern subjects had very little hope; however, his affect crossed the seven seas. Viewed within this context, Gidla's book reveals intimate experiences under the Nizam's misrule in the Hyderabad kingdom.

Gidla's story is representative of colonial modernity and its effects in the lives of the marginalized. Though, we often hear the benefactor of colonial progressivism being the native elites who compounded the benefits by acquiring the master's language, culture and religion to ascend into the hierarchies of local position. The cases of Gandhi, Mandela, Nkrumah and Fanon, speak to this rationale. However, what stands out in the case of subaltern caste groups in India is their determined fight against caste and colonial oppression. Thus, their struggle for equal rights and recognition marks a moment of colonized anti-colonial movement.

The imperial powers supported by the Church operated effectively to quell the early rebellion against the colonial oppression. The missionary efforts in the empire were focused on enhancing the spiritual–economic dualism of the colonized life. The Church did not rebel against the caste system, rather it accommodated the 'local customs' by providing a solid ground for the perpetration of the caste system. Given its influence and control—as part of the extended imperial authority—the Church became an accomplice in promoting the casteist dogma and remained another shadow of the Brahminical system.

Gidla's family conversion to Christianity offered them higher status and an escape from the everyday horrendous ritual-based caste system. At least, their family was not slaughtered for daring to enter the temples, or not summoning expensive Brahmins to their ceremonies. Thus, an upper rank of being a Christian over a Hindu untouchable coupled with modest English education gave Dalit Christians an upper hand. By the virtue of their access to the English language and Church networks, Christian untouchables could have been, by default, the leaders of the anti-caste movement. However, we do not come across any other such names as towering as Ambedkar, N. Sivaraj and Mangu Ram Mugowalia among the Dalit Christians. In effect, Dalit Christianity inserted ready-made tactics of escapade by shunning their morale to the diluent inferiority.

Christianity exposed the untouchables to a malleable modernity. At the least, they could have records of their ancestry. Many working-class untouchables in India do not own a paper and neither do they have oral memories of their ancestors' history and their past. On the other hand, Christianity also maintained strong ties to parochial conservatism. Manjula had to suffer in spite of her accomplishments and qualifications to get a good job. The Christian institutions had a problem with Manjula going to the movies and being a communist. SM met with the same treatment and was bitterly harassed for his communist activities by the Catholic institutions (pp. 254–255).

Political Mobility and Ambedkar's Clairvoyance

SM began as a staunch anti-British Congress supporter. Eventually giving up on Gandhi's looming working style, SM remained committed to the militant Congress led by Shubas Chandra Bose. Then losing interest to Congress, he drew inspiration from Bhagat Singh, then again coming back to Congress as a treasurer of the Gudivada Youth Congress, finally graduating to communist ideology for most parts of his life, and towards the end looking into caste politics closely by drawing inspiration from B. R. Ambedkar.

As a member of the communist movement, SM was committed to the separate Andhra movement. The separate Andhra state demand along the linguistic lines was in tune with Ambedkar's prognosis of

the post-partition India. Ambedkar considered the reorganization of the Indian states a much important issue for him to 'sleep over in silence'. Ambedkar had strongly argued for the division of larger states into smaller ones for effective governance. In his *Thoughts on Linguistic States* written in 1955, Ambedkar had proposed the one-language-one-state formula. However, he was also in favour of one language multiple states. He had then carved out a formula of separate states that strikes a balance between the majority and minority castes taking into account the sentiments of the state citizens. He feared the majority–minority complex would put the minority castes into the hands of the tyrannizing majority. In addition, he had suggested the average population of the state should not exceed 20 million.

Hyderabad was an important location strategically and culturally. Given the defence line of action and the geographical placing, Ambedkar had rallied for Hyderabad's status as a second capital of India. He had believed that the centrality of Hyderabad was not only a meeting point of the North and the South, but it was also a politically viable option. He had written:

> Hyderabad has all the amenities which Delhi has and it is a far better city than Delhi. It has all the grandeur which Delhi has. I do not see what objection there can be in making Hyderabad a second capital of India. It should be done right now while we are reorganizing the States…Fortunately, it can be very easily done with satisfaction to the whole of South India, to Maharashtra and to the Andhras. (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 171)

He saw this problem as easing the tensions between the North and the South.

However, the Congress ignored Ambedkar's formula only to be received with hostility further down the line by the Andhra people. The issue of division of states on the pointers suggested by Ambedkar ghosted up. Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad agreements to run a co-joint state failed and a separate Telangana agitation rose gaining momentum in the 1960s. Against this backdrop, we see SM rallying for the cause of a separate Andhra state and later separate Telangana. The on-ground actions of the community people are well presented in a concise form through the Chapters 2 and 3 in the stories of SM's anti-Congress, anti-state activities along with the communist support.

In the many told incidents and now a folklore, of Andhra state formation, the names of untouchables are invisible, thus making it appear as though the Andhra struggle was led by Manumarxist communists and radicals. The contribution of the untouchable peasants and landless wage labourers was important and the most volatile one (Benbabaali, 2016). The foot soldiers of these movements were fighting for food and a place to put their foot. No material rights came to the doors of the untouchables. After the revolution, the untouchables went into their dungeons and segregated ghettos laden with discrimination and humiliation. The dominant castelords continued their enslavement on the control of cane and initiated unaccounted violence. This reminds one of the warning given by Ambedkar regarding the failed romanticism of revolution in India:

> 'Men will not join in a revolution for the equalization of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally and that there will be no discrimination of caste and creed'.

As the promises of a new Andhra state dismally failed the Dalits, so did the legendary history of Andhra untouchables. SM, the popular mass leader of the movement, is an unknown name. A leader as young as Bhagat Singh was already leading a people's movement on the field by gathering subaltern groups through cultural troupes and literary evocations. At the age of 21, SM emerged as an influential leader of the separate Andhra agitation.

Therefore, read this work for calling a spade a spade. Read this treatise to experience the wrath and the unapologetic, straightforward, no-nonsense talk of a middle class highly educated Dalit woman –an infrequent sight, if you have not felt it. A Dalit woman in our popular imagination is a subservient,

modular and bended character who is there to *please* your senses, desires and lust. She is often a victim in tears. She is your maid, bai, *kaamwali* (female domestic help), shit cleaner, *aaya* (nanny), sharecropper, labourer on a construction site and a help.

Although sometimes misjudging the character of intra-caste relations and thereby loud-mouthing the personage of the caste system, Gidla's powerful voice is still undeniable and it is surely going to blow your senses. So read if you are in denial, if you are in support, against, a comrade or a nemesis of the profoundly equipped self-loving Dalit movement. This book is a welcome addition to the genre of Dalit literature that modernizes the love and culture of revolution.

A rich repository of vernaculars, religion and culture, it is a go-to book for scholars from multi-disciplines. It is a sophisticated work of art, rich with narratives drawn from ethnography, participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews. With the detailed researched references of historical incidents and taking from personal testimonies of majority of the actors discussed in the book, the author is seen committed to the project of unravelling the political position of untouchables in contemporary India. This book could well be a political treatise. It deserves a serious treatment and equally disciplined reflection.

Revolutionary Casteism

The caste communists are notoriously known to harbour strongest casteist sentiments in the movement and beyond. Even in the revolutionary praxis, the Dalits are termed as the lowest of the low vanguards. Communists like the Congress party have been an anti-Dalit establishment since inception. In West Bengal where communists ruled the state, their anti-Dalit politics conveniently excluded Dalit leadership. Alongside the Congress, the communists of West Bengal brutally suppressed the ideal political leadership of the Dalits in the state, for example, of Jogendranath Mandal. Mandal was promised an electoral support as an ally; however, no one except the Dalits voted for Mandal. It was later revealed that communist cadres were actively told to not vote for Mandal.

Similarly, as described in this book, the Dalit cadres of the People's War Group (PWG) complained about casteist experiences they suffered at the hands of fellow comrades in the revolution. The young untouchable cadres were assigned duties according to their caste. The untouchables did the filthiest job of cleaning the lavatories, the barber castes were told to shave hair and the washer-caste members were told to clean the clothes, thereby creating a protected revolutionary *varnsharma* dharma. The untouchables drafted themselves into the Naxalite movement to precisely fight against this tyrannical system. The caste was the main reason for their oppressive life. Therefore, when they attacked temples, they attacked the institution that spat on them for daring to enter; they attacked the *Komatis* (moneylenders) because they were the reason for their indebted life. They wanted to annihilate the caste system once and for all. However, their radical urge was misdirected into fighting against an imagined capitalist class that could only be resolved with Marx's Europe-centric indoctrination.

The growing numbers of 'upper'-caste sympathizers who joined the movement cherished an image of utopia. However, when they entered the movement, they were not told to fight against the prejudices of caste. The issue of caste as an important problematic factor was not encouraged to discuss. It was totally shunned. 'Talk of caste feeling inside the party had always been taboo' (p. 302). Instead, the toilers were encouraged to 'fight for the demands of the whole class, not for those of particular groups' (p. 305). This created a huge vacuum which is difficult to fill now. The party which was anti-capitalist was anti-Dalit as well. It rarely supported SM's radical activities even though he was often considered by the party leadership as an untouchable cadre placed on the margins.

Given these circumstances, India can never have a desired subaltern revolution. The revolution designed within the mandates of a bourgeois framework of neoliberalism is the talking point of the liberal elites. This perhaps is one of the stronger reasons that revolution remains a distant dream and is unable to sprout in recent times. The reason varies: revolution is a romanticized idea, revolution for self and not for everyone, and revolution as a way of life than a given state of order. Many dominant-caste Hindus who preferred to opt a radical move did not shed their biases and pungent discriminatory attitudes. Thus, their adoption to Maoism was not centred around camaraderie. It was centred around *varnsharma* dharma giving rise to the *chaturvarna* (caste system) in the hierarchy of revolution. The caste Maoists became Hindu Maoists and Hindu comrades or Hindu Marxists, reinvigorating caste-based sensibilities. S. A. Dange, a foremost Brahmin communist leader, had advocated Vedanta and justified the caste system as a 'necessity of divison of labor' matching Marx with Krishna for advocating a philosophy of economic determination. This is what happens when an imported product is nativized. An ugly imagery of profound stupidity is presented as a revolutionary model without base and structure.

One of the benefits of being a Brahmin in the communist movement was ascribing to the personal philosophies of religion and caste. Dange, like many dominant castes, did not relinquish his caste accretion and continued with amassing his spiritual privileges for his own advantage. Oxymoronically, these dominant castes saw Marxism in 'the Vedas and the Bhagwat Gita' (Teltumbde, 2017, p. 48). It is to the Brahmins and other dominant-caste Indian communism that there has been no real effective change, let alone revolution, on the ground. The contempt of the toiling masses, the Dalits and backward classes, towards Indian communism is not towards the ideology but towards the caste-laden leadership that is responsible for their suffering in the caste society.

Revolution was sold as a utopian dream and everyone was excited to file the ranks in the troops. However, they were not as committed as SM. The ones who went into armed struggle shamelessly left the battle in the middle when reality hit them by abandoning every principles of revolution. When they left the movement, they had properties to take care of or jobs to attend. Many flew into the cushy comforts of the USA using their caste networks, abandoning the comrades on field. As the leaders in the Marxist Leninist (ML) movement came from '"upper" caste, petty bourgeois strata that had joined the movement during the student days from elite/urban institution' (Gudavarthy, 2005, p. 5413), comrades like SM who were Dalits were deprived of this falling-back-upon-something opportunity. Dalits run the social and political movement with penury at home. Since their life was a testament of living revolutionary praxis, they did not find it necessary to turn back as they had nothing to fall on. Same huts, same slum, same poverty, same oppression and common death!

The extremely hypocritical form of communism has been in operation ever since it was led, directed and appropriated by the caste-Hindu communists—most of them Brahmins. During one of the election rallies in Telaprolu, a landlord stops the rally and demands the return of his *paleru* (bonded labour). The communists simply return the *paleru* without hesitation to his landlord against whom they were holding their rally. SM was a frontal man of the rally carrying the red flag of the party. Upon noticing this incident, SM intervenes and questions the party cadres. But he fails to raise an alarming protest over such anti-Dalit behaviour of the communists. In this act, SM conveniently fit himself into the party structures and joined the ranks of many Dalits of the revolutionary movement who silently allowed caste to function. Similar examples could be cited from elsewhere wherein the oppressed-caste folks were assimilated into the dysfunctional strategy of the communist movement. Malayapuram Singaravelu Chettiar, who himself gained the moniker of 'Godfather of the Indian Labour', was a giant leader from Tamil Nadu who worked with the likes of Iyothee Thassa Panditar as a Buddhist and Periyar EVR Naicker as a radical rationalist alongside Gandhian Congress before joining the communist movement.

Teltumbde describes Singaravelu's position in the communist party as someone who chose to concentrate on the theoretical dimensions of Marxism, meaning conservative reading of economic variances by overlooking the social structures of caste and untouchability. Singaravelu's position as someone who comes from the fishermen caste comes as a surprise when he had relative experience of caste as opposed to his Brahmin counterparts in the party. Teltumbde notes that the Communist Party of India (CPI) could influence the likes of Singaravelu to avoid caste in his approach in the struggle for social justice. If this is an indication of anything, Teltumbde says, one could only guess the take of the Brahmin leaders who were primarily the voices of the CPI (Teltumbde, 2017, p. 38). Like Singaravelu, Teltumbde states another Dalit CPI activist Jiban Dhubi who was incarcerated for 11 years for his activism with CPI was termed as a 'scheduled caste comrade', clearly drawing a fine line of caste ascription. In his searing critique, Teltumbde shows how the communists saw the emergence of Ambedkar as a threat to their leadership. They defiled his personality by calling him names and declaring him an imperialist supporter, and anti-worker, when in fact, Ambedkar had organically shown communism in practice. Citing overwhelming anecdotes, Teltumbde's proposition suggests that communists in India who were more interested in a creed version of Marx than Marxism were united with the Hindu zealots in their abusive tirade against Ambedkar. The communists could have easily looked up to Ambedkar as a natural ally, like other communist movements in the colonized world did by allying with respective progressive ideologies. However, the casteist gaze did not consider Ambedkar equal enough. The Brahmin communists even went further ahead by splitting the scheduled caste votary by fielding candidates against Ambedkar's party. In a very Congress-que passion, the communists proved once again that they were Brahmins first—'the chief political and intellectual leaders'[1]—and communists second.

Ambedkar's academic and as well as sociopolitical resume was by far the most suitable as far as relating to the philosophy of communism was considered—due to this exposure to the early years of Marxism discussed in the academic circles in the West, and his position as someone being from the oppressed community who centralized the cause of labour in parliamentary politics. However, the communists did not consider Ambedkar's quality as that of being revolutionary. Instead, they were mired with historically congenital practices of caste supremacy, and thus, with that lens at disposal, Ambedkar was as damned as a wretched Dalit. By detailing these pitfalls within the communist movement, Teltumbde conclusively shows the mirror to the casteist Brahmin class who paraded as communists.

Taking from the historical evidences of the Dalit communist's mistreatment, and their close encounters with casteism, SM, like many Dalit communists, have now given up the isolated position of 'class war' to a 'revolutionary programme' of the caste–class war. The fate of SM from being a mainstream communist leader to becoming a neglected anti-caste-class leader is indicative of many Dalit experiences in the communist movement in India. SM was heckled as a '*Naqli* Marxist' (phony Marxist) by Hindu Marxists in the struggle. Many Dalits who chose to go with the arms struggle faced two armies to fight and two enemies: the first being the caste army and the second the state. A towering figure like comrade SM who conspired a revolutionary struggle against the state fell only to see his comrades giving up on him. By avoiding the question of caste, SM became an archetypal token Dalit figure who could be spotted lingering in any non-Dalit movements as an untouchable who is used and tossed out whenever needed. Due to the revolutionary casteism, many post-Naxalite Dalit leaders and their families expressed a deep-seated hatred against the communist movement. During their work in the party, the Dalits in the struggle were identified as Dalit Marxists, and the ones who decided to leave and form a new coalition were ostracized. One such case is of two former leaders of the PWG and the Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India (M) who started a journal *Edureet* and established a Marxist–Leninist centre. In spite of its central focus on Marxism and Leninism, none of the ML parties gave it recognition.

The Dalit valour and loyalty are diluted from appropriate struggles and instead diverted into the struggles of others but sold as their own. After comrade SM was expelled for his anti-caste stand, it was

proved that the communists, right-wing members, centrists and socialists were all intimidated seeing the rising consciousness among Dalits. Carrying this bitter experience, SM launched a Samatha Volunteer Force in 1991 (Menon, Top Naxals woo Dalits to split People's War Group (PWG)). The objective was clear: 'The SVF will be a youth army to counter attacks made on Dalits Samatha Volunteer Force'—a tit-for-tat response. SM became widely appreciated in the circles of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh for his commitment to caste issues.

In his later years, the PWG's pro-Dalit stand especially in the wake of the 1985 Dalit massacres by the rich Kamma farmers in Karamchedu brought forth a mixed wave of reaction among Dalits. The PWG guerrilla physically eliminated the main accused responsible for the Karamchedu massacre; however, the pamphlet it released after the massacre failed to recognize it as an issue of caste violence. It instead subverted it as being a landlord–labourer dispute, squaring it into the brackets of class struggle. The Dalit leaders protested against such a formation. They framed it as an attack by the 'Kamma landlords' on 'madiga coolies' by asserting the palpable caste reason. Following the events of 1985, conscious Dalit intellectuals and Naxalites started getting hold of Ambedkar and they formed the Dalit Mahasabha (DMS), an organization that radicalized Ambedkar's revolutionary thought into action. They decided to fight the oppression through legal means. Such a move proved an anti-CPI Marxist–Leninist and Naxalite position by the new wave of the Ambedkarite Dalits who committed to a 'new Dalit democratic revolution'. Ambedkar's definition of democracy meant, 'a form and method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed' (Keer, 2016, p. 445). The manifesto of the DMS declared its primary objective: 'to annihilate the untouchability and caste system which are impeding their solidarity and along with preparing them to annihilate socio-economic inequalities'.[2] The PWG criticized Dalits for abandoning the revolutionary mandate.

The Ambedkarite politics in the Telugu belt dabbled with the Naxalite movement as an ally, at times seeing it as a representative of the caste hierarchy they were fighting against. However, a solidarity among these ideologies continued when the DMS journal *Nalupu* started to air its concerns against the state for its fake counters and ban on the PWG. And *Edureet* seeks to actively open up dialogues between the Naxalites and Ambedkarites. The agenda was set for redistribution of land on the basis of caste and ascent of Dalits and descend of the dominant castes from the party leadership. This was coupled with the Chunduru massacre of 1991 that brutally killed 10 Dalits. Against this background, angry Dalits committed to 'Dalit-only' leadership.

This confidence emerged out of the national-level wave of Bahujan politics led by the charismatic anti-caste organizer who floated an unbelievable caste-centric politics on a national level: Kanshiram. Kanshiram's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a widely popular political party, gained acceptability among diverse scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and the other backward classes. This attempt to forge a unity among the classes who were up against each other was welcoming to the neo-Dalit Andhra leadership. The Bahujan politics gained momentum in the DMS leadership who sought to work closely with the BSP that offered a collective unity of the oppressed classes to fight against the caste-based oppression under a common identity of Bahujan. Since the BSP came with a huge social base and political coinage, it became a natural ally to the radical Ambedkarite political leadership. The rise of the BSP was compared with the ML's failed efforts to bring about a revolution. It was stated that the BSP's ascent to the throne would bring about Indianized democratic revolution.

However, in spite of a rich radical caste politics base in the Andhra belt, the legendary leaders of the Scheduled Castes Federation such as Bhagya Reddy Verma, B. Venkata Rao, J. H. Subayya and Shaymsunder came out as towering figures in the Depressed Classes Movement. And the later figures of the post-independence era like Bojja Thakaram and Kathi Padma Rao find neither reference and nor recognition in Gidla's work.

We need to amplify the voices that align to the current interests. The current is an extension of a long and unattended struggle of the history. Gidla abruptly ends the book without giving hints to the situation of SM's post-communist party caste politics. She also does not give us enough to ponder upon the experiences of SM as a radical anti-caste leader. Ambedkar and his influence on the political scene of Telugu states and on SM are also not represented. Ambedkar, as a political radical, only finds mention towards the tail end, in the last paragraph. SMs loyal friend and a fearless radical, Nancharayya accompanied SM on cultural troupes and unfurled the black flag on tehsildar's office alongside SM during separate Andhra agitation. Nancharayya is an Ambedkarite who gauged the politics of the oppressed castes under the influence of Ambedkar. SM's book on Ambedkar titled 'Ambedkar Suryudu—Ambedkar, the Sun' does not find mention in the book which was a response to the casteist Hindu Marxists' abuse of the revolutionary movement of the Dalits (Navayan, *Sathyamurthy: People's Poet and Leader Who Lived and Died Among the People*).

Every oppressed writing is an outcome of social movement. Thus, it is a social product. We would hope that Gidla takes on the mantle of educating and leading the struggle of modern untouchables in the Western space where she is now based. Her leadership and courageous representation will only add strength to the anti-caste movement.

Notes

1. S. A. Dange commented against Ambedkar's first civil rights march in Mahad (Teltumbde, 2017, p. 49).
2. See http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/17193/13/13_appendices.pdf.

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