



## **My Father Baliah: A Tale of Dalit Madiga Family Who Fought Against a Casteist Society**

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### INTRODUCTION

Dr. Y.B.Satyanarayana (Yelukati Baliah Satyanarayana) is a first generation Dalit writer after the Independence. He hails from a poor Dalit Madiga family. For over three decades, he taught Chemistry, a subject in which he also took a PhD. As an academic, he has been part of several governing bodies, including the executive councils of Kakatiya University and Osmania University. A staunch follower of Dr Ambedkar's teaching, he began to take a keen interest in Dalit literature and history in the early 1990s, and started studying the progress of Dalits in various fields. On 14 October 2006, along with thousands of other Dalits, he gave up Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. He is currently the president of the Centre for Dalits Studies, Hyderabad. In this autobiography he has written about four generations of his family. The book is rooted in the Telangana Dalit Madiga experiences. Yet, the world that is presented to us is far removed from the urban, upper-class English-speaking world in style as well as in substance. For not only does Satyanaryana dwell powerfully and poignantly on what it means to be a Dalit in pre and post-independence India, he does so by altogether eschewing a narrative of individual success.

At the emotional heart of this narrative, is that simple and yet increasingly rare sentiment of gratitude. It is interesting too that while Dr B.R.Ambedkar is mentioned, the author chooses to highlight the familial sphere as central to his growth and formation. The spotlight is not on the broader Dalit political movement but on the struggles and sacrifices of the narrator's family-his father Ramaswamy alias Baliah, his mother Narsamma, his brothers Balraja and Abbasayalu and his sister Bachamma. It is a history of people told charmingly and with great honesty and reads like a tribute to them. This book is written with the desire to make known the inhumanity related untouchability and the acquiescence and internalization of this condition by the Dalits themselves.

### ABOUT MADIGA COMMUNITY

Madiga is a Dalit artisan group. They are also known as Maadiga, Maadara, Adi Jambva, Maatangi, Makkalu and Madigaru. They are from Scheduled Castes and are found primarily in the southern Indian states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Orissa, Chhattisgarh. The Madigas were historically marginalized and oppressed. Their socio-economic standing today has been improved through the impact of their classification as a Scheduled Caste. Traditional work of Madiga community is making footwear, leather work and tanning. The women help in hide tanning and act as midwives. They work in agriculture, though not many own their own land.



## STORY OF FOUR GENERATIONS

Y. B. Satyanarayana narrates the story of four generations beginning with Narsiah and his son junior Narsiah, junior Narsiah's son Ramaswamy alias Baliah and one of Baliah's sons Y.B. Satyanarayana, the author himself. It is about the history of the family members who overcame the oppressive caste system and feudalism by dint of their hard work and education. Satyanarayana has stated in the Preface:

*“This is the story of three generations of my family, and I have woven it together from the memories I have of conversations with my grandfather Narsiah, my father Baliah, my aunt Pentamma and my elder sister Bachamma. Mainly, though the incidents narrated here were recounted by my father after his retirement when, every evening, I would get him a drink and sit by his side while he told me stories about the days when he and my mother struggled to raise us.” (xix)*

There are thin lines that split the lives of Dalits in three parts- Before the British rule, Under the British rule and after the Independence. There used to be a societal supremacy and suppression by upper caste before the British arrived in India. There was an authoritarian practice of inhumane regulations posed on Dalits by the upper caste people. But when the British Raj, the administration began a policy of constructive discrimination by reserving a certain proportion of government jobs for the subordinate lower castes. But, this too did not break the mindset of discrimination; the Dalits were discriminated again at the workplace, civilization and in the educational institutions as well. In this autobiography Satyanarayana has written about the events and incidents of suffering which his family has experienced from last four generations. Every generation of his family represents a particular era and it will help in understanding the predicament of Dalits.

During the late nineteenth century Satyanarayana's great-grandfather, the senior Narsiah received a huge tract of land gifted by Nawab Mir Tahaniat Ali Khan Afzal ud Daulah, the fifth Nizam of the Asif Jahi dynasty of Deccan. Once when the Nizam was passing through the Vengapalli village, Narsiah had presented him a beautiful pair of shoes made from the hide of a young calf. In return Nizam declared a gift of fifty acres agricultural land to Narsiah. But, being untouchable the local Dora, the village chief permitted Narsiah to occupy only two acres of land. When Dora, died his cruel, arrogant son took his place. Later on Narsiah's entire family died due to Cholera except he himself and his son Ramaswamy ails Baliah.

## JOB IN RAILWAYS WHICH OPENED THE DOORS OF DEVELOPMENT

British Raj took drastic changes in the life Dalits and other backward classes. To facilitate their own economic growth, British began to take a keen interest in developing the local infrastructure. There were hardly a few of British to manage the Indian administration. So, they started to offer jobs to Indian people. To run the government system they gave jobs to educated upper caste people in administration who were usually Brahmins and in departments like Railways where man power has required they gave jobs to lower caste people. Here also upper caste people were not ready to accept Dalits at the work place but the British government forced them to work with Dalits. In many ways, it was the British Indian era that opened the doors and avenues of development to the Dalits.



Now Narsiah's main concern was for his son Ramaswamy who lost his mother at such a tender age. With the help of his uncle Narsiah got a job in the railways. Narsiah's uncle requested to a Gora sahib (white sir), a British officer and Narsiah got job of pointsman. Here Satyanarayana gave a detailed picture of the world of gangman and pointsman and the heavy, arduous menial jobs that they had perform to earn their living. It was a period of early twentieth century. In those early days of the railways, people were also required in large numbers to aid the formation of trains by coupling coaches to the engines when required, and detaching them when no longer necessary. This process was known a 'shunting' and those who worked at this job were said to work in the 'operating' department. A person working thus was at the lower rung in the job order and was designated as a 'pointsman'. Pointsmen could get seriously injured if they slipped while running on the tracks; sometimes, they even came under the wheels of the moving bogies.

Ramaswamy alias Baliah's story starts from here. Ramaswamy was five years old child when he lost his mother Abbamma. For taking care of him his father Narsiah had married again with Ramakka. There was a school in the neighborhood of Ramaswamy. After finishing his work at home, Ramaswamy used to spend his time watching the school children and their activities from a distance. His keen young mind wanted to learn to read and write, but being an untouchable he was not allowed to even enter the school. When he said his father that he wants to go to school, Narsiah looked at his innocent face and said, "*Dear child, we are Harijans, they won't teach us.*" But when Ramaswamy said that he won't touch the teacher at that time Narsiah could only say, "*No son, we are not supposed to write and read. We commit a sin when we do that.*"

After narrating this incidence Satyanaryana has written:

*"Narsiah had no answer to his son's argument; he was unable to explain to his son the laws of 'Manusmriti', that sage Manu had codified everything about the Hindu way of life, and untouchables had, for centuries together, been segregated. Sin and punishment – papamu and dandana – are infallible tenets of Hindu laws regarding Sudras and untouchables. This ideology conditioned the minds of untouchables to believe that they would be committing a grave sin if they went against this law. According to Manu's laws, touching caste Hindus amounted to a sin, so did standing or sitting in front of them, and wearing a turban or footwear in front of them." (22)*

Argument with Narsiah did not satisfy Ramaswamy's young mind. He wanted to read and write and his wish came to realize when the Mullah (a Muslim priest) who used to live in his neighborhood said that he is ready to teach him. With the help of Mullah Ramaswamy became first person in the family who can read. After some time Narsiah got transfered and they moved to Secunderabad. Narsiah requested Gora sahib to give his son a job in Railways and soon at the age of fifteen Ramaswamy got a job as 'box man' at the Bellampalli railway station.

As yet, untouchability was strictly observed, particularly by women. Untouchable Dalit box-men were not allowed to enter the houses of the upper-caste guards. They had to wait outside till the guard's trunk was brought out by guard's wife. These



women insisted their husbands to sprinkle holly water on the box once it was placed in the railway van, and they did the same when it was brought to the house. As soon as Ramaswamy got job in Railways his father Narsiah started searching a girl for him. Soon he find Karpati Malliah's ten year's old beautiful girl Narsamma. The wedding was lavish by the community's standards. It was a grand wedding although they were Dalits. Malliah gifted some kind of gold jewelry to his daughter. In those days untouchables could hardly afford silver jewellery or if they can afford the upper caste people will not allow them to wear it. Satyanarayana says:

*"This had been possible only because it was in the railway quarters and not in village, where higher-caste landlords would never have allowed such pomp and show by the untouchables." (45)*

We can find similar incidence of caste discrimination in Phoolan Devi's biographical movie 'Bandit Queen', directed by Shekhar Kapur in 1994. Where newly wedded Phoolan Devi goes to the common well to fetch water the Thakur women don't allow her to put her mud-pot in their queue because she was from the lower caste. On the way back to home some rowdy Thakur boys break up her pot by slingshot. After coming back to home she asks her mother-in-law "*Why don't you get a brass pot, like Thakur wives?*" and her mother-in-law replies "*Who do you think you are, a queen?*" this was a time of 1980-90. All though, the untouchability was abolished and Dalits have right of equality by the law in 1955 but, after that also they were not even allowed to use metal pots.

#### ALLEGATION OF STEALING AND IDENTITY CHANGE

Once, Ramaswamy was implicated in a case of theft in Secunderabad, one of his friends was caught red-handed while stealing a bottle of liquor from a carton in a wagon. As Ramaswamy was standing by his side, he too was interrogated and was dismissed from service. Seeing his distress, Ramaswamy's father Narsiah implored the higher officials to reinstate his son into the service. Narsiah who had a good reputation in the railway office was able to secure a job for his son with one condition. The assistant personal officer proposed that the name Ramaswamy should be changed in order to suppress the incident. Ramaswamy took a new name Baliah Ankus.

#### REALIZATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

In the later period Baliah became a father of eight children. He realized the importance of education and insisted that his children should be educated in order to get job in the railways to put an end to their suffering. Baliah's world revolved round railways. He had the dream of making his children not collectors or bureaucrats but railway officers and stationmasters. Baliah left no stone unturned to get his children educated. He inculcated the same passion in his children and most of his children too imbibed the same urge and of their father to be educated. They all had a secured childhood though the living condition was appalling. Although Baliah learned to read and write a little, his sons are the real first generation learners in his family. Baliah was determined to help his sons to pursue higher studies at any cost. Balraj though very young started doing odd jobs to help the family's earning. At the age of sixteen he got a job in railways as Box-man and later on got promotion to a Points-man. Narsamma worked as an agricultural laborer, leaving behind her breastfeeding boy in Bachamma's care.



Satyanarayana's story starts from here; he was a sixth child of Baliah and Narsamma. Baliah's second son, Abbasayulu, was at the railway school in Secunderabad. Though he could not afford to send the younger children to the railway school where Abbasayulu studied, Baliah was determined to send them to school wherever he worked. The three boys - Narsimlu, Anjiah and Satiah (author himself) – went to school wherever Baliah was transferred. They often walked long distances to reach the primary schools, which were usually quite far from the railway stations.

The children often faced humiliation at school since they were the only children from the untouchable community attending school. They were made to sit separately and were not allowed to take water from the school pots; they had to go to distant place, into the Harijanwada (area where untouchables and other backward people used to live) to quench their thirst. India had just become independent, but schools in the rural areas were as stubborn as they had always been. After few years Baliah was transferred to a place known as Bonakalu, which is a part of Andhra region. Here, the school was a mile away from the railway station. Baliah's three sons were the only untouchables in the primary school; they had been admitted by the schoolteacher only because of the stationmaster, to whom Baliah had made a special request. Satyanarayana and his two elder brothers had to walk a long distance early each morning to reach school.

#### SATIAH TO SATYANARYANA

Author tells that how his name has been changed. When he was in the ninth standard, one day their headmaster called him in his office and suggests him that he should change his name. He said, *“Look, Satiah, you are also good at your lessons. You may become a big man in the future. But your name will come in the way of your progress. I advise you to change your name to Satyanarayana.”* (138) although he was a Brahmin by caste, he had always taken keen interests in Dalit untouchable students. Sometimes, with the parent's approval, he changed the names of students if, in terms of caste, it seemed to represent something contemptible. The headmaster did this while sending their names to the Board of Secondary School. In Satiah's case, the suffix ‘-iah’ gave away his caste. The headmaster knew that the name ‘Satiah’ directly symbolize his caste Madiga and it will became an obstacle in author's life one day. After that Satiah became Satyanaryana.

In 1961 Styanarayna passed matriculations exam in second division. Despite several odds and adversities, the author Y.B. Satyanarayana pursued higher studies and became a professor, obtained a Ph.D in Chemistry and became the Principal of a college, a post he held until his retirement. As he knew the pain of discrimination against the Dalits, Satyanaryana founded a voluntary organization to lend a helping hand to Dalits. After getting inspired by thoughts of Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on 14 October 2006, along with thousands of other Dalits, he gave up Hinduism and embraced Buddhism.

We can find that superstar Rajnikanth is reading this autobiography of Dr. Y.B. Satyanaryana in the opening scene of his blockbuster movie ‘Kabali’, directed by Pa. Ranjith in 2016. This movie is based on Karl Marx's theory of ‘equality’. Rajnikath had played a role of Kabali who fights against the oppression faced by the Tamils working in Malaysia as laborers. The movie shows the current predicament of Dalits in the society. One of the scriptwriters of ‘Kabali’ is also the translator of this book in



Tamil. Satyanaryana thinks that the book will make more impact on youngsters because of this movie. In his interview he has said that, “*Rajnikanth fans follow him from tip to toe. What he reads in a movie might be read by the fans as well*”.

#### CONCLUSION

The biography ‘My Father Balaiah’ portrays the life and intense struggles of protagonist Balaiah who faces innumerable hurdles in his journey of life. It is a history of relentless struggle of an untouchable community against social and economic discrimination, against oppressive caste hierarchy, against feudal conditions and against ridicule humiliation. It presents the socio-cultural landscape of the marginalized communities of the Telangana region of over two hundred years. In temporal reckoning, it stretches over a period of great change and turbulence in Indian history from colonial times to Independent India. It is also a story of changing lives.

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