



Siddalingaiah's Ooru Keri: A Story Of Bitter Truth

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ABSTRACT

Literary means of autobiography is an account of a person's life written by himself or herself. Autobiography does not speak only about author but also it deals with incidents and experiences. Autobiography is a part of a literary genre that brings personal accounts of life in public domain. They incite others too to relate with their human emotions and circumstances with lived-up reality of the writer. Autobiographies of Dalit writers are called as narrative of pain, it carries certain historical truth. We can find such stories of bitter truth in different languages. The Dalit writers have developed it as narrative of struggle against caste monopoly. One important feature of such writings is that they are strongly social assessments of Varna system which declared Dalits as most inferior and untouchable part of society. In this struggle, autobiographies serve as moral source for Dalit movement. They split open the pain and sufferings experienced by Dalits under the rigidity of tradition. The paper is an attempt to explore Ooru Keri, autobiographical writing of Siddalingaiah. He is an Indian poet and playwright writing in Kannada language, and a Dalit activist and politician. Powerful narrative with simple but elegant language makes this book a great work of art.

INTRODUCTION

Siddalingaiah was born in 1954, Magadi, Bangalore, Karnataka. He is credited with starting the Dalit-Bandaya movement in Kannada and with starting the genre of Dalit writing. He is one of the founders of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti. He was honored by Sahitya Akadmi award in 2003 for his autobiography Ooru Keri. He is acknowledged as a symbol of the Dalit movement and leading public intellectual in Karnataka.

Siddalingaiah is one of the India's foremost Dalit writers. He has written Ooru Keri first in Kannada language as an article in the Kannada magazine Rujuvatu, and the English translation by Dr. D. R. Nagaraj (editor and critic) came out in the magazine section of Deccan Herald during 1995. With five parts of nostalgic memories, Ooru Keri was again translated by S.R. Ramakrishna (Founder and Editor, The Music Magazine) in 2003 and was published as Dalit autobiography. Siddalingaiah's Ooru Keri portrays his life-long- struggles with poverty, hunger, and humiliations in the village Magadi of Karnataka.

VILLAGE STRUCTURE

Ooru is the place (village, a town) where all non-Dalit castes- from the Brahmins and the land-owning castes to the service castes like the barbers- live, and it contains the settlement's main temples. Keri is the place where Dalits live; it is geographically separated from the main body of a village; socially, it is set off from the mainstream society. By tradition, village has various lanes which have represented Indian caste systems but there was no place for Dalits in lane of village; they were thrown out of the village. In relation to this, Siddalingaiah's Ooru Keri begins with same view: '*Ours was the last house in the colony.*' (1) His house was last in the village, its roof had collapsed. It was made by mud and slight high which shows that how Dalits are backward. He further narrates about his house: '*Our house was very small. It was not enough for four or five people to sit comfortably, leave alone seep.*' (70)



Due to economic troubles, his family migrated from place to place. Graveyard settlement was one of the migration places, where he lives out of house. It shows that Dalits have no firm address as they are forced to migrate from one place to another place.

SUFFERING, HUMILIATION AND MIGRATION DUE TO POVERTY

Siddalingaiah's parents were uneducated and worked as farm laborers. Ainoru's field was only source of income for them. However, they worked in their land. They used to cultivate the Ainoru's as sharecropper and get low-income, sometime nothing. He grew up like any Dalit wanton boys- humiliated and unable to comprehend why his family was made to suffer. His early memories, he said, were of how his father was unable to find work in Magadi, causing the family to move finally to Bangalore. Being citizen of Bangalore, his father worked in nearby firewood depots to run the family. His people used to go to collect tuber, yams, and greens to make night meal. They are their main food. The people of his colony got into debt by Marwadi shop. Many a times they even failed to pay the interest upon the debt.

Food plays fundamental role in Dalit society. Once, Siddalingaiah's father Dyavanna took him to an orthodox Brahmin's house. The Brahmin land-owner gave them previous night's leftover. Siddalingaiah never saw and ate a complete food like the leftover. Therefore, he narrates:

*When Appa, Avva and I went town and stood in front of his house,
he gave us the citranna and poori left over from the previous night.
I had never tasted these delicacies before. (2-3)*

Though he stood in the front of door, but his concentration was at leftover.

Similar incident can be seen in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons: We Broke*, when Yeskar Mahar used to roam for collecting a bundle of stale food and used to return home, where everyone waiting to taste the leftover:

*When he stood at the door of the high caste house, he was
forbidden to call out. He had to sound the bell on his stick thrice.
His entire family would dine on this food. (Kamble: 2009: 75)*

Famine and natural disasters affect all people equally, but Dalits were considered the last beneficiaries. Due to famine, Siddalingaiah's family moved to Bangalore and his father worked in nearby firewood depots to run the family. Siddalingaiah joined a government primary school where he was admitted to the third standard. By inspiring and given support to Andamma, Brahmin teacher, he settled at a slum area called Srirampura in Bangalore and began to concentrate on his study. There everyone has his own problems and quarrels. Siddalingaiah's mother fixed his name to R. Gopalaswamy Iyer, a Dalit hostel in Srirampura. She herself worked as a sweeper there. Every day after the hostel boys were served, the leftover was given to the workers. She used to take home the mudde, and saru (meal), it solved the food problem of Siddalingaiah's family. The food served at hostel was not enough to fill stomach. Therefore, there used to be quarrel between boys for leftover meal. In relation to this, Siddalingaiah narrates:

*If there was any mudde left, the practice was to serve all those
sitting in line. They used to call his extra. Very young boys refused
it. Older boys would rush in and reserve seats for younger boys.
(47)*

It means hostel has given them maize, and very little gram which were hard to digest for the students, yet they refuse their ragi and wheat. However, Siddalingaiah's self-survival and progress shows that he was a representative of Dalit people whose life is surrounded with poverty and struggle.

COLLEGE EXPERIENCE OF EXPLOITATION

Siddalingaiah memorized his college incident, which shows the treatment of injustice:



A lecturer used to feel thirsty in class. He would give me the key to his Godrej almirah and ask me to fetch water. I would do as told. He was very orthodox. Why he still chose me to fetch water became a subject of discussion in class. He had mistaken me for a Lingayat. I was liberated from the task of fetching water after he came to know my caste. (75)

It indicates caste remains paramount factors in India. As long as neighbors are not aware of a person's caste, a Dalit is safe and things will be fine. The moment they find out the caste particularly that of Dalits, everything changes. Dalits are emerging as an indispensable force in India, today but their problems are not changed yet.

BECAME A POET AND SPEAKER

Srirampura had many libraries, where several newspapers and journals were available. There was a student in the hostel, who gave Siddalingaiah a slim book named, 'Avatarapurusha Ambedkar' (Ambedkar the Messiah). Being influenced by this; he started to write poetry. Siddalingaiah wrote revolutionary poems and delivered them in his speeches. He first emerged on the public scene as a student leader in the 1970s, a period when Dalit rights issues had begun triggering conflict with the upper caste people. However, Siddalingaiah did not join active politics then because he had too much work as a Post-Graduate student. Although he is a poet, it is his autobiography Ooru Keri which reveals how he has shaped his life.

During the span of hostel life, he had read several books about Dr. Ambedkar and gained enough confidence to speak about him. Once, a letter comes from D. C. Hostel, Nazarbad, Mysore. It was an invitation to him for speech on Dr. Ambedkar. He accepted the invitation and goes to Nazarbad. It was his first speech delivered before hundreds of students in hostel. It was an unforgettable experience for him. In speech, he has given two myths, which impressed the students as well as the warden. One day, there was Ambedkar day; therefore, Chief Minister Veerendra Patil, High Court Judge Bheemaiah, IAS Officer Bharanaiah and Minister B. Rachaiiah were invited as guests in Town Hall. Among them Shataveri Gopal Gowda was the main speaker on Ambedkar. Siddalingaiah got an opportunity to deliver the speech on the same topic. Being heard the speech everyone fell in love with high school boy named Siddhlingaih. As result of this, they encouraged him and became famous in his school as well as in town. This incident gave him a representation in other inter-high school debates and colleges.

Siddalingaiah sought admission in the Government Arts College and lived in Dalit hostel on Mahatma Gandhi road. Though he went for higher education he remained poor. He had a broken trunk and tattered mat carried out to the Dalit hostel. The food of college level was good than school level. He got there rice and chapatti twice a day. Due to this, his external appearance changed. He had bad experience at the school level that's why he hasn't said 'no' or 'enough' to food. He used to turn his face whenever food was not served. As a result of this, his friends called him 'envious.' During the college time he met with a revolutionary poet Gajigatti, editor of English magazine People's Guard, and wrote poems. He has come in contact with D.R. Nagraj, a member of Yuvaka Sangha, who encouraged him to write poetry therefore he could publish his book of poetry entitled 'Hole Madigara Hadu: Songs of the Holeyas and Madigas.' He participated in various college debates and won the prizes and cups. He also joined the scheme of earn while you learn at Bangalore.

FORMATION AS AN ACTIVIST

Siddalingaiah joined the Karnataka Association and was elected the Joint Secretary. Later he founded a society called 'Vicharavadi Parishad' and visited all Dalits hostels around



Bangalore. The association brought out the problems of hygiene, food, etc. He demonstrated the plight of Dalits to the Government of Karnataka. Under the leadership of Prof. M. D. Nanjundaswamy, Siddalingaiah was misused by politicians. Prof. M.D. Nanjundaswamy asked Siddalingaiah and his followers to throw 'handbills' from Vidhana Soudha visitor's gallery where Ministers and Legislators participated. After that, police arrested Siddalingaiah and his friends. They were put in the lock-up. At midnight, they were released. Therefore, he understood that it was nothing but the political drama. This incident gave them a moral support and confidence to protest against Indira Gandhi by hosting a black flag. It was the time of drought in Karnataka, instead of coming to Karnataka Indira Gandhi goes to the 'Darshan of Swamiji'. Therefore, on such occasion, the slogan of this association was 'Not to Udupi, go to Bidar.' (86) In this way, he established a society called Vicharwadi Parishad. The purpose of this society was to solve the problems of Dalit student. Regarding this, a student said: 'We don't even get food, why do we need laboratories?' (89) Under its banner, Dalit student's first protest procession was taken out in Bangalore. Its demands were to increase the scholarship amount, to repair Dalit hostels. This meeting took place with Chief Minister Devraj Urs, which paved the way to construct the new buildings besides the two hostels on M G Road. The scholarship amount has been increased. During this time, he came in contact with Communist (Marxism) Party of India. Not only he works for Dalit students but also started night school in slum area. As a night school student, he realized the importance of night school. He started night schools for Bangalore's slum children. The night school enlightened many downtrodden lives.

DALIT SANGHARSH SAMITI

Another association was founded by Siddalingaiah as Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, which goes to the last part of society and makes awareness among them. He walked to many parts of Karnataka to establish Dalit Sangharsh Samiti movement (DSS). Through this movement, he brought Dalit's basic issues to the government. His movement began to progress. As far as his education was concerned, he got first class in M.A., Kannada language, and won the D. L. Narashimhachar Gold Medal. He honored with the post of Research Assistant at the Kannada Study Centre. In this way, Siddalingaiah's struggles made him self-empowered and got a desire for formal education from the beginning. Thus, as years passed by, he considered that learning to read and write are the first steps toward self-empowerment.

REJECTION OF GOD

Being educated and influenced by Dr. Ambedkar and Periyar, Siddalingaiah began to deliver speeches on Ambedkar and caste system. His attitude towards religion was rational and started opposing Hindu beliefs. Therefore, he acquired more knowledge about the orthodox Hinduism and caste system. He and the graveyard workers always discussed on the subject of God. They were strong believers in God whereas Siddalingaiah was rationalist. Therefore, they could not accept his arguments that God does not exist. Once, Siddalingaiah attended ceremony which was organized by graveyard worker for his friends. On the occasion of this, the owner of house said his faith of God was too diminished. Suddenly, Siddalingaiah asked but why? The story was told by him was interesting. He said:

When he was standing devoutly in a queue to get darshan of the deity, the man behind him had tried to pick his pocket and rob him all his money. If he had continued to stand devoutly, he would have lost all his money. Immediately becoming alert, he had bent backwards and caught the pickpocket. If he had lost the money, the very return of his family to Bangalore would have been difficult. (73)



It indicates that if God exists, so why does not punish him, who have been torturing the pilgrims. But still the workers could not lose their faith from God.

Once, the college has sent Siddhlingaiah to inter-college debate competition. He began his speech with poetic language:

Temples are houses of black magic/ Religious leaders are magicians/ Pilgrim centers are places of disease/ Innocents, idiots, these pilgrims. (77)

He means to say that the temples become the houses of black magic and priests are their magicians. The place of pilgrim becomes the place of disease and idiot. He satirically interpreted the God and religion. It was not only a speech, but a satire on entire orthodox system. Therefore, the judges were impressed by his speech and declared him to be first in debating competition. D R Nagraj, a student one class ahead to him, met at debate. He was a rationalist and revolutionary poet therefore he encouraged him for future. His friendship gave a new turn to his life. It was time of debate and he won the first prize in it.

Once, an inter-college debating competition took place at A.P.S College, Bangaloe. The subject of this debate was 'God does not exist'. The inauguration function was started with the lighting of a lamp. The lamp was lighted with the faith that there is God. Having to say that god does not exist; Siddalingaiah was annoyed with the lamp. He put off the light which was pointed out as evidence of the existence of God. He challenged, 'If God does exist, will it stop me speaking.' he openly said that God does not exist in his speech. Due to his stinging speech upper caste people planned to assault him, but still he got the first prize in debate. One day, he walks on the street where he saw secondhand books on footpath. A book entitled 'Devaru Satta: God is Dead' caught his attention, he bought it and read out and decides to meet its writer Vasudeva Bhoopalan. When he meets the writer, Siddalingaiah understood that he was living under the pressure of traditionalist.

The beauty of *Ooru Keri* is that the narrator nowhere directly talks about Dalit consciousness. Through incidents he indicates the essence of his public work. By slightly distorting the major and serious issues, he tries to overcome all these issues. It is an innovative way of presenting hunger and humiliation. Smile and laughter overshadow the sorrowful experiences.

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