

# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## In Conversation with Shyamala Gogu, Dalit Feminist Writer, Poet and Activist from Telangana

Eligedi Rajkumar

*Shyamala Gogu is a Dalit feminist writer, poet, and activist in Telangana, India. She edited the following Telugu literary works: Nallapoddu: Dalitha Sthreela Sahityam 1921-2002 (Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921-2002, an Anthology of Dalit Women's Writings in Telugu language from Andhra Pradesh during 1921-2002. This was published in 2003. The text highlights discrimination against Dalits from a Dalit womens' point of view. It was followed by Nallaregatisallu: Madiga Madiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu (Furrows in Black Soil: The Stories of Madiga and Madiga Subcaste Women) in 2006. It is also about the discrimination against Dalits from a Dalit womens' point of view. 'Thataki' (Thataka) and 'Madiga Badeyya' are two Telugu short stories written by Shyamala published as Wada Pillala Kathalu (Dalit Childrens Stories) by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad in 2008. The same is also published in English with the book titled as Tataka Wins Again and Braveheart Bedeyya by Mango DC Books, Kottayam, Kerala in 2008.*

*And in the year 2007, when Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, determined to document the lives of the most empowered women, it decided on doing the biography project of T.N. Sadalakshmi, who was not only by that time but even to this day the most accomplished and most politically empowered of women from Telangana Dalit (Madiga Caste), and the project was entrusted to Shyamala Gogu.*

*In 2011, Shyamala published the biography of one of Telangana's leading women Dalit politicians, T.N. Sadalakshmi titled 'Nene Balanni' – T.N. Sadalakshmi Bathuku Katha ('I Am an Empowered Woman': The Life Story of T.N. Sadalakshmi). This biographical work of Shyamala is based on extensive research and a series of interviews she had conducted not only with T.N. Sadalakshmi but also with her family members, numerous community leaders, contemporaries in power, politics, opposition, Dalit and Madiga Dandora Movement for ABCD categorisation for Sub-castes' Reservation, and Separate State movement for Telangana. This became*



*necessary after the unfortunate demise of Sadalakshmi during the biography project. She is currently working on preparing a paper on domestic violence and Dalit women.*

*Rajkumar interviewed Shyamala Gogu on 22 July and 21 September 2013 at EFL-University and Anveshi Research Center for Women Studies in Hyderabad. The interview was conducted in Telugu, a language predominately spoken in Andhra Pradesh. It was translated into English. She spoke about her personal experiences with the women's movement, and association with the feminist organisations in Hyderabad, India. She expressed her views on Dalit feminism, Brahminical patriarchy, and her works from Nallapoddu: Dalitha Sthreela Sahityam 1921-2002 (Black Dawn: Dalit women's writings) to the recent translated collection of stories Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a small Basket, but ...? She also spoke about Dalit feminism and the upper caste feminism and the role of translation in disseminating knowledge on feminism.*

Rajkumar: Could you explain about your educational background?

**Shyamala: Education is always a must and essential for Dalits.<sup>1</sup> My education was like a battle. I had to fight for it, in fact. Since, though I am a girl, my parents gave my education greater importance than that was given to my brothers. So, my brothers had to work hard so as to earn the money and spend the same on my education. It was only with the help of my entire family including my brothers that I had completed my intermediate studies withstanding all hardship. Including lot of hurdles and immense societal pressure, that was all there, pestering and forcing my father to give up sending me to college studies only for the reason that we are Dalits.**

**Though I had to discontinue my education after passing my Inter and I could not take up graduation studies for a while; since, my family was not in a position to give any financial support to my higher Education.**

**I faced terrible financial problems. I may have even died for lack of food and nutrition as we were very poor. Therefore, I felt it better to die in the movements than die in poverty. I resolved to join the movements with a purpose to work for the people without any caste consciousness. I was unaware of the concept of community and Untouchability. I was facing humiliations but unaware that these humiliations were a result of Untouchability. I have gone through huge struggles in my life and have never broken down.**

Rajkumar: Do you consider yourself a Dalit feminist or how would you like to describe yourself?

**Shyamala: I would like to be identified as a Dalit feminist writer since it is from the perspective of Dalit feminism only that we can understand anything, and question everything. And for us, there are no limitations in this kind of framework: such a Dalit Feminist perspective is all about self-respect and women's assertion. It is through such assertion and self-respect only we claim our Dalit identity; only after the consciousness we have gained from the struggles against Untouchability and discriminations in varied forms.**

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'Dalit' means 'downtrodden, or oppressed'. Dalits represent a community of 167 million in India, constituting 16% of the population.

Rajkumar: I heard that you were active in Revolutionary organisations? How long you were with these organisations?

**Shyamala:** I worked with different organisations like students, women, agricultural labour and peasants. I spent my activist life working in these varied fronts in a process before I quit all these revolutionary fronts in favour of the Dalit assertion and identity movement. It was only during my school days I moved towards Progressive Students Organisation as the organisations used to take up issues relating to scholarships, hostels and amenities. So it was natural for me to participate and fight for the same and fight against discrimination being a student lodged in S.C. (Scheduled Caste hostel). I was for some time worked as a full-timer during my collegiate education in these revolutionary fronts. And in the process of doing such work, I realised that the uneducated (those without higher and English education) working within these revolutionary fronts do not have any chances of holding leadership positions. So I opted for Dalit identity movements rather than complaining about staying there within revolutionary fronts.

Rajkumar: Are there any texts translated into Telugu on women's movement? What texts inspired you?

**Shyamala:** I used to read works translated into Telugu; initially novels like *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky (in Telugu *Amma*), *Jamilya*, *Red Hibiscus Flowers* (these are Russian and Chinese revolutionary stories). Apart from which, I also read the autobiography of Winnie Mandela, Galina Nikolyeva's *New Corner* (translated into Telugu as *Aparichita* in 1959): this translation is about a woman comrade. We used to connect to the various kinds of women movements and their leaders like Emma Goldman, Clara Zetkin, their lives and their writings. Histories of the movements that took place in France, Russia, and China are also translated into Telugu. Later on, with my allegiance towards identity movements, I continued reading biographies and writings like that of Savitri Bai Phule's *I am Savitri Bai (Nenu Savithri Baina* in Telugu); Mahathma Jyothiba Phule's *Slavery*; (in Telugu *Gulamgiri*), Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (in Telugu *Kula Nirmulana*); in India Maharastra Mathma Phule-Ambedkar's movements were translated into Telugu which we used to read.

Rajkumar: Do you think translation played any role in disseminating knowledge on feminism in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh?

**Shyamala:** Definitely. Translations played a major role in spreading and strengthening both the movements and ideologies as well. Particularly, the Dalit and women's identity movements and ideologies after that of Marxist ones are spread through translations. The discourse of Phule and Ambedkar through their writings has become mainstay in reading choices for me as these are more relevant today. Such inspiration is also derived from Savitri Bai Phule and Jyothiba Phule through reading their translated texts. And it is thanks to these translated texts, we can say, that Dalits of today have derived all their activist-oriented determination to work for women and Dalit cause. And only with such an inspiration that we had derived from all those original texts of great women and men in history that it has become possible for a Dalit woman like me to become a Dalit feminist activist-writer. The

Telugu translations of these texts gave us full confidence in taking up our activities and the programs that we were practising after undergoing our basic theoretical study, putting all our efforts towards working for an egalitarian and better society. Initially, the emergence of 1970's women's movement in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (AP) was all a result of myriad of such translations appearing in Telugu from the original texts of social revolutionaries in historic periods from India and from the world as well. These texts both in English and Telugu were most sought after by the dominant caste, middle-class, upper-middle-class and English-background-educated women in these areas during the time, who read them for the questions and issues of women of foreign countries. In Telangana and AP, all these sections read the women's questions in English and some of them translated the works into Telugu with their experience. English knowledge gave them such confidence. The slogan, 'Women's Health Rights are Political Rights' is used as part of women's movement in a country where they struggled for women's health rights. This slogan from English is translated into Telugu. When we look at such powerful expressions of Dalit's, like 'Dalit Panthers' and 'Dalit is power', these in fact can be said to have relied on such slogans used in some other countries as 'Black Panthers' and 'Black is Power', which are actually derived from English, not only as slogans but even also as the theories and experiences of their movements, that were inherent behind the slogan. Texts of such movements were translated into Telugu to introduce here, to convince and to bring in arguments into a layer of middle-class educated here in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. They used these theories to get a better acceptance among the middle-class educated here and by doing that they influenced even the mainstream and some of us also got a mainstream status as well.

In Telangana, numerous armed struggles, paths/lines and many other Communist struggles took place. The basis for the Telangana armed struggle (in the 1940s) is the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the French Revolution of 1789. The middle-class educated women of Telangana have taken their thoughts and insights from the women from Russian, French and Chinese Revolutions. In all these revolutions it was male communist leaders who were given the due importance to the detriment and discrimination of female leaders in their struggles.

'We Were Making History': Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra (Life Experiences of Women in Armed Struggle) is a document of women who participated in the Telangana Armed Struggle during 1946-51.

Rajkumar: Could you explain about Dalit feminism? What are the major differences between Dalit feminism and the Dominant-caste feminism?

Shyamala: There is a major difference between the Dalit women and Hindu dominant caste's hierarchical women. Since these very women are unable to understand segregation (Apartheid), Untouchability, slavery, massacres, regular atrocities. The same is reflecting on the Feminists particularly on those who are hailing from Dominant castes. But Dalit women and the women of the productive castes have productive and food security relations with natural resources. These women are skilled, productive and knowledgeable in livelihood productions. For instance: making a pot from natural resource like lake mud. When we look at Dalit women, she has the knowledge of crafts, food grains, land for agriculture, whereas the Hindu Dominant-caste women are not skilled enough to produce such things but they

have skills only in managing the lands as property and ownership including bossism on the untouchable agricultural labourers, including women. Feminists hailing from dominant castes in India are not considering all these factors even to this day.

The question of reproductive rights and democratic space within the family system rather than subjugation of women is the central issue in the Feminist Movement in India. Women should be able to enjoy democratic rights within the family. Discussion on these particular issues was started by dominant-caste Feminists, yet the very reproductive rights, social productive rights always remained part of Dalit and also artisan community women's life. The position taken by Dalit Feminism is that these particular rights of Dalit women, and families in particular, are controlled by the Hindu dominant caste system. And this is going on in all the villages in India as the Dalit families work under them as labourers, since it is the Dalits who only have all the productive agricultural knowledge. So it is mostly Dalit women for whom the reproductive rights are necessary for their family, community and for social production for entire society rather than for mere Dalit Family.

Rajkumar: Dalit feminists fight against Brahminical Patriarchy. Could you elaborate on it?

Shyamala: For a Dalit woman, apart from herself, her husband is also a slave and both of them including the children and the entire family and entire Dalit community are untouchables and become victims in the hands of dominant castes all the time according to the Varna Ashrama Dharma system, whereas Hindu Dominant caste women fight against their Head of the Family (that is her husband, Father-in-law etc.). And those who benefit from Brahminism in spite of opposing patriarchy do not fight the Hindu Brahminical patriarchy. In the Varna caste system no person is allowed to live individually. The Hindu Brahminical patriarchy within the Varna caste system grants the dominant castes the entire social capital, economic and cultural status all by itself, whereas the same Varna caste system not only deprives all the Dalit and Artisan castes including its women but also denies them basic livelihoods and sustenance only to push them into slavery, untouchability and segregation. Thus the oppressed castes fight against the Brahminical patriarchy and Varna Dharma. We are seeing the same very clearly in all the villages in India, even now in 2014 as even now Dalit children under age 7 are still being pushed into bonded labour, which is being referred to as child labour in India. As almost all these Dalit families do not own any land even if they did, the same is always either targeted or snatched away in no time. Thus, unemployment, illiteracy, malnutrition, Jogini, Basavi (institutionalized prostitution) rate is very high among Dalits.

'As a Dalit woman where should I fight this patriarchy?' is the phenomenal question that disturbs every Dalits mind in India today. Since now days, the Dora<sup>2</sup> disappeared in the village in the context of globalisation. The enemy also seems to be disappeared. The patriarchal symbol 'Husband' too seems to be changing. Today in India the lands in lakhs of acres are being given to SEZs (Special Economic Zone) instead of Dalits and poor as largesse. Handlooms, cottage and community and village products and utilities have also disappeared from even the very villages and communities once used to be hot beds for the same. Pots are

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<sup>2</sup> Dora is a term used for the Upper caste Landlords in Telangana.

given up almost and plastic pots and utilities have become rampant. Who is the enemy then? Brahminical Patriarchy has taken the form of Capitalism, bureaucracy, judiciary, political parties even socialism and communism ideologies including Naxalism which includes Manu,<sup>3</sup> Landlord, Brahmin, Bania, a Member of Parliament, Legislative Assembly, a Minister or Chief Minister in the Government or a big Contractor or industrialist in the private sector. It is possible to look at it purely from Dalit feminist perspective.

Rajkumar: What are the important issues raised by feminist groups, writers, and organisations in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh?

**Shyamala:** Feminist organisations in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh played an important role in literature and politics. Here, feminists and feminism recognise that the history is all written merely from the point of view of men. Feminists here have started reconstructing the same articulating the history from women's point of view. They also have through their experience started studying the State and its repressive structures and as well the family and its kinship and society's social structures since these are mainly and repeatedly raised by the Dalit feminists. In India it is the men who take decisions in the family and in the state as well; it is as if family and the state are one and the same, as it is Patriarchy which operates in both the institutions. So, to that extent, the feminists here in Telangana and in Andhra have worked on the conditions of women in the family and with regard to the state as well.

Rajkumar: There is a gap between educated and uneducated women. Educated women motivate and act as stimulators. Do you think women rebelled against their oppression in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh?

**Shyamala:** Rebellion should also be seen as an opportunity in the light of ages of patriarchy manning every public and private sphere in the society. For example: suppose if a woman wants to be part of the Army, a predominant male bastion. But her father and brothers would not allow her to join the army. My point is that in case if there is an opportunity, even if it is in a male bastion system whether public or private, let the women-folk work wherever there is a scope, so that women could increasingly join in every sphere, so that both men and women can take the responsibility of protecting the country collectively and equally. Any woman can take such opportunity by fighting and convincing her families. So that our social system can be transformed into women oriented rather than male chauvinist oriented. Feminism played an immense role in establishing such a system. Therefore opportunities are more important.

The high point of feminism can be seen for the first time in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in questioning the Left Parties Including Marxists, Leninists and Maoists. The voices of such women are brought out by the feminists hear; the same we can see and hear from the book *We Were Making History*, in Telugu language *Manaku Teliyani Mana Charitra (Life Experiences of Women in Armed Struggle in Telangana)*, published in 1989. Women authors

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<sup>3</sup> 'Manu' is a title that is held by numerous characters in Hinduism. Manu is also the author of Manu Smriti, the Hindu code of conduct for domestic, social and religious life. Feminists and Dalits view it as anti-women and anti-Dalit as it degrades and deprives women and Dalits of their rights of education, independence and wealth.

and publishers brought out this book to question and expose the patriarchal tendencies prevalent within the communist party leaderships for the first time as feminists. And for doing this these Feminists were blamed by Marxists in Andhra Pradesh. The question raised by the feminists was 'How was Communist party and its male leadership looking at the women and the family?'. The leadership's answer was something like this: 'Sita has been to forest for Rama's power. So, in a Naxalite Party too, women go to forest.'<sup>4</sup> We can well understand the difference between the two. Sita has gone to forest for Rama's political power. But here in Telangana and Dandakaranya or Nallamalla, the Naxal women go to forest for dying to consolidate merely Brahminical patriarchal leaderships. Naxal groups mired in patriarchal legacy do not see all these aspects from their own theoretical perspective. It was ... and it is by feminists, who looked at them from the theoretical perspective and they explain these aspects as feminists and as Dalit feminists. Since then, how to live with their Dalit traditional livelihoods in the face of the present context of globalisation and the neo-liberal agenda has become more important and a challenge for the people of today, particularly to Dalits, Adivasis and to Artisan communities as well. And these people have found the answer as to how to live a dignified life in the face of such global scale challenges compounded by global scale class ideologies like communism. And being Dalits and being Dalit feminists we came to know the value of dignified life only after reading Mahathma Phule and Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar's theories and writings and about Varna-caste discrimination, segregation etc.

Even the people of artisan communities, including its women, today are imbued with the awareness of Phule and Ambedkar's writings since they too are aspiring to lead a dignified life.

Rajkumar: What is your experience and observations on Naxalite parties in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh?

Shyamala: I was very interested in Marx and Engels' theories during my College days. I was very passionate about class struggles of Naxalite parties and their theories during the time. But after some time I realised that they are also following the same Varna-caste inequality rather than Marxism base of equality as any orthodox and feudal Brahmin does. Because the main leadership positions within the Naxalite parties are occupied by such persons who belong to dominant Hindu castes like Kamma, Reddy, Karnam and Brahmins only. These are the very same Varna-castes that follow Manu Srimuthi Varnasrama Dharma Ideology. And as well, these are the very same Varna-castes, who dominate the society as being the ruling classes, big landlords, capitalist classes and perpetrators of untouchability (Apartheid), Jogini, landlessness and massacres on Dalits and other oppressed castes in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. How come the same people from same Varna-castes run the communist parties in India? This is the question raised by Dalits and Dalit feminists of today.

Take the case of one such Brahminical Hindu caste, particularly, the Kamma; Kammass perpetrated a massacre on Dalit Madigas in Karamchedu (a village of dominant Kammass with

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<sup>4</sup> Sita is the female protagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana. She marries Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. He desolates a pregnant Sita when one of his subjects expresses doubt about her chastity. Sita leaves the Ayodhya and stays at sage Valmiki's hermitage in the forest.

scores of millionaires) in Prakasham district in Andhra Pradesh. Reddies too are not lagging behind; they too perpetrated a massacre on Dalit Malas in Tsundur in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. I am only questioning here how and why all the communist and Naxalite parties in AP and Telangana are being run by only those leaderships who hail from such dominant castes, the same castes who actually perpetrate all the massacres on Dalits. Can they ever follow the Marxian theory ... is it possible for decades together? In Telangana these Communist dominant caste leaderships ran a comprador 'Vishalaandhra movement' using Marx, Engels and Lenin's names like a mask and looted the entire Telangana, its people's jobs, river waters, forests, lands and each and every resource for more than 50 years since 1948 to 2013. These so-called Communists of Andhra are only an offshoot of the comprador 'Vishaalandhra Armed Movement'. It is no wonder if such Varna-caste oriented Brahminical communist parties are ignoring the Mahathma Jyothy Rao Phule and Dr Bheem Rao Ambedkar's movements and theories right from the beginning of the birth of such a communist party. And it is only for of all these reasons that thousands of Dalits, Adivasis and other productive artisan communities, both women and men, are being killed by the State. Many Bahujana people who worked with the party have died because of Kamma-Reddy-Karnam-Brahmin oriented leadership communist parties which are existing in the State from the time of Hyderabad State since 1946.

I must say that most of the killed in the communist parties hail from Dalits, Adivasis and productive communities. It is only Kamma, Reddy, Karnam and Brahmin castes who are benefiting from such communist and Naxalite parties in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in many ways like caste power, social capital, Business, and in many professions, education, opportunities from Abroad.

I also feel that wherever there is a presence of Brahminical Naxalite party, there we find the absence of Bahujanism,<sup>5</sup> Mahathma Jyothi Rao Phule and Ambedkar's movements and writings. Bahujan concept was also hidden and suppressed by the Left groups in Andhra Pradesh. There is no even Marxism in Andhra Pradesh. It is like Manuvadham continuing in the name of Marxism.

Rajkumar: What do you say about your recent translated collection of stories *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a small Basket, but ...*? Some of these stories are already published in Telugu magazines.

Shyamala: I wrote these stories as I need more courage and energy to write modern Dalit feminist political stories. I am in the process writing political stories now. All my stories are becoming somewhat 'controversial' with the Hindu dominant castes. I have some friends in the print media whose background is from dominant castes. Although they all appreciate me, by saying that I write well, when I ask them to publish these stories of mine, they gave many reasons for not publishing my stories. When they refused to publish these stories, I felt sad.

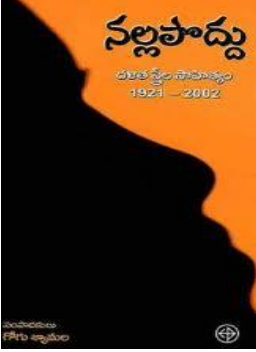
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<sup>5</sup> The word 'Bahujan Samaj' means 'majority of the people' which refers to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, Other Backward classes and Religious Minorities. The idea of Bahujanism is shaped by Kanshiram, the founder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). This party believes that the social transformation and Economic Emancipation of the 'Bahujan Samaj' is possible only through achieving the political power. Bahujanism means political power for Bahujans.



They always say that my language, ideas are not acceptable for publishing as their editorial norms are different. In spite of these rejections, I have never changed my language for the sake of mainstream media controlled by the dominant castes in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. We have small magazines who have published these stories very happily. These magazines are waiting to publish my stories even now. Mainstream Andhra Telugu dailies are scared of publishing these above stories of mine.

Rajkumar: Why did you edit *Nallapoddu, Black Dawn: Dalit women writing* in Telugu? This book can be one of the bestsellers in India if it is brought in English.



Shyamala: *Nallapoddu (Dalitha Sthreela Sahityam 1921-2002) (Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921-2002)* is an anthology of Dalit women's writings in Telugu language from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh during 1921-2002 in the form of songs, poetry and short stories, as well as speeches, by 53 Dalit women writers. This was published in 2003. The book highlights the discrimination against Dalits from a Dalit womens' point of view. *Nallapoddu* is a very significant work as a reference book. The book is concerned with the feminist and the Dalit literary movement and academic circles as well. I too have the ambition that *Nallapoddu* should be published in English. And I think it is not even

difficult to bring out this book in English. It is notable that some thinkers of repute have commended the work, saying that no comprehensive Dalit women's anthology like *Nallapoddu* has been published in India.

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