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Women in Activism, Assertion and Empowerment: A Study of T. N Sadalakshmi's Biography *Nene Balaani* (I am Strength)

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Abstract

Assertion leads to activism and activism leads to empowerment. The interrelatedness and reciprocity implies that empowerment cannot be achieved without holding onto either assertion or activism. Therefore, it is the assertion of oneself leads to activism that strengthens the socio-political position of women to combat to accomplish empowerment. The goal of assertion and activism is to accomplish empowerment by questioning and challenging the existing socio-historical, cultural and political oppressive structures of the society. Considering the Dalit assertion and activism which can be defined as socio-political apparatus derived from the self-contained personalities like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who apparently cling on to the assertion and activism which lead them to question the dominant voices. T. N Sadalakshmi, a Telugu Dalit Bahujan leader and activist who hails from Telangana comes with the assertion and activism with the influence of the self-contained Dalit ideologues like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar and Phule who took up assertion and activism as a means of bringing empowerment and a constructive change in the society. The present paper seeks to highlight the dialogues of T. N Sadalakshmi with Gogu Shyamala. Further the paper tries to evaluate T. N Sadalakshmi's biography *Nene Balaani* (2011) as such an example to study and understand how as a downtrodden woman empowered herself and further lead the Dalit Bahujan community to assertion, activism and empowerment by embracing the words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's 'educate, agitate and organize'.

Keywords- *Activism, Assertion, Women Empowerment, Social, Political*

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Nene Balaani (2011) is a Telugu volume composed on the life history of Mrs. T. N Sadalakshmi, one of the prominent unnoticed politicians of India from the state of Telangana, South India. T. N Sadalakshmi was born in a Mehtar community, which is widely located in scavenging profession in Telangana and which is also regarded as a sub-caste of Madiga community. Mehtar is regarded as one of the most inferior castes in the caste order even among the sections of lower castes. But, Sadalakshmi rose to an extraordinary political stature despite all odds. Yet, she was not properly recognized by the dominant Indian casteist society. The writer Gogu Shyamala chose Mrs. T.N Sadalakshmi with great admiration and was determined to compose her life history. In the view of the writer Shyamala, the life of this great selfless leader Sadalakshmi, who had emerged as a rare political figure in the state of Telangana, is worth documentable. Hence, the present venture of composing the life history of Sadalakshmi was undertaken on behalf of the Anveshi Women's Research centre, Hyderabad.

Empowerment is one of the key factors in determining the success of development of the status and position of dalit women in the society. We focus on empowering women and girls, because we believe that they hold the key to long-lasting social change in communities. It is our constitutional and social responsibility to make sure their development by giving them with equal rights and opportunities.

Aloysius Irudayam S.J the author of *Dalit Women Speak Out* (2011) expresses out rightly that, "Women always face oppression, from men. Equality is only preached but not put into practice. Dalit women face more oppression every day, and they will continue to do so until society changes and accept them as equals."(Irudayam, 2) The above mentioned quote gives us a glimpse of unending oppression and violence which are still perpetrated upon dalit women.

Many dalit women intellectuals and activists are consciously and actively taking part in the dalit women's cause and concern by hosting various forms of self and collective movements to claim their primary rights and privileges of which they are historically denied. The most prominent Telugu dalit women writers are Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, Jupaka Subhadra, Gogu Shyamala and Swathy Margaret. We have also dalit women activists and intellectuals from various parts of India who are working relentlessly for democratic participation in various sociopolitical streams. Their participation in itself an adventurous attempt to break the shackles of different means of oppression, to transcend the demarcated socio-cultural and political boundaries, and to the journey towards the ultimate desired goal of justice.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the first man who thought intellectually to redeem women from upper caste and dalit women from lower caste from the bandage of Indian Hindu caste system and Hindu Patriarchy. This was a beginning of new era for dalit women's

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empowerment. In the words of B.R Ambedkar in *Dr. B.R Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (1954):

My final word, to you is 'educate, agitate and organize' have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing social or material in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power, it is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality. (Keer, 351)

These words have brought hope and joy among dalit women. These words see them as an equally important human personality like the elite class. If empowerment means equality and justice, we need to educate the oppressor and empower them in different ways that recognize their role in oppression. When dalit women extricate themselves from a system of bondage, they are more than creating a space for their own improvement. In a way, they are basically changing the system at its core essential.

Baby Kamble, a radical dalit woman writer and activist asserts that she became an activist to fight for her community rights because the credit goes to Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the man behind every dalit women's assertion and activism. In the words of Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* (2009):

I am a product of Ambedkar Movement, Ambedkar Thought. It taught us that character is the foundation of this edifice called human society. When compassion and morality follow character, society achieves its real strength.

He wanted to transform society in the light of this philosophy. (Kamble, 125)

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist writer and critic in her work *Towards Black Feminist Thought* (1990) critically speaks that empowerment over all need to be understood at two levels: one level is understood from the perspective of gaining the critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies. Second level is the construction and gaining of new knowledge of the existing conditions of social and political contexts. (Hill Collins, 286) These are the core essentials of empowerment which dalit women need to obtain to resist the hierarchical structures of society.

Gogu Shyamala contends that movements are the best experiences of our self-assertion and affirmation. Organizing collective movements by dalit women are tool, for empowerment. She says "It is better to die in movements than in poverty." (Rajkumar, 2014) She claims that dalit women must connect themselves to various kinds of movements and its leaders and must read their writings as to get empowered and strengthened to stand firmly for the democratic rights of dalit women. She gives her own example how she was empowered by coming in contact with historical people and their writings. Lastly, she asserts that a

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community cannot be empowered without women getting empowered. So, dalit men and women must be conscious of this.

Swathy Margaret a Telugu dalit feminist asserts that “Our self-perception is crucial for building our politics. I appeal to young dalit women not to get subsumed in the relatively macro identities of mainstream progressive movements such as the male dalit movement and the upper caste feminist movement.” (Margaret, 2005) Her contention is that there must be a sense of belongingness, sense of solidarity and constant dialogue among dalit women and they must keep themselves away from the mainstream feminist’s movement and they must represent themselves independently as a unique body to learn and contribute to both the movements. She says that distancing herself from male dalit politics and feminist groups has empowered her much, so as to stand independently and fight against oppressive structures.

Bama, a well known Tamil dalit writer contends that dalit women must educate themselves and take up writing as a tool of empowerment to liberate from the oppressive structures of the society. She says in her autobiography *Karukku* (1992) “Because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste difference and discrimination.”(Bama, 20)

She repeatedly points out that dalit women have to help themselves, work under one common banner and assert their difference from dominant caste groups as a strategy of self-resistance. Both her works demonstrate how dalit women should empower socially, politically and economically. Bama’s *Karukku* (1992) talks of education as a tool for empowerment, *Sangati* (1996) talks of movement activities as a tool for empowerment and *Vanmam* (2000) preaches cohesion among dalit women communities which tells them to fight united to accomplish empowerment.

P. Sivakami, India’s leading dalit feminist and a novelist as well as politician contends that education is the prime need of dalit women, but it has not yet at the door steps of dalit women and is yet to reach them. She asserts that if the basic right of education is denied for dalit women, it is impossible to see dalit women being empowered.

She argues in an interview “Caste is the real hurdle India has to cross. We need more authentic spaces to discuss caste because whenever I go to villages to discuss caste with the Dalits, it becomes full of political overtones. The entire country is rooted in caste.” (Sivakami, 2010)

The most acclaimed book on Dalit women *We Also Made History* (2008) written by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon rightly says “The rights one has lost cannot be regained by begging, one must fight against those who have taken those rights away.” (Pawar, 348) A similar kind of statement is expressed by Vemula Ellaiah “Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Oppression in a way is counterproductive. Since dalit women are oppressed, they will find their own forms of resistance and dalit feminism is a form of resistance.” (Ellaiah,

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341) The reason behind quoting such revolutionary ideas is to contextualize T.N Sadalashkmi's activism and assertion which upholds the revolutionary path to accomplish socio-political democratic rights of Dalit Bahujan communities.

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist writer says in *Towards Black Feminist Thought* (1990) "Revolution begins with the self, in the self." (Hill Collins, 286)

The following quote is much more relevant in the context of history of T. N Sadalakshmi's activism and assertion; we need to look at T. N Sadalakshmi from socio-political perspectives. Her life not only revolves around political events but also takes a social revolutionary standing to oppose the hierarchical structures of society. Here, Sadalakshmi's social activism is much more influential, revolutionary and progressive than that of her political activism. Her interest to participate in socio-political activities has developed from her child hood onwards. She has always derived her strength from the basic teachings and speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and from her political guru Babu Jagjeevan Ram. She has shown keen interest in participating in the socio-political activities taking inspiration from these great ideologues and intelligentsia. These influential events have driven her towards a democratic society. Therefore, Sadalakshmi is not typically seen as a political activist but as a social activist, social reformist, and social revolutionist who asserts claiming of her rights, voice and opinion for which lead empowering herself and empowering Dalit Bahujan communities.

T. N Sadalakshmi's life long struggle was not for political cause and concern but for the social cause and concern of Dalit Bahujan of women to provide adequate resources to rejoin her Dalit Bahujan women and create a home of egalitarianism and humanitarianism on the ground of social cause. This reflects her consciousness of Dalit Bahujan intellectual thought. Sadalakshmi says "I don't know why I am so interested in socio-political activities. Before my marriage I was involved in activities and after marriage also I am engrossed in activities. As a student I was so active. So much zeal I have." (Shyamala, 74)

Even though she was exploited and discriminated in the hands of dominant caste groups, she was firm and determined to pursue social justice without any inhibition. In one of her speeches she very firmly and rigidly says that "Even if they were scornful of me, yet I'm determined to carry out my responsibility as a representative of my community." (Shyamala, 143) This was the strength and courage of T. N Sadalakshmi's activism and assertion. Through her ideal speeches she tries to implant the seeds of socio-political activism in the minds of Dalit Bahujan communities.

T. N Sadalakshmi as a woman and as a downtrodden woman at that time had encountered double oppression in terms of caste and gender. She clearly repudiated these forms of oppression and raised her voice against such inhuman practices. For instance, when she was a member of Congress party, she had participated in campaigns. After the campaign

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all party leaders had gathered for a lunch break in a house of a dominant caste member. All members belong to dominant caste were having lunch inside the house but members belong to lower caste were given lunch outside the house. This type of discrimination on caste lines had irked and infuriated Sadalakshmi much. She instantly ran into the house and questioned the upper caste members for their inhuman treatment of Dalit Bahujan communities within the realm of one political party. This made her realize that leadership and politics is a different sphere. They needed strategies and wisdom to tame the dominant spectrum of society. In the words of Sadalakshmi:

P. V. Narasimharao, you are committing a big mistake by keeping two separate lunch places for Dalits and upper caste groups; even here you are discriminating people based on caste. I will report this to high command. As a protest, I am leaving this place. (Shyamala, 280)

Through this revolutionary stand T. N Sadalakshmi could challenge the dominant hegemonic ideological structures. This demonstrates her self-assertion, self-affirmation and activism towards social democracy stemmed from her struggles to survive.

T. N Sadalakshmi through her power politics could transform and reform the ministries in which she took charge. As a minister of Endowment, Social welfare and as the Assembly speaker, she has brought tremendous reforms in these portfolios. Yet there was huge criticism and opposition to her considerable democratic deeds. But she never bent down to the criticism and carried out her policies and implemented them very successfully in a democratic manner. This shows her activism and assertion within political life and reminds us that if a dalit woman like Sadalakshmi has power, there will be no question of inequality, poverty, discrimination and injustice. Also one can imagine a society's progress keeping in mind all sections of the society.

Without T. N Sadalakshmi's assertion of the self through activism be it social and political, there wouldn't have been the realization of Telangana statehood. She was the forerunner of separate Telangana state agitation movement during her life time. Though she faced double oppression from social and political sphere she never stepped down and never bowed down to any oppression. During her life time, she had given more importance to socio-democratic values which would establish human spirit and harmony in the society. In the words of Y. B. Satyanarayana who quotes Andhra Pradesh MLAs, "These Telangana leaders do not know anything, they only know how to chew betel nuts and drink tea." (Shyamala, 282) This infuriated T. N Sadalakshmi and immediately she went to Telangana Congress leaders along with Anjaiah an Andhra MLA. She asked "What are you doing here when the assembly session is going on?" (Shyamala, 282) She asked him to apologize immediately for the remark. This shows her strength and courage. She was very committed to the social values as well as political values and stands as an epitome of a genuine politician.

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T. N Sadalakshmi as a downtrodden woman primarily stood for dalit women's cause and rights to uphold their interests in every sphere. She was always objective in the perception of her role as a dalit woman to work independently without giving chance to others to define what her position is. She led a women's procession from Keshav Memorial School, Narayanaguda to the Assembly and appealed to women to participate in the 'Chalo Assembly', procession to prove their unity and determination that they were prepared to sacrifice themselves for the preservation of democracy and achieve a separate state for Telangana. She gave a slogan that "Women warriors, arise to speak up." (Shyamala, 187) For this, she worked day and night knowing her limits of reason and wisdom. Swathy Margaret underscores that "If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others, for their use and to our detriment." (Margaret, 2005) T. N Sadalakshmi's voice needs to be looked at from dalit feminist point of view as it is a representative of all dalit women who are oppressed and silenced.

T. N Sadalakshmi's assertion by an activism aims at progressive, secular and democratic society. In addition, her activism reflects revolutionary, reformist, progressive and radical ideology. The intention of T. N Sadalakshmi to take up the path of activism is the existing conditions that have made impact on her from her childhood days. She was determined to question the injustice right from her childhood. In her words "I am not inferior to you in anything for that matter. My caste is not lower than your caste. My caste has fought with Brahma. Jambavamthudu has fought with Brahma that is my caste. We don't have any intention to compromise with you." (Shyamala, 285)

As a leader of the Dalit Bahujan community, T. N Sadalakshmi employed a range of strategies in challenging dominant caste groups. In many cases, she practiced individual and collective protests against unfair rules and practices. She always thought of herself as "I can do anything concrete to revolutionize conditions." (Shyamala, 172) This was her inner strength, strong determination and persistence. Simultaneously, she also believed that "I had to do something to preserve what remained of my self-respect." (Shyamala, 270) Telangana movement and Dandora movement are considered as one woman's campaign- that is of T. N Sadalakshmi.

For the upper caste woman, her family is her world and she usually argues for self modification centered on individual liberation and progress. Whereas for a downtrodden woman her community is her family and she aims towards the upliftment of the community. In the same way, T. N Sadalakshmi has portrayed herself as a subject of community (who seeks community empowerment as well its progress), not as the subject of individual (who seeks her own empowerment and self progress). T. N Sadalakshmi played an active role for the betterment of not only her family but also for her whole community. In the words of T. NSadalakshmi "For me, my community and my family is essential than a political party."

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(Shyamala, 78) Dominant caste groups have tried to prevent her from attending the meetings of Dr. B.R Ambedkar. She further says that “I can bear any sort of humiliation and pain for my community. I have lot of strength to swim any length of sea.” (Shyamala, 258)

Conclusion

Though her voice is muted and kept silent in all odd circumstances, she rose like a phoenix at every possible situation and she could articulate well her vision and work out her own praxis that have challenged the dominant caste groups. She is well defined herself by upholding the egalitarian values that are being followed by Dr. B. R Ambedkar and Jagjeevan Ram. This is the power of a downtrodden woman T. N Sadalakshmi who empowered herself and the community of Dalit Bahujan women by asserting her voice at every possible sphere.

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