
**BREAKING BARRIERS: CASTE, EDUCATION AND CHANGE IN Y.B.
SATYANARAYANA'S *MY FATHER BALIAH***

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Abstract: *My Father Baliah* by Y.B. Satyanarayana presents a poignant narrative of generational struggles against caste oppression in India. This paper examines the central themes of caste-based discrimination, the pursuit of education as a tool for social mobility, and the complex dynamics of change in a rigid societal structure. Through an analysis of Satyanarayana's family history, particularly focusing on the transformative journey of his father Baliah, the paper explores how education emerges as a powerful means of resistance and self-assertion for Dalit communities. By centering education as a means of empowerment, *My Father Baliah* celebrates the capacity of learning to transcend social barriers, fostering resilience, dignity, and hope in the face of oppression.

Key words: Caste, Dalit, Education, Resistance.

Introduction: The memoir, *My Father Baliah* by Y.B. Satyanarayana, portrays the journey of a family belonging to Dalit Madiga community of Telengana. Telangana was a part of the Nizam's composite Hyderabad state. The region, as observed by K. Srinivasulu in "*Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh: Mapping Differential Regional Trajectories*" was characterised by the "presence of a class of large landlords, comprising of the *jagirdars*, and *deshmukh doras*, who constituted the support system of the Nizam's state" (15). In Telengana, agriculture is the main occupation of about 60-70 percent of the people. Land is the central issue on which the socio-economic and political conditions in the state depend. The exploitation of the people also centred on the land and agriculture. The state, as Srinivasulu points out, "bestowed citizens with hardly any civil or political rights, while the landed gentry inflicted suffering on the rural population through the illegal eviction of farmers, the extraction of free goods and services (*vetti*) and much more significantly the denial of people's dignity and self-respect" (6). At the bottom of the agrarian society, as per the observation of K. Y. Ratnam in *The Dalit Movement and Democratization in Andhra Pradesh* "are the outcaste Dalits, who were excluded from possessing land, became *Paleru*, and the permanent farm servants called *kamatagadu*, *naukaru*, or *jeetagadu*" (5).

My Father Baliah is a struggle of the Yelukuti family for a better world. “It is a depiction of the lived experiences of members of the Madiga community over several decades in different places, settings and situations, making it a unique social history of the times” (Sankaran xi). The text is woven out of author’s memories of his conversations with his grandfather Narsiah, his father Baliah, his aunt Pentamma and his elder sister Bachamma. The memoir meanders over different places and times and lives; and moves from a remote village, Vangapalli, through Telangana and finally Secundrabad; from colonial times to independent India; narrating story of changing lives. The text points out to what it means to be a Dalit in pre and post-independence India. Satyanarayana documents the inhuman cruelty of the other castes towards the untouchables and also the “helpless acquiescence and internalization of this condition by the untouchable community itself” (Sankaran xii). In *My Father Baliah* caste and untouchability follows the family everywhere.

Being a Dalit is to constantly fight, negotiate and ameliorate abhorrent conditions of the structured society. The oppressor’s influence on the psychic and material inputs entangles with the Dalit experience. In *My Father Baliah* Narsiah, a Madiga, presents a beautiful pair of shoes prepared from the hide of a young calf to nizam, who fascinated by the shoes declares a gift of fifty acres of land to Narsiah. But because of the local power dynamics i.e. the feudal power of local Dora, Narsiah is allowed to retain only two acres of land and the rest is taken away by Dora. Narsiah is neither dismayed nor resentful at this turn of events. He, rather, feels happy at the prospect of earning some more money through the land to improve his family’s financial condition. After the death of Dora when his son takes over, he calls Narsiah and asks him to surrender his two acres of land. But Narsiah refuses to give his land to the Dora and faces his wrath. After the death of Narsiah and his wife, junior Narsiah is under tremendous pressure to surrender his land to Dora. At this juncture, his wife also breathes her last after falling prey to cholera. The quagmire of poverty and the indifference of his own community towards him invoke the compelling desire to escape and junior Narsiah finally decides to leave his village.

According to Dipankar Gupta’s observation in *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* Dalits never accepted their position in the social system. In this context Paramjit S. Judge and Gurpreet Bal write in the introduction of *Mapping Dalits*

The ideology of the ‘Karma-Dharma’ did not completely envelope the consciousness of the oppressed sections of the Indian society despite its strengths in providing justification to the social hierarchy and occupational distribution. (14)

The Yelukuti family in *My Father Baliah* rejecting the age old social oppression and economic exploitation emerges out from the untouchability to self-respect. The journey from illiteracy to literacy and unemployment to employment by breaking the cultural restrictions imposed by hegemonic structure of society brings forth the inherent potential of Dalits. The foreword of the memoir highlights this as follows:

This excellent book brings out not only the existential situation but also the inherent potential of people struggle, and succeeded against odds, and obstacles. Such narratives serve as inspiration for other member of the caste to use education to overcome massive social and economic impediments. It holds out hope as it is possible to pave your way up the social ladder. (Sankaran xvi)

Although Baliah had neither read nor heard Ambedkar but his thoughts were similar to him. Satyanarayana proudly recalls his father's words: "Bidda, do not bend yourself before anyone. No matter whether you are starving, your pride should never be mortgaged" (Satyanarayana 199).

Dalits, as Karl. J. Weintraub observes in "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness" "acquire a thoroughly historical understanding of his [their] existence" (821). As Dangle writes in *Poisoned Bread* a sense of historical injustice and unfair treatment meted out to these communities is the driving force behind it. Economic dependence on the upper caste becomes a hurdle before their social mobility and empowerment. Sunanda Patwardhan points out in *Change among India's Harijans* that "the norms governing occupation were particularly rigid in the case of the polluting castes. Ascription was the norm for the occupational roles for members who belonged to the untouchable groups and such occupations were considered impure. An untouchable could not change his occupation within a rural setting. Migration to towns and cities enabled him to have a certain measure of change in the occupational pattern" (65-66). According to Judge's observation in *Mapping Dalits* "movement towards new occupations as a result of education or otherwise is a sign of empowerment as economic independence provides autonomy to Dalits to take decision about themselves" (29). With the beginning of the era of railways the recruitment of untouchables in large numbers all over the country becomes inevitable as no touchable was ready to take up the hazardous jobs of gangmen and pointsmen which requires a "precise technique and expert handling" (Satyanarayana 26). In *My Father Baliah* Narsiah takes up the risky job of pointsmen that demanded running between the rails. Dalits, thus, availed this opportunity to break away the rigid caste structures as now they, who were outcasts and segregated in every village, start living alongside sudras in the same areas.

The railways represent a relatively caste-free space, a space which holds out the possibility of growth. In the railway colony, caste is markedly less-pronounced even though it does not entirely disappear. For one thing, the employees live side by side-the sudras beside the untouchables-something that would be unthinkable in the village. The colony also has schools for the children of the employees. Y.B. Satyanarayana states in the preface of his memoir: "Three generations of my family have worked in the railways and lived in railway quarters. I often wonder where my family would have been had my grandfather not migrated from his village" (xx). Dalits, as Judge observes in "Mapping the Dalits" "are able to change their status through various modernising forces as well as their own efforts" (33) as "the occupational mobility has a direct relationship with the social mobility" (34).

As Sunanda Patwardhan points out in *Change among India's Harijans* "the importance of education as a means of achieving upward social mobility is grasped by the Harijans [Dalits] and there is conscious effort on their part to get their children educated" (80). In *My Father Baliah* Satyanarayana informs us that Dalits had "little confidence and an inferiority complex haunted us [them] at every step" (162). Untouchability had rendered their minds stagnant for centuries as they were denied access to education and were forced to serve upper-caste people. Education in the Yelukati family starts against all social and religious odds. It is because of Baliah's strong determination with regard to educating his children that they are able to achieve that goal. He cultivates them just as a fallow land needs a lot of effort for cultivation as the environment around was not educative in Dalit families and there was "nothing like getting together with learned people to imbibe knowledge from them" (161). Further, "the restrictions, humiliation, insults and discrimination meted out to his children did not deter Baliah from educating them. He advised his children that they neglect these insults and humiliations and focus on the ultimate aim. Pursuing their education was, he maintained, the only way out of their misery and was necessary if they wanted to become masters in the railways" (84-85).

Badri Narayan points out in "Documenting Dissent" "there may be multiple forms, methods, tools, and techniques to defy the authority. Denial, which is one of them, denies that reality which is dominant and exists in an authoritative form. Denial may take place in many ways. One of them is to imagine an alternative reality" (334). In *My Father Baliah* the continuous harassment by upper castes is denied by Narsiah as he migrates from the ancestral village to save his son from becoming a *jeetagadu*. This changes the course of history and saves the future generations from bonded labour. Narsiah's migration from Vangapalli, in the Karimnagar district of Telengana, his native village proves to be a turning point for the Yelukati family. This incident gives rise to a life of dignity with education and self-respect instead of a life of utmost suffering, humiliation and bonded labour. Another alternative reality is generated by Narsiah's son Ramaswamy whose young mind had keen interest in getting education, and would watch the activities of school children from a distance. He is able to attract the attention of a mullah, who offers to teach him and is surprised by Ramaswamy's promptness and the interest he showed in learning. Ramaswamy, thus, against all religious odds of being denied learning by caste Hindus, is able to pursue his passion for learning for at least two or three years, and could read and write a little.

Baliah provides a disciplined atmosphere for their education and the regular monitoring produces an excellent effect as the children learn to take their education seriously. He even offers to skip a meal in order to send them to a big school. He spends all his earnings on their studies and even amid all the difficulties he remains firm about educating his children. They were not allowed to play in the evenings but whenever they had time they would contribute to the family by selling sugarcane pieces to the passengers on trains. Satyanarayana recalls his father's concern for their education: "He was trying to provide us an atmosphere in which we would not be disturbed from our studies... we had strict instructions from him to go to bed at ten o' clock and get up at four. My father would sit with

us while we read aloud in the morning, making anyone who felt drowsy wash his face with cold water and come back to his lessons” (111). It was a sort of his life’s mission to educate his children for which he was applauded by even higher officials in the railways. Satyanarayana observes:

In most Dalit families even from the railways, it was difficult for the children to even reach matriculation. From Secunderabad to Kazipet, people were talking about my father: he had earned a name for sending his children to postgraduate colleges. Even the higher officials in the railways had great respect for my father though he had been at the lowest level of railway employees. (168)

As Satyanarayana mentions in the Preface of *My Father Baliah*, the positive discrimination, affirmative actions and reservations guaranteed in the Constitution of free India have not made much difference to the lives of the majority of Dalit families (xx). It is Dalit’s own conviction that made difference in his life as he relentlessly struggled against social and economic discrimination, oppressive caste hierarchy, feudal conditions, and ridicule and humiliation. Baliah develops a conviction that it is from self-respect and relentless hard work alone that one derives strength, confidence and recognition. He strongly believed in preserving his self-respect and always stood his ground. Education and employment, as Baliah had anticipated, changed the way of living of the family. Education breaks endogamy as he breaks the “traditions and entrenched customs” (Satyanarayana 185) and gives nod for the first inter-caste marriage in the family. He, as Satyanarayana reflects, “was a visionary and a great man, greater than many intellectuals who claim to be Ambedkarites, and yet remain against inter-caste marriages” (185).

As Ravi Shankar Kumar observes in “The Politics of Dalit Literature” “Through writing or reading, otherwise denied to Dalit communities, they acquire a life of ‘thought and intellectuality’, and refuse the denial of their freedom” (66). Baliah’s struggle finally bears fruit as four of his sons become postgraduates and three of them lecturers in various colleges. Abbasayulu, who had been working in the railways for past twelve years takes a big risk and resigns from the job as he wanted to become a professor. He was so firm in his resolve that nothing could move him. He finally becomes the first doctorate and the “first professor” (Satyanarayana 180) in the family. Baliah’s fourth son Narsing “would not compromise once he was determined to do something, no matter how many attempts he had to make to achieve the goal” (183). He gains a PhD degree and becomes a professor in Osmania University. Later, he presents a paper at an international seminar held in Australia. “His journey had been an uphill task, in which he had remained strong and resolute” (190). Satyanarayana’s observation after his father’s death epistemologically sums up the theme of his memoir:

The man who had taught his sons discipline, made them tough and uncompromising, enabled them to reach the highest possible heights in education, and given them a good social standing in society breathed his last. He had set an example for many Dalit families...he fought social evils at his own level and was uncompromising in his fight.

He had refused to subservient to anyone throughout his life, and had therefore commanded respect even from those who belonged to higher castes (209-10).

Education, no doubt, serves as one of the powerful tools to affirm self-dignity and intellectually reject caste hegemony. By centering education as a means of empowerment, *My Father Baliah* celebrates the capacity of learning to transcend social barriers, fostering resilience, dignity, and hope in the face of oppression. The memoir continues to resonate as both a personal narrative and a call for collective action towards a more just and equitable society.

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