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Growing up in Andhra Pradesh Today

Karthik Navayan

I am from a village called Morriguda in Adilabad district of the Telangana region in Andhra Pradesh where my parents are agricultural labourers. We are five brothers and sisters, and my two younger brothers and sister are still studying. I studied in Telugu medium in a government school, living in a scheduled caste welfare hostel, not far from my village. Scheduled caste welfare hostels are run by the state government and provide residential facilities for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe students at minimum cost. There were many Dalit families in the village that had sent their children to this hostel as they could not manage schooling and boarding expenses. Probably, my father came to know about this through them and decided to admit me and my elder brother together. I was in the second standard and my brother, two years older to me, in the fourth standard. However, while being admitted, I was put into the same class as he—my father went to the principal and requested him to do so, since he could not afford a separate set of books for me. So we both studied together till the tenth standard in the same hostel, using the same set of books.

We were altogether a hundred students and all of us were from a similar socio-economic background from surrounding areas. The hostel was two kilometres away from the school and we walked the distance. I scored more than 60 per cent marks and took commerce for my intermediate, but could not pursue it seriously since just a year earlier my father had left for the Gulf to work as a labourer. For two years, we heard nothing from him.

Meanwhile, after my brother and I finished the tenth standard, we had to leave the hostel to live outside on our own for further studies. So I started working as a sales boy in a local medical shop. By that time my elder brother was involved with the Progressive Democratic Students Union (PDSU), affiliated to a Marxist–Leninist group, and left his studies to work with them full-time. He could not complete his intermediate. I failed mine.

My father was cheated by agents. They promised him some work in Kuwait but sent him to Lebanon instead. He took a loan of about a

* This piece was first published in 2010.
hundred thousand rupees from relatives and other sources to be able to
go to Kuwait but was stranded in the war zone of Lebanon without any
means of communication. The Gulf War broke out and he ended up
working with some Indians who helped him with an air ticket to return
home. These were very difficult times for us and it was my mother’s
earnings as a daily-wage labourer that sustained the family till I found
a part-time job at a medical shop near the local nursing home. But our
financial situation at home was so bad that I returned to the village
and started practising as a first-aid doctor, using the knowledge gained
in the nursing home and medical shop. When things became a little
better at home, I got myself readmitted in intermediate and managed
to pass with a second division and joined college. I, too, was influenced
by a Marxist–Leninist group that was active in my area, and alongside
studies, worked in the party’s publishing wing. My job was to compile
articles and publish them. I worked there for more than a year by which
time, I grew disenchanted though my brother continued as before. I
began taking my studies more seriously and wanted to complete my
graduation.

In the Telangana of the early 1990s, if anyone wanted to fight caste
discrimination, there was no option other than joining Naxalite groups.
Being from a rural background, I was acutely aware of the problems we
Dalits faced. The awareness of resisting oppression was very high in the
area where I grew up. There were many people working in and around
our school who influenced us. One of them was a charismatic Dalit
activist known as Parshuram, who later became the leader of the PDSU.
There was an incident where a senior Dalit leader, K.G. Satyamurthy,
was expelled from the party by Naxalite leaders as he began talking
about caste issues and Dr B.R. Ambedkar. This impacted us. Then there
was an organization called Darakame (an acronym signifying the united
forum of Dalit writers, artists, and intellectuals) that started publishing
pamphlets and booklets on Dalit issues. This made many among us
realize that the Naxalites had neglected many of our issues. By then I
also got to read about Babasaheb Ambedkar and I had no option but
to leave the group I was working with and start working for my own
people; more importantly, to complete my graduation.

I was doing my B.Com at Mancherial. It took two more years to
graduate as I had to work for livelihood. During my entire graduation
period, I did a lot of petty jobs, from being a newspaper hawker to a
Xerox-machine operator. I spent more time working rather than study-
ing for my graduation.
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I had quite enjoyed my studies at school when I was living in the scheduled caste welfare hostel without any financial worries. My dream then was to join the IAS, but after leaving the hostel, I gradually realized that my dream was unreal and unattainable. As soon as I finished my graduation in 2000, I left for Hyderabad and took admission in the LLB course.

By the time I finished my graduation, my great and sole inspiration was the life and struggle of Babasaheb Ambedkar. One of my Dalit friends in Hyderabad initiated me into Babasaheb’s books and there has been no turning back since then. Ambedkar became my role model. He was my primary inspiration for pursuing law. Due to my earlier political work, I was acutely aware that most of our problems were related to legal issues, so I wanted to become a lawyer and fight for our people.

I did not face serious caste-related problems till I began my graduation. Untouchability was never an issue because my village consisted of only Dalits. At school too, I lived in a hostel that was exclusively for Dalit students and hostellers were treated very well as our hostel was considered a centre of progressive politics. No one would dare say anything to us. But in the town, things were quite different. It was during my graduation while taking rented rooms, making friends, etc., that I realized that my caste was a big issue.

I recall some incidents: The first was in my village during the summer vacation after my intermediate exams. I was reading a newspaper sitting near a tank bund outside my village, on the path to another village. A middle-aged man with a big bottu (bindi) on his forehead, and in a white shirt, approached me and asked, ‘Who are you?’ I was silent. When he repeated his question, I replied, ‘I am Battula Dubbaiah’s son.’

At this, he became agitated and said very curtly, ‘Oh, so you belong to the Mala caste!’ Then he left the place. I was hurt as I felt that this was not the best way to treat someone who was one of the most educated people in the village that time.

Similarly, while studying LLB I had to visit my sister in another village. I went to the village and began to search for her house, this being my first visit after her wedding. I asked a woman where I could find my brother-in-law Mamidi Gangarajam’s house. She replied angrily, ‘Why are you here? Go, go from here. Go to the other side of the village.’ I got very angry with her but thought there was no point talking to ‘human beasts’ and left the place.
During a class on Constitutional Law, I had to endure the professor making nasty remarks about Dr Ambedkar’s scholarship, saying that he was not the one who wrote the Indian constitution.

I took my degree in 2004 with a second division and immediately started practising law. After a year, I began focusing on the issue of child labour and joined the Human Rights Law Network as a child-rights advocate and later worked with a non-governmental organization. More than 90 per cent of child labourers are from Dalit households. Many of my childhood friends worked as child labourers. I felt that being part of the Dalit movement, this was one issue we needed to focus on and contribute to more concretely.

My brother remained underground for more than ten years and emerged very disillusioned, realizing that Naxalism was no answer to the problems our community faced. Dalit cadres were being treated very badly in the Naxalite party. They remained at the cadre level, even after a lifetime in the movement. They were never given any opportunities to lead; that was firmly with the upper castes, most of whom lived comfortably in the metropolises, whereas Dalit cadres were left fighting a number of criminal cases filed against them all their lives. My brother came out with six or seven criminal cases against him and is still fighting these. Married to a tribal girl who worked with him in the party, he has two children. He is unemployed at present and spends most of his time visiting courts for his cases. He is supported by us, his friends, and his wife who works as a manual labourer. I don’t want to say more about Naxalism. It has certainly brought some relief in the Telangana region.

Coming to the issue of Telangana, it is a very genuine one and I support it on principle. It is a fact that people from Telangana suffered a lot due to the hegemony and monopoly of coastal Andhra people, particularly the Kammas and Reddys from that region. I don’t participate in this movement as I am busy with my activities in the Dalit movement. Initially, I participated directly for about a year but I learnt that there was a lot of politics and ulterior motives involved. The forms of protests in the Telangana movement are Brahminical, very Hindu, and I am repelled by them.

The issue of classification of scheduled castes is really about reservations within reservations. Due to historical reasons, Malas from coastal Andhra are far ahead (in education) and, therefore, able to garner much of the reservation benefits when compared to the rest of the Dalits. This issue was first raised by coastal Madigas and the movement started from Nellore district in coastal Andhra, although its leader, Krishna
Madiga, is from Warangal district. I belong to the Mala caste, but I feel that this is a genuine issue and reservation benefits need to be shared among all Dalits equally. This issue deeply impacted the Dalit movement and there is a sense of disunity among different sub-castes. However, Dalits from different sub-caste groups do come together for a larger cause. Recently in Kadapa district, the statue of the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy was to be erected alongside Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue but there was a huge protest against this by various Dalit groups cutting across sub-castes.

At present I work with the National Dalit Forum (NDF) and its campaign on the Special Component Plan, that is, the scheduled caste sub-plan. According to this, the central and state governments have to allocate funds to the SCs and STs in proportion to their population. Various ministries have to spend 16.2 per cent for SCs and 8 per cent for STs in the central and state budgets. No ministry actually spends money on Dalits, but diverts it elsewhere. It is unfortunate that there is not much awareness about this issue. It is probably one of the biggest ongoing scams of the country and cuts across the political spectrum. Apart from this, I am also involved in mobilizing, fact-finding and fighting a number of caste-atrocity cases, and also in raising awareness about the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.

I travel a lot and try to attend, and also organize, meetings on different Dalit issues across the state. In my free time, I write for magazines and newspapers on Dalit issues.

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*Bones*

Gurram Seetharamulu

If I write about my childhood, it would inevitably and naturally be about hunger and untouchability—I suffered both acutely.

At that time, the Lal Bahadur canal of Nagarjuna Sagar was yet to be dug and my village often reeled under severe drought. The Madigas of my village used to work in the farmers' fields as farmhands, and my father, Lachaiah, was one. Instead of calling him by name, they would

* Originally titled 'Konni Yamukalu Inkonni Ginjalu', this piece was first published in 2011.
A particular experience haunts me. At the Vinayaka Chavithi celebrations (festival of Lord Ganesh) in Vizianagaram in 2003, during the immersion ceremony a low-caste child fell into the water. No one jumped in to save him because he was a safai karmachari. Touching him would pollute them. The child drowned. I can never forget this. To them, our lives have no value. They would rather we died than touch us.

—BANGARU SRIDEVI, ‘Why Should I Deny My Caste and My People’