

**Literature as Protest:
Thematic and Interpretative Analysis of
Siddalingaiah's Select Poems**

Dr. S. Ramanathan, Ph.D.



Dr. Siddalingaiah

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Siddalingaiah, a Leading Kannada Poet

Siddalingaiah is a leading Kannada poet and public intellectual and the founder of the Dalit Sangharsha Samiti. He has played a powerful role in Dalit movement in Karnataka in the 1970s and 1980s. He has also participated in many agitations. His lyrics which are published as *HolemaadigaraHaadu* (Songs of Holey and Madiga) are often sung at public meetings and demonstrations. He has published several collections of poetry and an autobiography,

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OoruKeri(in two volumes). Like all other Dalit writings, Sinddalingaiah's writings are also translated into English by many scholars; his autobiography is also rendered in English as *A Word With You, World: The Autobiography of a Poet*. He has been the Head of the Department of Kannada at the Bangalore University and a Member of Legislative Council. He is currently the chairman of Kannada Book Authority.

Ostracizing Dalits

The atrocities committed by non-Dalit castes against the Dalits even in modern days in spite of laws against such atrocities, trigger vehement anger in the minds of Dalit Intellectuals. For them, literary discourses are no longer the aesthetic entertainments than tools. They use literature to express their anger. Their anger is against the society which has subjugated them. Whenever so-called upper caste people need the service of Dalits they make them enter their homes through the backdoor and in all other times their entry is prohibited

Siddalingaiah's poem entitled, "A Song" expresses anger against the society's double standard:

Bash them, kick them,
Skin these bastards alive!
God is one, they claim
But build a different temple on each street
We are all God's children, they say,
Yet they shrink from us holeya as if we're snakes
No entry for us to their inns, their wells, their houses
But dogs that lick our shit may share their rooms. (1-8)

Siddalingaiah alludes to Gandhian term, "Harijan", which means the "God's people" by saying "We are all God's Children". The uppercaste people should think whether it is correct to burn or behead a Dalit who is also a son of God.

Life Sans Dalit Help Impossible

The upper caste people need the help of Dalits in all their walks of life -- to clean the houses and lavatories, to look after the cattle, to do household works and to work in their fields in sowing seeds, planting, weeding, spraying pesticides, harvesting and the like. They need Dalits in order to live because Dalits attend to agriculture work more than any other caste, and agriculture provides all food. Dalits are the producers and people from the upper castes are consumers. They need the food stuff but not Dalits, after production. Siddalingaiah writes:

They eat what we grow, take the sweat of our brow
It's only us people they shun
We are not holeya and madiga any more, my brothers,
They call us harijan and laugh, my brothers! (A Song 9-12)

Clever, Cunning and Dirty Politics of Upper Caste Leaders

Siddalingaiah also attacks Indian politics and politicians. In India political system has become a puppet in the hands of the upper caste people. Dalits are the laymen who mount flexes and paste wall papers for political parties. Dalits' service is needed and is utilized at the grassroots level but they are not given any key positions in the party. Even in governance the key ministries like home, finance, and the like are allocated to the upper caste people whereas some ministries like the SC/ST welfare departments are allocated to the Dalit representatives and they too are not in a position to act freely for the welfare of their people. Yet the politicians hold meetings on the theme of obliterating casteism and caste-based ostracism and oppression, whereas Dalits are desperately left out to live on the edges. Siddalingaiah writes:

They hold "meetings" about us, they declare in papers
Pat each other's backs in our name,
how they yell from their mikes'
Yet no *ischool* forus, my friends, only drudgery.
No one can hold our head up
They are playing games with us, these bastards! (A Song 13-19)

Literature as a Record and Tool

Literature is the tool that enlightens people about their basic rights and also it is a tool to record the social inequalities. Siddalingaiah provokes Dalits to protest against the upper caste culprits who tend to uphold the caste hierarchy and caste-based atrocities. He instructs Dalits to “break these whoresons’ bone!” (A Song 20).

Literature is not only revolt in nature but also a testimony to Dalits’effort to rewrite history. Historically they feel that their position is ostracized. Their heroes are assigned a secondary position. Dalits too have many dreams of their future. They want to make their paths on their own, not devised by anyone. Siddalingaiah states:

Minds burning with countless dreams,
Slogans like thundering and lightning,
.....
here comes the dalit procession,
witing [history] with their feet
.....
on the path they struck for themselves. (The Dalits Are Here 3-10)

Dalit Struggle for Equality: Retaliate!

Every Dalit wants to free himself from the traditional, tyrannical clutches of casteism. Their minds sparkle with the sense of revolution. They do not want their subordinated status of the past to continue. Obviously, the problem of untouchability perennially exists. The practice has been originated during the time of Aryan settlements. Dalits stand in front of the upper caste people with bowed head and folded hands with towels in their armpit. But presently they have understood the need for realizing and obtaining their basic rights and consequently they have started their movement of revolution which may promptly lead them to liberation. Many Dalit organizations instruct Dalits to retaliate. Dalits want to wreak vengeance.

Since Rama’s time and Krishna’s time
unto the time of Gandhis

They had bowed low with folded hands

Now they have risen in struggle

.....

Bullet for bullet, blood for blood,

shoulder to shoulder, lives bound together. (The Dalits Are Here 19-26)

My People

Siddalingaiah also visualizes the governance of Dalits saying “Under the flag of Dalit India / stood the farmers and workers” (The Dalit Are Here 27-28).

Behind every mansion and bungalow, one can witness the work of a Dalit. But he is homeless. Dalits starve to death but they produce crops, Dalits are unrelentingly the agricultural workers. They are exploited in all the way without giving their dues. The upper caste forbids them equality. Siddalingaiah declares in his poem, “My people”:

They who plough and sow and harvest the crop

They who sweat and fry in the sun, my people

Empty-handed they came and sat down with a sigh

and wrapped their empty bellies in cloth, my people

.....

They who dig up gold and have never seen food,

they who weave cloth and go naked,

they do as they are told, my people

They are content to live on air, my people. (5-20)

All religions ill-treat the Dalits in one form or the other. As Arundati Roy observes, “It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan to the fire.” (74) Dalits have realized the need for protest against the socio-political, sociocultural and socio-religious clutches that hitherto made them subservient. Dalits,

Marching like ants, roaring like lions

Down with inequality!

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Forever down with
the arrogance of the rich!
Like countless snakes they crawled in
and filled the town;
descended to the lower depths
soared high in the sky. (Siddalingaiah: Thousands of Rivers 8-15)

Siddalingaiah's creative poems focus on the need to demolish the established superstructure saying, "They caught by the neck those / who had beaten them with sticks" (Siddalingaiah: Thousands of Rivers 28-29).

Role Model: Ambedkar

Modern Dalit protest culture began in Maharashtra with Ambedkar. Ambedkar, a Dalit political philosopher, paved the way for liberating Dalits from the tyranny of casteism. He taught that education, unity and revolution would bring freedom for Dalits. His life itself is a valiant and valid lesson for the modern day Dalits. Siddalingaiah writes:

You showed with your life
the way of struggle
You called us to come and see
the cracks in the mansion. (Ambedkar 9-12)

Subdued Protest of the Past

Here Siddalingaiah refers to the established and senescent values through the phrase "Cracks in the mansion". The revolts of many Dalit poets and social philosophers in the past were subdued and eventually their writings reflected the sense of despair and mere acceptance of their position as fate. Dohaara Kakkayya, a Dalit Saint voiced against casteism during the eleventh century itself. He moans in his poem for his low birth, and invokes Lord Shiva to relieve his pains and anxieties of being a Dalit.

O, linga father you made me take birth in a mean caste

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I am undone as I touch you and yet do not touch
If my hand cannot touch you can't my mind too touch you. (Kakkayya 1787)

The poet believes that the meanness of his birth can only be rectified through the touch of God.

Questioning Religious Values

Much contradictory to such views of Dohaara Kakkayya, Ambedkar questions the values of religions, that too particularly Hinduism. He believes that the religion which invariably ostracizes Dalits cannot relieve them from any subjugation. Ambedkar asked Dalits to lead a prestigious life.

You sowed the barren land
with plough of self respect,
.....
you woke up the sleeping
.....

The need for strength to back resolve (Siddalingaiah, Ambedkar 21-31)

To Conclude

Siddalingaiah is a Dalit activist who raises his voice for the betterment and liberation of Dalits. Siddalingaiah's poems protest against subjugation of Dalits from time immemorial and lead Dalits towards the path of liberation.

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