

A Word with You, World: Siddalingaiah's Voice for Deconstructing Caste and Reconstructing Society

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Abstract:

This article deals with Siddalingaiah's struggle and success against many social hurdles and impositions. His evolution as a prominent Dalit activist as well as a writer of voiceless people paved the way for the progress of Dalit literary and social activism in the Kannada region. His autobiography A Word With You, World is the bilingual narrative that covered the topics ranging from penniless struggles in the childhood to his success as a multifaceted personality with self-respect. The author, he is a renowned poet, orator, social activist, rationalist, professor, and very importantly, a politician too. Such kind of great and a versatile personality who hails from a poor Dalit family of Karnataka state struggles very hard to get develop himself since his childhood. He has to undergo many ordeals in life. The author, being a caste victim, never worries in his life about anything, and continues his incessant life struggle until he reaches that what he thinks. Being a staunch supporter of social reformation, and as a rationalist, he very strongly advocates for the social revolution in the country expecting a new nation. His multiple journeys against social strictures give him a respectable position in the society irrespective caste stigma. As a result he got evolved to the state being known as a good leader, reformer and a savior for many problems of the people in the region. Thus he remains the true voice of voiceless.

Key words:

Eeducation, empowerment, hard work, struggles, survive, rationalism, caste, god, religion, hate, poverty, employment, money, infidelities, liberation, self-respect, atheism, identity, socio-transformation, modernization, equality, etc.

1. Introduction:

The present article deals with the detailed study of famous Kannada poet, Siddalingaiah's struggle for success in his autobiography, A Word With You, World. This work is often considered as one of the influential Dalit autobiographies in the field of translation studies of the country. This plays very important role in creating the self-respect literary movement in the marginal communities as well as a unique genre for itself in the third world literature. This famous work has been produced as a combination of his two vernacularly written autobiographies, Ooru Keri and Ooru Keri-2. His first autobiography Ooru Keri was

published in 1996 to be written in Kannada language. The second one, sequel to the first one with same title as Ooru Keri-2 was published in 2009 in the same language with an extended autobiographical theme. Later these two were jointly published to be translated into English with the title, A Word With You, World in 2013. Each of these books has five sub-parts which means the joint publication has ten general sub-parts with the two major parts. The first part of the book discusses the author's childhood life, where as the second one deals with the author's literary and social activism. D.R.Nagaraj, a famous scholar opines about the autobiography in the afterward of the book as: "Siddalingaiah's autobiography contains several elements that we may expect in a Dalit author's work such as poverty, rage, and humiliation. However, it is fresh, and unexpected throughout the work" (Siddalingaiah 295).

The basic title of the autobiography, Ooru Keri has its own important regional and socio-contextual meaning. Here it says as: 'Ooru' means a main part of the village, where the upper caste people like Brahmins, land owning castes, and other serving castes of the upper castes live together, and the word 'Keri' gives the meaning that denotes the colony of untouchables, who are deprived of opportunities by rejecting their straight admittance into the main village due to caste distinction. Thus the outcaste wards and their importance is very well narrated as the main subject matter of the narrative.

The first chapter of Ooru Keri, "Magadi, and Manchanabele," is a beautiful account of Siddalingaiah's childhood set within the frames of family, caste, high religion, and folk religion, school, and perhaps most importantly landscape - a landscape that, as in Pasternak, teems with life, and seems to redeem human acts of injustice, and spite. (The Caravan)

This discusses the author's personal as well as the caste's social, and economic experience, and its conditions. His painful journey from dependent to independent leadership is very well delineated in the present work. Thus this autobiography emerges as a record of their history to provide the people with the author's rarest inner views, and as a socio-literary contribution to inspire the downtrodden castes. In this context, Chandan Gowda remarks about the novel that:

Ooru-Keri laid out the tough experiences of growing up as a Dalit with a gentleness, compassion, and life-affirming wit not usually seen in the Dalit autobiographies. He affirmed his selfhood without resentment towards the vicious workings of caste, and class while doubting alongside the value of the stakes involved there. The moral gesture was one of forgiveness, and reconciliation. (Gowda Web)

The author begins the autobiography with his first expression as: "ours was the last house in the Dalit colony" (Siddalingaiah 1) which means the entire Dalit colony was very clearly set out of the main part of the village. Thus he writes there had once been a house beyond his house. This was in ruined condition with collapsed roof, and three feet high mud walls. The author along with his friends of his age used to go, and enjoyed here by climbing the house for a glimpse of their parents those who have to return in the evening from the work. People could go to work in the fields of Ainoru who is an upper caste elder man. His fields lie at a distance of four to five hundred feet away from the ruined house. Here this Ainoru owns his beautiful house, and a well on the farm. This well is the one and only source for all the Dalits to fetch the water for their needs. In this context, the author writes," as for the people of our colony, it was a big thing if we got any water to drink. Our people trudged to a flower garden the distance away and fetched

water from the well near it” (Siddalingaiah 15). Once, when the author as usually goes along with his friends to play here, he notices a rarest and unseen laborious thing that “a man had fastened a yoke onto the shoulders of two other men, and was ploughing Ainoru’s fields” (15). It was amazing to see the two people, who were acting like bullocks while the third one was riding the people for ploughing the land. People, who see this scene express their pity over the people. The author, being a child could not understand what was going on there. However, he was very much disappointed after noticing that one of the men, carrying the yoke was his father. He writes the situation as: “a strange agony griped me at that movement. The women came up to us, and sighed, “what a plight has befallen poor Dyavanna!” This doubled my agony” (Siddalingaiah 16).

This story takes place at a place called Magadi, a town in Karnataka state. The place is no more inferior to any other places of the country in ill-treating the Dalits. The caste system was in strict practice here too. The Dalits were never allowed to have their own any free life. They do not have any happy and easy life other than working very hard, and leading a tough life. The village has a ‘mango tree land’ which was often rumored as the ghosts live there. People are often scared of the garden due to the ghosts and hesitate to go to work there. However, the people have a good notion about the owner of the garden, Ainoru who was indeed a generous man. They remember how he used to donate them the left-over food like poori, chitranna, and tattered dresses occasionally. Once, the author being a child notices, the caste people are sitting in a row for the left-over food. They would love this food very much and express their feeling as it was very delicious. Therefore, the people could throng over here on knowing the news about the distribution of this tasty left over food. At that time the author reaches the spot late, and repents over his delay. However, he feels a little happy for getting a small portion of the food.

The author’s family faces tough times since beginning of their family’s journey. Father Dyavanna has to work either for Ainoru or for the others during his stay at the village. He faces many problems to make his family meet minimum needs with his meagre income. He also had no option of borrowing money, except going on for the work. Already he was in deep debts. Therefore, he had a plan of shifting from Magadi to Bangalore in search of work after the Mari festival is over here in the village. Before his visit to Bangalore, he would like to go to his uncle’s village, Manchanabele.

Manchanabele is more beautiful town than Magadi. The author’s grandfather was a martinet. He was a principled and ideal man in the caste, had showed a great influence on the author’s tender mind. Another fellow, who was the author’s uncle also influenced the author very much. He is the man who admits the author into the school, diverting him to not be remained a wandering boy. He is the man none other than his father’s brother, who was good at reading Jaimini Bharata, the sixteenth century Kannada version of Mahabharata.

The goddess Maamma is their favorite deity, who goes on possessing one of the persons in the village. The possessed one would deliver the prophesy regarding their life. Goddess foretells many things in that possessed condition. Therefore, the people show great respect for the goddess. They celebrate occasionally their Mari festival happily, and enthusiastically. Jaldagare Amma, and Monteswamy are also other important deities of the caste. They could fear a lot about these deities. They used to worship these deities in expectation of protection from the diseases like cholera, and diarrhea. The community people always believe that the god Monteswamy belongs to their Holey caste. They feel very proud of him for

his hailing from their caste. This is the reason why, the father of author wanted to move to Bangalore after the festival is over only and he also planned accordingly in search of livelihood. After reaching here, he finally settled as a wood worker for cutting the fire wood at timber depot, Srirampura. The author being a child also used to go to function the available works for making money. Mother also extends her support in making money.

The area Srirampura colony was quite new to this family where varied caste people were seen having their abodes. Most of them are very rustic with the belligerent nature. The author shares one of his Bangalore's experiences with the locals that how they killed a bus conductor for killing a local girl by the bus accident. He leads a tense life everyday due to caste configuration. Robbers, drunkards, rogues, and their nuisances were common here every day in the evenings. However, they enjoyed the local life here against all the hardships. The author shares his summer experiences of Srirampura. He writes that "every summer, the story teller Malur Sonnappa used to give harika the discourses for a month in our colony. The discourses began at eight in the evening, and held large audiences spellbound till late at night" (Siddalingaiah 46). The author likes immensely his discourse style, which attracts lot of people's attention since his school time. Later he draws the inspiration from his friends, and mentors to mold him into an effective speaker. Consequently, he is seen as an effective speaker in course of time. The author joins at Srirampura School for completion of his upper primary education. Later he joins in the R.Gopalaswamy Iyer hostel in Bangalore for his further studies. He continued his education against many odds. His father's income did not meet minimum needs of the family. The author shares as how his father suffers from deep debts. He writes, as his father got deeper, and deeper into debts. For him, it was as easy as drinking water to loan from others. But at the time of repaying them, he could face a lot of troubles. Once, he had faced such kind of a bitter experience from his money lenders. He observed how they had asked him demanding and humiliatingly for not repaying them in time. Thus the author writes about the incident that "they had assaulted my father because he had not repaid his loan in time. Unable to bear the humiliation, my father drank poison that night. He writhed in pain, but recovered after he was admitted to hospital" (Siddalingaiah 59). Consequently, his mother joins as a sweeper at the same hostel, where her son studies to overcome the financial problem. She could provide the children with the leftover food from the hostel and bring them up for a while. Thus, they had to lead their lives against many problems in the life.

The author faced many problems to continue his education peacefully. He writes very proudly that his joining at R.Gopalaswamy Iyer hostel, Srirampura was a turning point for his educational career. He said that he enjoyed the facilities provided at the hostel. Three hundred students from different places gave him a new experience of life. The students have to adjust with the small rooms among themselves. Each room was possessed by thirty to forty students. Therefore, skin diseases were common among students. The time table maintained at hostel was good in molding them as perfect students. For many a times they have to go half fast due to insufficient food. However, they would never deviate from focusing on the studies. The students, apart from the study, they could enjoy the ghost stories at night. The hostel life for the students was undoubtedly the time of new experiences, where different areas Kannadigas, and Tamils stay together. During this time alone the author starts focusing on debates. The student friends extended their support to him in this aspect. As a result he had to meet many prominent personalities of that time in seeking the support from them. Barnaiah an IAS, Rachaiah a minister of that time, D.Venkataiah, a

follower of Gopalswamy Iyer, Dr.N.C.Biligirirangaiah a scholar, and lawyer, Basavanna a senior student, and the other prominent people, the few important personalities helped in shaping author's life. The author writes, Gopalswamy Iyer's death was a fatal blow to down-trodden communities. They treated Iyer with great veneration. When he dies, the students of the hostel mourned for him for whole day and at night singing this special song:

Guru of the Harijans, have you flown away?
Have you reached the feet of Hari?
Have you turned us into orphans?
Will you never look at us again?

who will call us now?

They will only tell us not to come. (Siddalingaiah 84)

After some years, the author's family grew into big in size. House was very small to move together. Most of the times, the author had to stay outside allowing the other people to stay in side. There were six children in the family altogether . They are indeed more burden on the author's father to maintain as head of the family. Therefore, the author, and his mother could go on for odd works. The author, being a child also joined as a worker at a silk factory during the summer vacations. He was given the work of cleaning huge vessels where he had to collect the garbage in a bucket here.

After completion of the cleaning, he had to dump that in a wayside pit. He could carry the work in a hurried manner to avoid being spotted by any of his acquaintance due to the reason of contemptuousness that may arise after he was seen performing such menial job. He writes, "I ran the risk of being spotted by acquaintance as I carried the garbage to the pit. To avoid that, I smeared my face with grime before taking the garbage out, ensuring that I was unrecognizable" (Siddalingaiah 93). After the days he was taught the winding wok, in course of time he got the money by working there. He juxtaposed the situation with a book that he bought titled, Asprishyaru (The Untouchables:Who Were They, and Why they Became Untouchables) with the money that he earned by working here. All these things made him mentally prepared strong and study hard. However, the atmosphere at the house was inconvenient for his studies. Therefore, many a time he preferred to stay at a graveyard which was indeed calm a place for the study. This kind of radical experiences made him lose the faith in the god. Gradually, he was turned to be a rationalist. After completion of the schooling at Srirampura School, he joined the Government Arts College for his further studies where he had been taught by few excellent teachers. He says that he was deeply owed to the college atmosphere. This is the place where he meets his senior friend named D. R. Nagaraj who is a critic, and an author later who offered his friendship to the author. D.R.Nagaraj supports the author Siddalingaiah in evolving a good poet in the ensuing time. Siddalingaiah is not only an author but also a good orator. His oratory skills made him participated in many debates, and facilitated him to get prizes. The times, when he gets the money as a prize, the author tries to fulfil his needs with the prize money. Apart from this kind of earnings, he could also go on the other works at every available time for making the money.

D.R.Nagaraj is the first person to recognize the author as a rationalist. His way of approaching, writing style, and the thought process were seen quite as a rationalist. Therefore, he decided himself to be

a scientific person instead of remaining a superstitious man. During this time alone, he underwent the influence of controversial Tamil rationalist, Ramaswamy Naicker Periyar. The author liked Periyar's speaking style very much, and his controversial commentary on Hindu gods too, for the reason of their helplessness despite being born himself a Hindu. Sometimes he also organized meetings by inviting Periyar as the chief guest. They faced threat from many religious fanatics during time of organization of the programs. Basavalingappa, a minister of that time had supported them very much. He used to make some provocative statements intentionally about the sensitive subjects so as to jerk the stagnant society. At that time, Devaraj Urs, the Chief Minister of the state supported his activism. There were many other people seen supporting from behind him and his progressive movement. Teachers, mentors, social activists, politicians, and friends were the few important people among his supporters. During this time alone, he was attracted by the communistic ideology due to the impact of the then effective speakers. However, his attachment with the party had lasted only for a short while.

The author's activities for the Dalits' rights were really praiseworthy, and recognizable. During his college time, he founded the 'Dalit Sangarshana Samiti' (DSS) to bring the consciousness among the Dalits. It fights not only for their rights but also against the atrocities of higher caste people on the low castes. Here he shares one of his activities that has been carried under this banner. He writes, "a Dalit in Bangalore Rural district had been assaulted, around this time, and we visited the village" (Siddalingaiah 133) to justify him. His Dalit activities, and anti-caste movements brought him many troubles. However, he could not stop his activism of writing poetry, publicizing them, and organization of other similar activities. And, further he continued his debates actively against the casteism. One of his remarkable programs was to conduct a temple entry program for the Dalits during a conference conducted at a neighbor village, Bangalore. It was led to a disturbance due to upper castes' objection. But the author being a social activist was very well aware of the arising consequences if the program is conducted. Therefore he had to take the support of his followers and friends in making it a grand success. The author was a man of the gift of the gab to encounter the counterparts by his voice. He can create the energy and enthusiasm in the minds of the people by his revolutionary speeches.

Thus, he led many movements successfully in his life. During this time he got published his first Dalit work called HOLEMAADIGARA HAADU (Song of the Holeyas, and Madigas). After this publication, he finished his M.A and got a job as a research assistant in the Kannada department. With the publication of his first work, he could make money, and fame in the society. His works started to be appeared in varied magazines and papers. People started recognizing him as a poet by his name. However the humiliations, and looking down on the writer were not yet stopped by the people due to his past life. The people intentionally treated him as an inferior man. But he never minds, and leaves it for themselves only. Even after his settlement, the author never forgets his base from where he had raised. He writes about one of his such lifestyles. He always used to prefer to sleep outside since his house was so small. He never repents the condition through which he had gone in his life. He writes this as: "I used to sleep on the street during summer" (Siddalingaiah 154). Whenever any people had to come to meet him, he could speak to them on the streets only for the reason of this small house.

He also further writes, poverty is as a common problem of every household in their living area. There were many people who were seen in the dire poverty. A woman who borrowed the money at a very

high rate of interest was forced to face the problems by the lender for not repaying that in time. Whenever the money lender was insistent about the repayment of money, she could implore him to excuse for her delay. Despite the beseech, he paid a deaf ear to her words and he showed his rowdy nature at her. Further he started even scolding her. Then, “His eyes fell on the four-year-old child playing in the house. He forcibly picked up the child, and took it away, saying he would keep it in his house till she paid back her dues. She had cried, begged, and fallen at his feet, but no avail” (Siddalingaiah 159). There were many other such kind of instances of loans and consequent problems arose due to the functions, diseases, and needs in the house. As far as the author is concerned, he understands the poverty of the poor people, and the affluence of the rich people which lies between a hut and building. He also describes one of the incidents that shows the condition of the poor people that who suffer the inadequate houses at the times of functions, and the consequent difficulties that they face after the visit of relatives during such occasions as an example of small lives.

The author never worried about his problems of poverty. He did whatever he wanted to do in his way ahead in the life. Many people like Basavalingappa, a minister of that time, Bhaktavatsalam, a wealthy supporter, Basavaraj Kalgudi, a scholar, S. R. Malagi, a professor, Shankarappa and Kalegowda staunch socialists, Kallur Megharaj a friend, and the other friends extended their sincere support to him in his activism. As a result he wrote many revolutionary poems and songs emphasizing on social change. For many a time the local people could report his father quite negatively as if he was working against nation for producing such revolutionary poems. His father who was a calm going man used to follow an idea that nobody should disturb anybody, and everybody must mind one’s own business not to be disturbed by anyone else. However, the author never stopped writing the revolutionary poetry like “May the heads of rich roll/May the rebellion begin/May blood spurt, and flow like the waters of the Ganga” (Siddalingaiah 211). Once the father of the author was terrorized by complaining about his son, “he will be jailed for his poetry” (211). This literally shocked the father about his son and dreaded him about the ensuing thigs. So as to protect his son by averting the danger that is going to meet his son, the father had contrived a plan of smashing all his writings. The author mentioned the incident as:

“He, and my well-wishers got together, and dug my poetry notebook. The book contained the poetry I had written till then. They lit the stove, tore up the book, and fed it to the fire, and my Bandaaya poetry turned to ashes” (Siddalingaiah 212).

However he organized so many Bandaaya annual literary conferences in his life time by inviting many great authors from across the country. Despite his outstanding scholarship and lifelong literary productions, he remained an untouchable and was recognized as a Dalit poet only. He condemned the label of recognition as a ‘Dalit poet’ and repented over this discriminatory recognition in spite of his outstanding literary contribution. Therefore he wished to be recognized as a rationalist instead of being recognized as famous ‘Dalit poet’. Despite many hurdles tried to hold him back from evolving a great poet, he never compromised in creating a niche for himself in the emerging literary genres of India. Thus the author Siddalingaiah remained an inspiration to the both rationalist and Dalit activists in making the country filled with a new, revolutionary and scientific society.

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