



**MY FATHER BALIAH:
COLONIALISM, EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT**

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Abstract:

This paper is a study and analysis of Y.B. Satyanarayana's autobiographical text, *My Father Baliah*. It examines how the author's family were able to negotiate the spaces of colonial modernity and its institutions, such as the railways and educational institutions, for the upliftment of their family. Historically, education and respectful employment were categorically denied to Dalits. They were denied to Dalits due to the prevailing Brahminical caste system which prohibited Dalits from either acquiring book knowledge or owning any form of wealth or assets. However, the Dalit community was able to access some resources of modernity during British colonialism. Interestingly, the author documents the positive role Muslim rulers of the times as well as the British who enabled this mobility of a downtrodden caste. The paper looks at these historical shifts which opened a liminal liberal space for the author's forefathers during colonialism and sowed the seeds of education and empowerment for his family and an entire community.

Keywords: *My Father Baliah*, caste, colonialism, Dalits, education, empowerment, Telangana

1. Introduction

Y.B. Satyanarayana is an eminent Dalit academician, activist and writer from Telangana State. His ground-breaking memoir *My father Baliah* (2011) unfolds a saga of three generations of the author's family and the trajectory of their struggle to survive the odds. This paper is a study and analysis of how Baliah's family were able to negotiate the spaces of colonial modernity and its institutions such as the railways and education for the upliftment of the family. The author's grandfather Narsiah who secured employment in the British Railways was a torch bearer who sowed the seeds of education and empowerment for his family. The author's father Baliah who also got a petty job in the British Railways further instilled a strong sense of the importance of education among

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his children. With this inspiration, the author and three of his siblings excelled in their studies and achieved doctorates in their respective disciplines of chemistry, botany, zoology and sociology. It was this remarkable path of education that not only gained them a life of dignity and self-respect but also laid foundations of social justice and institution building. At the same time, we can read Satyanarayana's account as an account of a struggle for dignity that recovers histories of struggles against caste discrimination outside of a binary of colonialism and nationalism. In other words, the book records, to use the words of Rawat and Satyanarayana, "*Dalits as actors in India's history*" (2016, p. 8).

2. Education and caste mobility

Historically, the idea of economic and social mobility has remained a distant dream for Dalits due to the hegemony of a Brahminical caste system which prohibits the so-called lower caste Dalits from either acquiring book knowledge or owning any form of wealth or assets. The Dalit community has been denied any agency for hundreds of years. However, British colonialism opened a liminal liberal space for the author's forefathers during colonialism. The community was able to access some resources of colonial modernity during this time and the author acknowledges these historical shifts which also impacted his family and in fact changed the course of their lives.

3. Biographies and memories: Documenting a community

Over the last century, Dalit writers in India have made a spectacular use of the form of autobiography much more than of any other literary form. An early inspiration is perhaps Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's "*Waiting for a Visa*" that was originally published in 1935 or 1936. The very first incident in this all-too brief autobiography is about a childhood journey when the author was travelling with his brother and a cousin to visit their father, then stationed at a place called Koregaon in the Satara District of today's Maharashtra. Ambedkar's father, like his forefathers, had served in the army of the East India Company and rose to the rank of an officer. Later, he retired and joined the then Government of Bombay. The author writes of how the three little boys were mistreated, once a cartman discovered they were Mahar's, or "*untouchable.*" Another piece is about when Ambedkar returned to Baroda from his higher studies in London and New York, but could not rent a room because he was Dalit. Yet another story is that of being denied drinking water when Ambedkar and his comrades were on a tour near Daulatabad. In his 20-page narrative, Dr. Ambedkar jots down several of his experiences as a child and as a young man but the most important marker of the narrative is that the author was a Dalit student, a Dalit boy, a Dalit man. Thus, much more than a record of his own achievement and accomplishments, this fragmentary text documents the discrimination and humiliation that Dalits faced from "*upper caste*" Hindus, Parsis and Muslims in the region.

Thereafter, there has been a noticeable trend of documenting memoirs, particularly from the 1980s onwards in Marathi, Kannada, Gujarati and Tamil. Literary critic and scholar Sarah Beth points out that “*Dalit autobiography is a form of political assertion of Dalits. It constitutes a positive, self-ascribed Dalit identity and rejects negative identities of Dalits. It a reassertion of Dalit control over identity.*” Moreover, these writings also provide crucial evidence of Dalit activism in social, political, and religious spheres from the early decades of the twentieth century. Curiously, Telugu Dalit writers have published invaluable literature in the form of poetry, novel and short stories but autobiographies are fairly recent. Notable examples include *My Father Baliah* (2011), the first ever Telugu Dalit memoir written in English by Prof. Y.B. Satyanarayana and *Ants Among the Elephants* (2018) by Sujatha Gidla. Y.B. Satyanarayana notes in his preface that he had written this memoir for the sake of his granddaughter who was born and brought up in USA so that she would not forget her grandparents’ roots—a history of caste discrimination and untouchability which earlier generations had endured and overcome by way of education.

4. *My Father Baliah*

The memoir begins with author’s great-grandfather, Narsiah, who was regarded highly as a community leader and was a skilled craftsman and shoemaker. It so happened that when the then ruler, the Nizam of Hyderabad, was touring through his village of Vangapalle in Karimnagar district of Telangana region, Narsiah was able to gift a pair of splendid sandals to the Nawab Mir Tahaniat Ali Khan Afzal ud Daulah, the fifth Nizam of Asif Jahi dynasty. The Nizam was so pleased with this talent that he immediately gifted Narsiah fifty acres of land.

This ownership of land by a Dalit is also significant in the economic landscape of the times, when occupational stereotypes shaped by caste defined Dalits as non-agriculturalists and ensured caste Hindus’ domination of ownership, buying and selling of lands. Thus, no untouchable could ever even dream of owning such a huge parcel of land and Narsiah belonged to the leather-working, “*untouchable caste*” Madigas. Therefore, shockingly and yet unsurprisingly, the village’s feudal landlord or Dora raged and ranted at Narsiah’s temerity in acquiring this land. Eventually, the Dora encroached upon the land and left Narsiah only two acres. The hapless Narsiah did not have the courage to question the Dora; moreover, his son young Narsiah also had to be handed over as a bonded labourer under the shackles of the same Dora. Cholera took away Narsiah and his wife and after his father’s death, young Narsiah was not allowed to cultivate even those two acres of left-over land. Young Narsiah got married to.... She gave birth to a male child. He was named after Ramaswamy/Baliah. Again, the fatal cholera took away a young Baliah’s mother and no one would come forward to assist in her burial due to a fear of getting infected with the disease.

The young Narsiah was so disgruntled with this incident that, unhappy with his community and his entire village, he picked up the dead body of his beloved wife and his months-old son and hurried over to the river bank to bury her before sunset. He then

left Vangapalli and decided never to go back to the village. He walked hundreds of kilometres for two days and reached his maternal uncle's village Rangunathapalli, close to Warangal city. This journey of over a hundred kilometres from his ancestral Vangapalli village, Karimnagar district to Rangunathapalli, Warangal district was a remarkable journey in the lives of the Yelukati family.

Irrespective of where they come from, Dalit autobiographies vividly present a transformation of Dalit lives when an individual in the family relocates from a feudal, caste-ridden ghetto in a village to bigger town or cities that offer liberal spaces. Nationalist narratives depict colonial rule as generally exploitative and repressive. However, such a perspective frames colonialism as a homogeneous and singular structure of oppression. It does not sufficiently explain the different responses of various social groups within society. For example, Narendra Jadhav notes in his *Outcaste: A Memoir* about how working in Mumbai for several years and the city had brought touchability into his life, "along with an awareness of his rights as a human being" (p. 6). In an interview, Jadhav later pointed out that when Gandhiji was telling people to "go to the villages," Ambedkar was advising his followers to do just the opposite — "go to the cities." Thus, moving out of the confines of caste-ridden ghettos in the villages to the anonymity of cities allowed Dalits to exploit the practices in colonial public spaces and its normative categories. In effect, it offered Dalits a better chance of transforming their lives and realizing their potential.

5. Caste and education

Rangunathapalli village was close to the Khagipeta town and Hanumakonda railway junction. Narsiah's maternal uncles who were already working in the railways requested Mr. Franklin, a mand known to be sympathetic towards the poor, to find a job for Narsiah. Mr. Franklin considered their request and offered a job to Chinna Narsiah. He was posted at a small roadside railway station close to his uncles' village. His job included signalling the arrival and departure of trains by ringing a bell, signalling to fast trains, and walking the long distance to light the kerosene lamps fitted at the outer and home signals (p. 21). Narsiah was leading a renewed and decent life at his maternal uncle's village. His maternal uncles also performed his marriage to Ramakka. However, Narsiah worried about his son from his first wife, Ramaswamy, and whether a stepmother would take care of him properly. However, Ramaswamy was a clever child and interested in going to school like other children. When he had expressed his desire to attend school, his father was dumbfounded.

Thus, Narsiah was worried that his innocent son was chasing after an unreachable dream and responded by telling him gently, "Dear child, we are Harijans, they won't teach us." But when Narsiah pointed out to his son that they were "untouchable", his obstinate son responded by telling his father that he would sit far away and not touch "them", just as they "don't touch them elsewhere" (p. 22). The wary father would not relent and continued to tell his son that they were not supposed to read or write, that to persist in

such a desire was to “commit as sin” (p. 23). Of course, this argument did not satisfy the young Ramaswamy.

Narsiah’s apprehensions must be read as an acknowledgement of the reaction of caste Hindus who continuously opposed the education of those who, in their eyes, were fated to a life of ignorance. The Caste Disabilities Removal Act, 1850, a law passed in British India under East India Company rule and the subsequent establishment of schools are seen to have provided the first opportunities of education to the lowest of castes. However, what is relatively less known and acknowledged is the persistent struggle for access to schooling by the untouchables themselves in the face of considerable antagonism from caste Hindus. Geetha B. Nambissan, for instance, points out those untouchable communities have traditionally been denied access to learning, specifically because of their position in the Indian caste structure. The early efforts towards their education are usually associated with British rule and the efforts of the missionaries in India. Nonetheless, official reports in the late 19th and early 20th century are replete with accounts of the many trials and tribulations of untouchable children who persevered to receive an education even in “special” schools set up exclusively for them.

A few days later, the author tells us, a Mullah (a Muslim priest) who had been observing Ramaswamy for several days came to him and offered to teach the boy reading and writing. The boy informed the priest he was an untouchable, but the affectionate priest offered to teach him, regardless of the “sin” involved. He asked Ramaswamy to come over to the mosque where he worked, whenever the boy had time. The next day, after finishing his work, Ramaswamy took a bath, dressed as neatly as he could, and went to the mosque. The Mullah was surprised by Ramaswamy’s promptness and the interest he showed in learning. He made the boy sit beside him. The author tells us that Ramaswamy, conditioned as he was, moved away slowly, fearing the pollution his touch may bring upon the Mullah! Thus, it came about that, Ramaswamy began his educational journey with learning informally from a Muslim teacher. Against all social and religious odds, after centuries of being denied learning by caste Hindus, a Muslim teacher sowed the seeds of learning in the Yelukati family – something for which the coming generations would be forever indebted to this first teacher of the family (p. 23).

There were many historical and scholarly accounts that explain how the Nizam rulers contributed to the amelioration of the Dalit education. This is particularly true of the early 20th century when Bhagya Reddy Varma established many schools in Hyderabad with the monetary contribution and support of the Nizam of Hyderabad. Later on, Shyam Sunder and B.S. Venkat Rao played an impressive role by getting support from the Nizam. Charsley notes that when B. S. Venkat Rao became Minister of Education in the Nizam’s government, he could use this vantage point to obtain a ‘One Crore Trust Fund’ from the government for the education of the depressed classes (p. 10). Dalits had also been distributed *Inam* land grants during the Nizam’s reign. Further, distinguished scholars such as P.R. Venkat Swamy, Gail Omvedt, Dr. Jangam Chinnaiah and Y. Chinna Rao have studied the important role of the contribution that the Nizam had extended to the Dalits in their education and upward mobility.

It was in the late 1930s that Narsiah transferred to Secunderabad. It was a move that completely changed everything not only for Narsiah who was exposed to a big city for the first time and found himself very busy throughout his eight working hours, but also for his family. Ramaswamy had grown up and once again Mr. Franklin, known as ever-helpful to all working-class employees in the railways, helped Narsiah secure a job for his son. Ramaswamy also got a job as a box man in the railways. Narsiah also wanted to get his son married and set up a household but Ramaswamy wanted to spend his time in reading and learning.

6. Caste in Modern Spaces

Ramaswamy was posted at a small town called Bellampalle, which is in present-day Adilabad district of north Telangana. His job was to collect the boxes or trunks from the quarters of the guards and safely load them in the guards' coaches. At the same time, Ramaswamy noticed the changing forms of practicing caste discrimination in a seemingly "modern" landscape of a city, such as the railway quarters. The accommodations or quarters of the Sudras and the untouchables were in close proximity and untouchability was strictly observed, particularly by the women. Ramaswamy, unlike his Sudra colleagues, was not allowed to enter the houses of the upper caste guards. He often had to wait outside till the guard's trunk was brought out by the man's wife, with many wives cursing the untouchable "box boys". The women insisted that their husbands sprinkle water on the box or trunk once it was placed in the railway van, and they did the same when it was brought to the house. The Sudra and untouchable women who lived adjacent to each other too quarrelled in the yard in front of their quarters when an object was involuntarily touched by an "untouchable" woman.

The author notes that these practices didn't seem strange to Ramaswamy; or rather, he was used to it. However, he is inviting his readers to recognize that these "modern" spaces, along with modern institutions, bureaucracy, industrialization, and the public sphere, also "*created new conditions for the perpetuation of humiliation*" (Rawat and Satyanarayana, p. 16).

Ramaswamy was married to Narsamma who too had lost her mother like Ramaswamy when she was very young. Her father Malliah who also worked and lived in the railway quarters at Bibi Nagar had not remarried, choosing instead to raising his three daughters himself in responsible and respectable manner. Over time, Ramaswamy was posted at different stations. In fact, he had more knowledge in reading than many of his counterparts. Therefore, he was respected everywhere and also had many friends. However, he also began to indulge in alcohol and frequently disappeared with his friends on such drinking sessions. Things became more serious when Narsamma was at her father's house during her pregnancy and Ramaswamy became involved with another woman. Thus, Ramaswamy got into several messy situations and also began to neglect his duties. Eventually, he was suspended on the charge of being an accomplice of his friends accused in a theft case.

Narsiah rushed to Franklin and explained that his son Ramaswamy was not involved in the case. Six months later, Franklin helped Ramaswamy with a new job posted in a very remote area, albeit with a changed name—Baliah. A remorseful Baliah transformed himself totally into a dedicated employee and also began to pay serious attention to his children's education and their prospects. The couple had nine children in the course of time and it was Baliah's deepest wish that all his children be educated and become high-ranking and well-respected officers in the railways. It was for this that he was prepared to work extremely hard.

Baliah's eldest son Balraj was a helpful boy who assisted his mothers in household matters. The second son Abbasayulu was admitted to the railway school in Secunderabad and found learning in the English medium difficult at first. However, Abbasayulu was an enthusiastic learner and picked up the language in a very short time. The author recalls that whenever he came home during his vacations, he would read his lessons aloud in English and made Baliah very proud. Their father would repeatedly ask Abbasayulu to read aloud in English because even though he himself understood very little English and did not know how to read or write in the language, it made him very happy to hear his son say something in English.

7. Caste in Educational Institutions

The phenomenon of caste discrimination has prevailed in many schools in every village or town across time. Babasaheb Ambedkar has written about it. Similarly, in *My Father Baliah*, while Baliah desired to admit all his children in English medium schools he could not do so as he could not afford the financial burden. The children had to enrol at whichever local school there was, wherever he was posted in remote areas. In each such school they had to face caste segregation. The three boys in particular—Narsimlu, Anjiah and Sathiah—went to schools wherever Baliah was transferred and often walked long distances to reach the primary schools, which were usually quite far from the railway stations. The children faced humiliation at school since they were the only children from the untouchable community attending school. They were made to sit separately and were not allowed to take water from the school pots. They had to go out into the Harijanwada, the area where the “untouchables” lived and was quite far away, to quench their thirst. India had just become independent, notes the author, but schools in rural areas were as stubborn as they had always been (p. 83). When the teacher had to write on their slates, he would ask a Hindu student to sprinkle water on the slates before he touched them.

There was no one to play with them and the brothers played among themselves. The Brahmin teacher wouldn't shirk from mercilessly beating these children for even the smallest mistake since he felt, as he repeatedly told them, that their presence polluted the class. 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 (p. 84). Baliah and Narsamma were very attentive about their children's studies. They would wake them up early in the morning and make them sit

down to read again and again until they sounded perfect. This regular practice taught all the children self-discipline. Narsamma paid special attention about their neatness and cleanliness and she used to make sure they always kept tidy. She would dress her children like upper caste children, with silver bracelets and gold earrings. In this, the untouchables who lived in the railway colony seemed to have enjoyed some amount of freedom.

When Baliah was fortuitously posted at Secunderabad, he felt that his other children should also get the same kind of education, without the kind of caste segregations practised in schools of rural areas. He got all his children admitted at the Lalaguda Railway school and the children were also happy here since there was no segregation of untouchable students—all students sat on benches. However, Baliah could afford the education of all his children. Nonetheless, he was resolute in his desire to ensure that all his children would be successful in their respective studies. The author notes that his father Baliah was an inspirational and pragmatic teacher. Baliah used to explain some everyday matters in a logical and pragmatic manner to his children. For example, on a pilgrimage to Kashi once their train went into a tunnel. When the children were frightened of the darkness in the tunnel, Baliah described what was happening in matter-of-fact terms. He took up an orange they had, made a hole right through the middle and showed that the train was travelling similarly through a tunnel made in a mountain and would come out on the other side. He explained it was dark inside the tunnel because sunlight could not pass through the solid rock of the mountain (p. 121).

Most of the untouchable employees in the railway faced difficulties to earn enough money for their families on their petty wages. Therefore, a lot of the children of such employees joined the railway workshop as unskilled workers or laboured on daily wages. Since they were the children of railway employees, they could access these jobs relatively easily. For instance, some of the untouchables worked as a “*khalasi*” or “*bungalow peons*” at the residences of senior officials and a *khalasi*’s son could easily become one, just like his father. This meant that the children dropped out of schools (p. 123). But Baliah would not allow his children to work as daily labourers. Instead, he encouraged them to excel in their studies to get a better job. Luckily, his eldest son Balraj landed a small job at the Secunderabad railway station. The earnings of Balraj along with his father contributed to the upkeep of the family. Baliah’s second son Abbasaylu managed to gain employment as an Officer in the railways initially and later on he became a faculty member at the Department of Sociology at Osmania University. The two oldest brothers were instrumental in the progress and education of their younger siblings. Baliah’s eldest son Balraj’s petty railway quarters would go on to become the epicentre of all of his siblings’ progress in their education. It is worth revisiting Satyanarayana’s description here:

“We lived at Chilkalguda for several years, a large joint family that my father and Balraj oversaw. There were twenty-two members in the family, of whom only three were earning, and most of the rest school-going. Dinner at home was like a small langar, in which masses of people are fed in one go—more than fifteen people would eat at a time as my mother sat

in the midst of large bowls serving rice or chapattis, and my sisters-in-law handed filled aluminium plates to each individual.” (p. 149)

Abbasayulu was an intellectual mentor for his younger siblings while Balraj was actually sheltering and feeding them. Interestingly Narsimlu, Anjiah and Satyanarayana went on to pursue bachelor’s degrees in sciences. Going by the advice of Abbasayulu regarding the specialized subjects to choose, Satyanarayana opted for a combination of mathematics, physics and chemistry, while Narsimlu and Anjiah opted for botany, zoology and chemistry. The author took admission in Nizam College, while the other two continued at the Secunderabad College of Arts and Science. After completion of his graduation and teachers’ training, the author got a school teacher’s job at a village in an interior region of Telangana, near Tandoor. When the young Satyanarayana went there to join his duties, he was shocked to notice the caste system that continued to be strictly practiced in villages. He writes:

“One thing I lied about was my caste... Untouchability was still prevalent and strictly followed in villages. I was to say that I was a Tenugu, a Sudra. I took the risk of hiding my caste, which meant that I lived in danger of being found out every day. Villagers belonging to the tenugu community often visited me and enquired about my family and marital status, some even inviting me to dinner. I would constantly worry that someone would find out that I was an untouchable. Had the villagers known my real caste, at best, they would have driven me out of the village with contempt. I shudder to think of the worst-case scenario.” (p. 173)

On the other hand, he records:

“In the cities, things were fine as long as house owners or landlords, belonging mostly to the higher castes, were unaware of our Dalit identity, but once it was known, we would be harassed until we vacated the house. Concealing our caste was difficult, for although our ways had changed.” (p. 187)

8. Caste, culture and empowerment

There have been Dalit writings in Indian languages that have praised the arrival of colonial modernity for introducing new principles and institutions that enabled Dalits and other marginal groups to participate in the public space. Arjun Dangle too associates the arrival of the British with *“new knowledge, technology and production processes”* in his review of Dalit literature (p. 20).

Education and exposure had brought many over-all changes in the lifestyle of Baliah’s family in many ways. The author is keenly observant of the changing form of the caste practices within his family too. In time, all the brothers became prominent Faculty members at different educational institutions in the region. The author himself became a faculty member at the Department of Chemistry at Osmania University. Satyanarayana

acknowledges that the more they were progressing in their studies and getting jobs the more they were emulating the upper castes and their cultural and religious practices.

The family began to look similar to people from the upper castes in terms of their attire and the way they spoke. In the cities, the identification markers imposed on Dalits elsewhere had almost vanished, with the ladies wearing their saris like caste Hindu women instead of tying them further up so that they only reached the knees. Most of their silver jewellery was replaced by gold. The men, too, were no more half-naked as before, and it became difficult for caste Hindus to recognize Dalits from their appearance (p. 186). In terms of their religious observances, they started visiting temples, holding *pujas* very often and began to avoid eating meat. Even if someone fell sick, they seemed to depend more on the prayers of a priest instead of first taking them to a doctor. A sad consequence, the author notes, was that a brilliant daughter of his brother became a victim to the polio disease. Even his mother had to suffer from a trance due to blindly believing in mantras. The family began to invite Brahmin priests to attend and organize the rituals in their family celebrations and events. The author comments:

“Anjiah’s wedding was held just three days before mine, on 20 May, in the Railway Auditorium, and it was very different from the other weddings in our family. It was the grandest of the marriages by far: for the first time, I saw the pandal under which the bride and groom sat decorated with flowers, and a Brahmin priest performing the rituals... The gathering now consisted mostly of urbanized people, and the rituals were the same at those followed by caste Hindus.” (p. 188)

On the other hand, his family and particularly his father’s reputation acquired great eminent. His father Baliah now wanted to get back the land that his grandfather Narsiah had lost to the feudal landlord, the Dora at Vangapalli. A village patel or official, Narsimha Rao met Baliah at Secunderabad and convinced him that the land could be regained. Baliah went and built a house in Vangapalli as advised by the Patel and made several moral and legal efforts to get back his ancestral land. Nonetheless, in this he could not succeed.

Baliah was exceptionally glad that four of his sons got teaching jobs at institutions of higher education where they were continuously learning and simultaneously disseminating the knowledge to all their students without any discrimination, unlike Brahmins and caste-Hindus. Moreover, they all had been inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s philosophy. On many occasions these young Dalit teachers had to face upper caste anger and verbal abuse at their place of employment. The true colours of casteism continued to flourish even in such so-called civilised modern institutions like schools, colleges and universities. For instance, an upper caste attender who worked in a Physics lab kept making derogative and casteist comments against Dalit Faculty. This upper caste attender would plot and scheme to put the author in difficult situations that would force him quit office. He even tried to implicate the author in an examination scandal. Finally, his plans boomeranged and he himself landed in deep trouble. Satyanarayana writes about another instance, when he was appointed Principal and was

successfully leading the institution, an upper caste library assistant used to pass casteist comments. He would comment that the author, being a Madiga by caste, was not fit to lead the staff and institution.

"I offered him a glass of water, which seemed to cool him down a little. Friends, do not take this seriously," I said. 'After all, in this caste-ridden society, antagonism and intolerance by the higher castes does remain. And he is a Reddy; he expects us to remain at his feet. But now, we have a strong weapon: education. Let us use it.' Although I too had been angered, I kept my cool." (p. 195)

In another account, the author writes of when he attended an orientation programme organised by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) at Delhi. About fifty principals of colleges from across the country were participating in this course. During a debate on the subject of emancipation of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe students, these experienced administrators and teachers were more interested in discussing how long the reservations for these students would continue and so on, rather than talking about the topic at hand. Their antagonism towards their students from such communities was clear. None of them were even thinking in favour of upholding constitutionally guaranteed reservations for these sections. To top it all, one principal made a derogatory remark, *"No matter what reservations you provide and however long you extent it, these Harijans are never going to get any better. Their children attend colleges simply to receive the scholarship money"* (p. 202). Thus, the author exposes the deep-seated and entrenched institutional infirmities and the lack of commitment even from the educated upper castes.

The author spoke up and strongly condemned against the irresponsible remarks made against Dalit students. He was angered with such attitudes of the upper caste principals and took half an hour to speak of the legacy of Jyotirao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar for all Indians. He quoted Phule, *"Let there be schools for the sudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters! The sudras are the life and sinews of the country, and it is to them along and not to the Brahmins that the government must ever look to tide them over their difficulties, financial as well as political."* There was no Dalit present in the programme except for the author and needless to say, it shocked everyone present that not only was he a Dalit but also that he could be there. Had they known about it, the discussion might have not been so intense and disdainful against Dalits. Satyanarayana notes that the principal who spoke against Dalit students and reservations extended his apology. Nonetheless, the author writes that he understood that our public institutions are populated with horrendous upper caste arrogance, and an inhuman detestation and contempt against Dalit sections.

9. Conclusion

The author concludes on a firmly positive note that Dalit empowerment and emancipation is possible only through education. Historically, education and respectful

employment were categorically denied to Dalits. His Yelukati family was exemplary in this regard. The colonial government, of course with its own economic considerations in mind, recruited Dalits in great numbers in various fields even if in professions considered servile, menial and risky, especially in the railways. Interestingly, the author documents the positive role of Muslim rulers of the times as well as the British who enabled this mobility of a downtrodden caste. It was a Muslim teacher who first sowed the seeds of learning within the Yelukati family. In the Foreword, S.R. Sankaran points out that “*one is deeply moved when the author expresses the gratitude of the Yelukati family to this first teacher of the family, salutes him with great reverence and asks coming generations to remember Ali Saheb forever.*”

Satyanarayana records this memoir to recreate a history for future generations and to leave an indelible impression on the progeny of his family as well as on the community. He attributes this tremendous transformation to his father Baliah and to education. His father Baliah was a visionary who foresaw the importance of education and set an example for future generations. Education itself was an opening offered to Dalit communities during colonial times, something that they had never been allowed to benefit from before. The author notes in his Preface that three generations of his family could work in the railways and live in modern spaces such as those offered through railway quarters due to education. It was an instrument which allowed these young Dalit men, educated in non-elite institutions and vernacular languages, to become active participants in imagining a new, modern India.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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