

ANTS AMONG ELEPHANTS

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“Ants among Elephants” is not my own title. It is the title of a much talked about book. Sujatha Gidla has authored the English book with a telling title “Ants among Elephants.” A well-known publisher Farrar, Straus and Ginour, an Imprint of Macmillian Publishers have published the book in July 2017 which has 306 pages.

The book “Ants among Elephants” is all about the memorable experiences of a girl Sujatha who grew up as an untouchable person. She has studied in the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Madras. In the book Sujatha has described in great details her degrading and demeaning experiences as an untouchable girl in the school and in the society.

The narrative style of concrete experiences and personal sufferings of being an untouchable make the book interesting. I read several news reports and other write-ups on “Ants among Elephants” in the internet. Many write-ups in several newspapers and Magazines have given substantial quotations from the book.

Usually those who criticize the caste system of India or raise objections to it are labeled as anti-nationals who hate the Indian culture and art! For, everyone knows that even in the 21st century the grip of caste mentality is strong among many Indians. The untouchable (Dalit) people are chained at the bottom of the caste ladder. They are bound to serve all others in the caste-hierarchy. On the one side there are people who want strict adherence to the caste system and on the other hand the Dalit people want to break away from the caste system.

Sujatha writes that the untouchable are “Not allowed to come near sources of drinking water used by other castes. Not allowed to eat sitting next to a caste Hindu or to use the same utensils. There are thousands of other such restrictions and indignities that vary from place to place. Every day in an Indian newspaper you can read of an untouchable beaten or killed for wearing sandals, for riding a bicycle.”

Before I share further about “Ants among Elephants,” let me describe to you my own demeaning experience of the caste system. I had reached at Bhubaneswar, Orissa for a national meeting of Jesuits in social communication. There taking advantage of a half a day break, I went to Puri to visit the famous Jagannath Temple together with an American friend. Earlier, a few years back I had visit Puri and was very much impressed by the Jagannath Temple there. So I wanted my American friend to see the imposing temple structure and the

exquisite carving of gods and goddesses which are all indicative of Indian art and culture. And so we reached the Jagannath Temple at Puri.

A priest of Jagannath Temple met us at the entrance. Taking for granted that my white-skinned friend as an English citizen, the Priest showered us with a series of bad words and accusation. Fortunately my visiting American friend did not know a word of Hindi. After standing there a little while I told my friend, "Let us go back. The priest does not want us to go in."

Meanwhile I had told the priest that I am from Gujarat and my friend was a foreigner. As we turned away the priest followed us on the one side continuing his tirade against the English people and on the other side, he was telling me: "Saheb, you please come and perform the offering; I will help you in the worship of god Jagannath." But I told the priest repeatedly that "through the hands of a priest who is prejudiced against caste and color of person's skin, I do not want to offer worship to Jagannath!" But the priest was trying to make me to understand that the English dogs have looted Bharat and destroyed the nation. "But you, Saheb, do not go back without taking the blessings of god Jagannath."

Today I see caste system as a ruining factor of our country. It is true that many educated and enlightened people of our country do not follow the rigid caste system. But the Hindutva politicians coming from the majority Hindu population who follow the degrading caste system do keep aloof from the Dalits, the tribals, Muslims and Christians, who are all in the minorities. And the people wielding power, instead of pursuing the declared policy of development, are destroying the nations being with the hate-mongers!

The author Sujatha writes in 'Ants among Elephants' about her experiences of untouchability in her childhood, and during her education. She has also narrated the experiences of untouchability of her family and of poverty. Sujatha was brought up in an economically middle class family as her educated parents were teaching in a college. Still at every step Sujatha suffered the degrading ill-effects of the caste system. She has described many instances of being the victim of the caste system.

The book "Ants among Elephants" is written with the American readership in mind. Hence the author explains that the caste system and its consequences are totally different from the American class-system of the distinction or distinguishing between the black and white. She says the Indian caste system is worse than the American race difference between the black and white. In India the difference is much that different caste people live in distinct separate

areas. The people outside the caste system, the Dalits have to live outside the village. Between the caste people and the Dalits there is no giving or taking of daughters in marriage or sharing meals in one-another's home. The Dalits do not have the right to draw water from the village well.

Today most city people do not believe in caste system or in the degrading social order of Brahman, Kshatrya, Vaishya and Shutra. They do not differentiate in the name of caste. Though the so called high caste people do not eat or marry with the untouchable Dalit people, they respect each other from a safe distance.

The book "Ants among Elephants" is not yet available in India. But we can hope that sooner or later its international publishers will make the book available in India. By reading it many people can free themselves from the caste-inspired but dehumanizing attitude. All people are brothers and sisters of one another. I dream of a world where people will be free from degrading and dehumanizing attitude and begin to accept universal brotherhood/sisterhood of all people.

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