

GOGU SHYAMALA, *Nene Balanni: T. N. Sadalaxmi Batuku Katha [I Am the Strength: T. N. Sadalaxmi's Life Story]* (Telugu), Hyderabad Book Trust, 2011, xviii + 338 pp., ₹180, (Paperback).

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Within the patriarchal hierarchy of Hindu society, it is a rarity to find accounts celebrating the lives and achievements of dalit women. Yet Gogu Shyamala's *Nene Balanni: T. N. Sadalaxmi Batuku Katha [I Am the Strength: T. N. Sadalaxmi's Life Story]* shines as a remarkable exception, illuminating the journey of T. N. Sadalaxmi. Her story is not just inspirational, but deserving of global recognition, resonating with advocates for women's empowerment and those who champion women's potential in politics. T. N. Sadalaxmi's narrative is striking for two significant reasons. First, she rose from the depths of the Mehtar caste, one of the most marginalised within the dalit community in the Nizam's Hyderabad region, to become the esteemed first deputy assembly speaker of Andhra Pradesh. Second, her life's mission was dedicated to uplifting marginalised communities and advocating for rights across all levels of society. Her tale is deeply intertwined with the essence of Telugu society and politics, reflecting the spirit of the Telugu nation from the late 1940s to the 1990s. The book delves into the significant events and issues in Sadalaxmi's life, spanning across 40 chapters, rendering it a substantial volume by any standard. I will endeavour to highlight key aspects of Sadalaxmi's life below.

The presence of the Arya Samaj and the British had a profound impact on Sadalaxmi's family and her own development. Although the Arya Samaj used dalits to bolster the Hindu population in representational politics against Muslims, it established special schools for them. This initiative not only promoted literacy among dalits but also enabled some to pursue careers as school teachers and Sanskrit scholars. For example, Sadalaxmi's husband, T. N. Narayana, who was educated in Arya Samaj schools, went on to become a renowned Sanskrit scholar. Similarly, the British military presence in Nizam's Hyderabad provided employment opportunities for dalits, albeit in modest roles such as cleaners and sweepers, which nonetheless marked their first formal employment and brought economic stability to families. Sadalaxmi's father, Kondaiah, who worked as a scavenger for the British, wisely utilised his earnings to educate his children and invest in property.

In the early 1930s, amidst the fervour of the independence struggle, the dalit community split into two factions. One faction, led by Babasaheb Ambedkar, advocated for a distinct identity separate from caste Hindus and called for a separate electorate. Meanwhile, the other faction aligned with Mahatma Gandhi, who contended that dalits, whom he called *Harijans* (children of God), were integral to Hindu society, and thus, there was no need for a separate quota for the dalits. The Mehtars, Sadalaxmi's caste community, who had traditionally been engaged in scavenging—a profession similar to that of the Bhangis in northern India—joined Gandhi's camp. They erroneously believed that Gandhi, by likening their task of removing caste Hindus' excreta to a mother caring for her child, acknowledged their work as a service to society. Gogu Shyamala highlights a discrepancy in Gandhi's analogy: While mothers clean their infants, grown children are expected to tend to themselves. No mother would willingly clean the

excreta of an adult son, and it would be considered repulsive if she were asked to do so. The author asks, if Gandhi considers the Bhangis as integral members of caste Hindu society, would they not feel similarly repulsed when tasked with cleaning up after adults?

The majority of Arya Samajists who ventured into dalit neighbourhoods were actively engaged in politics. Despite pursuing their own political goals, they collaborated closely with the Indian National Congress. Through their teachings, they ensured discussions not only on their interpretation of Hinduism but also on the freedom struggle led by Gandhi. This influence left a lasting impression on young Sadalaxmi. She actively participated in Congress gatherings, affording her the opportunity to interact with and hear numerous Congress leaders speak. Interestingly, while she aligned with the leaders in the struggle for independence against the British, she held different views on their criticism of Ambedkar and his activism. Consequently, she began to comprehend the freedom struggle through Gandhi's lens but viewed dalit issues from an Ambedkarite perspective. Despite the potential backlash from her Congress counterparts over her admiration for Ambedkar, Sadalaxmi remained undeterred. This courage led her, at the tender age of 14, to travel alone from her locality to Secunderabad to hear Ambedkar speak during his visit to Hyderabad in 1944. In essence, Sadalaxmi's engagement with both Congress and Ambedkar left a lasting impact on her young mind.

How did political parties led by caste Hindus select candidates for constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs)? What level of support did dalit candidates receive during the electoral process? Were political parties willing to allow dalit candidates to advocate for dalit concerns—a primary goal of institutionalising political representation for dalits? Gogu Shyamala contemplates these questions through Sadalaxmi's political journey. In the aftermath of independence, during the initial general elections, the Congress party required a dalit candidate for the Sultanabad constituency in Telengana's Karimnagar district. This was a dual constituency, and the party enlisted the young and active Sadalaxmi, who was then pursuing her intermediate studies in Madras. Despite not meeting the required age for contesting Lok Sabha elections, the Congress party managed to overlook this requirement in Sadalaxmi's case. While P. V. Narasimha Rao, the former prime minister of India, contested from the Karimnagar constituency as the general candidate, Sadalaxmi ran as the dalit candidate. Narasimha Rao was provided with a vehicle and a substantial amount of campaign funds, while Sadalaxmi received a mere ₹2,500. This clearly reveals the attitude of the Congress party towards the dalit representation. How could the party field a candidate who did not even meet the required age qualification? Sadalaxmi was not even a local candidate and was unknown to the constituency's dalit population. Although both candidates lost the elections due to the popularity of the communists in the constituency, the Sultanabad contest marked the beginning of Sadalaxmi's enduring political career.

In the immediate aftermath of India's independence, as per the constitutional provisions for political representation of dalits, numerous individuals from this community secured seats in legislative bodies at both the central and state levels. However, among them, only a select few, such as Sadalaxmi, distinguished

themselves as champions of the marginalised. Notably, she rose to prominence as the first female deputy speaker in Andhra Pradesh and later as the first female endowment minister, advocating tirelessly for the rights of dalits. Gogu Shyamala highlights two significant contributions of Sadalaxmi that deserve special mention in this context. First, during an Assembly session, a debate arose regarding the allocation of land to impoverished individuals. The concept of poverty in India transcends caste and community boundaries, encompassing a wide spectrum of people. While it is ideal to distribute land to all impoverished individuals regardless of their background, the state is required to establish a fair criterion due to the limited availability of land, ensuring that the most disadvantaged benefit from such allocations. Participating in this debate, Sadalaxmi highlighted a crucial distinction between dalits and the economically challenged individuals from non-dalit communities who could sustain themselves by selling goods in the market, while the former, constrained by the caste system and untouchability practices, lacked this opportunity. Land, Sadalaxmi argued, was the only means for dalits to attain self-reliance and earn a dignified livelihood. Her argument compelled the Andhra Pradesh state government to initiate the distribution of land among dalits in the mid-1960s.

Second, the clash between Hindu dharma, which historically barred dalits from entering temples, and the Indian Constitution, which upholds equality, came to a head when Sadalaxmi, a dalit woman, became the endowment minister and boldly entered revered temples like Tirupathi, Bhadrachalam, and Srisailem, where Brahmin priests welcomed her amidst Vedic chants. This symbolic gesture marked a victory for Ambedkarism over Brahmanism. Sadalaxmi, believing untouchability originated in temples, advocated for their democratisation by mandating dalit and female representation in all endowment ministry trusts. Additionally, she established a Vedic school to train priests from diverse backgrounds, challenging brahmin dominance and fostering the democratisation of Hinduism.

Gogu Shyamala's book extensively explores Sadalaxmi's pivotal role in advocating for the creation of a separate Telangana state during the late 1960s. It highlights her acknowledgment of the employment injustices faced by the people of Telangana under Andhra leadership. Despite her affiliation with the ruling Congress party, Sadalaxmi actively engaged in the movement for a separate Telangana, much to the dismay of the Congress leadership. Shyamala laments the lack of recognition given to Sadalaxmi by the dominant caste Hindu leadership, attributing it to her caste identity and its societal position. Additionally, Sadalaxmi also played a significant part in nurturing the Madiga Dandora movement in the early 1990s.

The Indian state's blanket categorisation of all dalits as SCs failed to acknowledge the diversity in castes and social hierarchies within these communities, ultimately benefitting historically privileged castes within the dalit classification. This oversight led to instances where castes like Chamars in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana, Mahars in Maharashtra, and Malas in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka disproportionately utilised reservation opportunities intended for all dalits. In response, the Madiga caste, among the most marginalised in Telugu regions, challenged the dominance of Malas in reservation quotas, advocating for

sub-categorisation based on population proportions within the broader dalit category. Recognising the intrinsic fairness of the Madigas' demand, Sadalaxmi, a staunch believer in democracy and the rights of the marginalised, supported and nurtured the movement that unified all Madigas and affiliated castes under one umbrella. This approach sought to ensure that marginalised dalit communities received their equitable share of reservation benefits based on their demographic representation within the overall dalit population.

Sadalaxmi adorned many roles throughout her public life: Member of Legislative Assembly, deputy speaker, endowment minister, social welfare minister, revolutionary reformer of Hinduism, and champion of a separate Telangana state, as well as a supporter of the Madiga movement. Although, in all these roles, as is evident, she effectively discharged her responsibilities with utmost dedication and hard work, in her personal life, she faced profound challenges due to her husband's inability to support her. Despite this hardship, Sadalaxmi led a remarkable life, leaving behind a legacy of inspiration that will endure for generations to come.

To pen this book, Gogu Shyamala approached Sadalaxmi, who, in the twilight of her life, was bedridden with multiple complications. Her memory also appeared to be fading, and it was challenging and often painful for her to recall significant events and people from her life. Shyamala also seemed to experience a different anguish witnessing Sadalaxmi's suffering, who, in her distress, would often remain silent for hours. Sitting by her side, a witness to her suffering, the author nevertheless persevered through these difficulties to bring forth the life story of this Madiga legend. Gogu Shyamala's commendable contribution to enriching the literature on dalits, especially dalit women, warrants recognition and celebration.

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