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Through a Glass, Clearly

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A memoir that 'dwells on the determination, grit and creativity of ordinary people who come together in a battle waged on multiple sites, in public and private spaces: courts, mandal and panchayat offices, police stations, judges' homes, and— quite literally— the field and the archive.'

Gita Ramaswamy's political memoir is a riveting account of her life as an activist in search of a transformative politics in the post-Emergency years. In this rigorously self-reflexive but unsentimental narrative, she weaves the moving story of her own attachments, hopes and losses into her involvement with the struggle for land and dignity waged by landless Dalit communities in the villages of Telangana. Being deeply personal and also a record of important historical events that would probably have been lost to us but for this writing, it is a story narrated in different voices, which sometimes merge with each other and at others stand out in their difference.

Two-thirds of the 400-odd page narrative is taken up by Gita's life from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s in Ibrahimpatnam or Eerapatnam (as 'the locals called it'), an area some 30 km from Hyderabad city. Nearly all of her pre-Ibrahimpatnam life is compressed into the first eight chapters of the book: the repressed Brahmin childhood, the rebellious days as a politically active student at Hyderabad's Osmania University, relationships, friendships, and the founding of the Hyderabad Book Trust, built by her over the years to attain its current position in the world of independent political publishing in India. The rest of the narrative is devoted to the work of the ITVCS ("Ibrahimpatnam Taluka Vyavasaya Coolie Sangam/Agricultural Labourers' Union"), the union or 'Sangam' that she helped found in the mid-1980s. The Sangam's work was essentially to find ways of putting existing laws into practice and making them work for the poor, which meant challenging the Reddy landlords of the area. Beginning in 1985 with an aggressive campaign against bonded labour in these villages, the Sangam went on to the uphill battle to secure rights for the landless Madigas and other Dalit castes on lands expropriated by the Reddy landlords.

> As the redoubtable D. Satyamma's comment...tells us, 'we fought…were even jailed. But we prevailed.' That is the spirit of this memoir.

Gita's crisp writing style captures the mood of the 1980s, that mix of fear, energy and still-open political horizons, leading up to the threshold of the neoliberal 1990s. The broad political question that drove the founding and flourishing of the ITVCS remains relevant today, though in a very different force-field: 'Could a non-ML, non-violent, yet militant movement be built?... I wanted to see if a self-sustaining, strong organization of the rural poor could be set up' (129). If the book is already being treated as a 'How To' manual in some circles, it is because the answer is a resounding 'yes', with a few significant caveats. The analytical eye is more at home with pessimistic hindsight, especially when it comes to social movements: some hope, but mostly structural flaws and negative unintended consequences. This book, however, dwells on the determination, grit and creativity of ordinary people who come together in a battle waged on multiple sites, in public and private spaces: courts, mandal and panchayat offices, police stations, judges' homes, and— quite literally— the field and the archive. As the redoubtable D. Satyamma's comment on the book-jacket tells us, 'we fought…were even jailed. But we prevailed.' That is the spirit of this memoir.

Politics, fast and slow

One unfortunate consequence of the backlash against developmentalist "village studies" in the social sciences has been that the rural has nearly disappeared from mainstream scholarship on contemporary South Asia. Shadows of rural societies can be made out in the "peri-urban" and other such hyphenated terms that describe our urban present. There are, of course, good reasons for this—the accelerated growth of urban forms has shrunk the village into a spatial and temporal holdover, no more than a colourful setting for Telugu blockbusters. Thus, we no longer know how caste or gender relations, family and sexuality, or indeed the new economy looks in rural society. Gita's account of her days in Eliminedu, Gungal, Meerkhanpet, Pulimamidi and several other such villages, each having its own social character, takes us through not the "remembered" but the lived village.

Caste determines everything here, Gita notes, not just everyday life but also 'how and when you die' (137). She learns to see and describe the differential habitus of caste through language, music, food, institutional spaces like courts and police stations, and how

bodies learn to inhabit them. The humour, warmth, and anger she brings to these descriptions, while documenting the depredations of the system—for this alone the book ought to find a significant place in all Humanities and Social Science classrooms. She is not the first to critique the organized Left for its failure to attend to these aspects of radical politics, but the critique is nested in different, sometimes unexpected, registers. More than the scathing comments on 'vanguardism', it is the story of her 'sharp/steep learning curve'— a recurrent phrase in the book—that draws attention to the social demands of political work.

> Resisting the spirit of vanguardism, Gita Ramaswamy tells us that she began by 'mostly listening and asking', and 'the movement spread far and wide by the sheer will of the people'.

As one would expect from a political memoir, the narrative is full of frenetic activity: miles of cycling, walking, chasing the police and bureaucracy and being chased in turn, filing cases and following them up, organizing meetings and demonstrations. At the heart of all the action, however, is a quiet, slow and reflective process. And this may have been the enduring legacy of these struggles, writes Gita, '[t]he Sangam created a political space and a forum for discussion for the poor of the area, a space which exists even today' (324). We read about the role of meetings held in the dalit-wada, where decisions are collectively arrived at after long deliberation. Resisting the spirit of vanguardism, she tells us that she began by 'mostly listening and asking', and 'the movement spread far and wide by the sheer will of the people' (189). Listening is where political work begins, she suggests, and the hard work of creating and sustaining these spaces for discussion, where a new collective identity can be forged, is both the necessary ground for social change and its most palpable effect.

A people's history of Telangana

We can usefully read this political memoir as laying the groundwork for a possible 'people's history of Telangana.' Hyderabad state has been fortunate in its historians, and there are several excellent studies to show how these struggles unfold histories, which take us back at least 200 years. That is, if we begin relatively recently— with Salar Jang, 'the modernizer' (Prime Minister to the Nizams of Hyderabad, 1853-1889), and his wide-ranging reform of the Hyderabad state system in the mid-19th century. These reforms, of which the survey and settlement of land formed a big part, were instrumental in breaking the power of the old aristocracy and creating a new legal and economic structure for the state, which rapidly filled its near-empty coffers. But they had the long-term effect of strengthening the revenue and judicial hierarchy in rural Hyderabad, cementing the power of big landlords over subordinate castes obliged to render free service to the "dora", or "lord", especially in the villages of Telangana. It is well-known that this state of affairs was overturned briefly during the Telangana Armed Struggle (1946-1951). However, as Gita records in her book, even the limited gains of that landmark movement 'barely touched' Ibrahimpatnam's villages. The year 1948, when the Indian army's 'Police Action' against Hyderabad state took place, inaugurated 'the time of the land grab': large numbers of Muslims— landlords among them— were killed or driven out of Telangana villages, only to make way for Reddy and Velama landlords who simply took over these lands and renewed their power over the labouring castes (145-147).

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The ITVCS's work began by returning to this moment through the land-starved eyes of the peasantry, and retrieving painstakingly the paperwork that would allow many of them to claim the land that was rightfully theirs. In doing this, they are forced to confront Telangana's history of armed resistance to the state. Gita Ramaswamy's stand against so-called revolutionary violence is clearly spelled out in several places, but the question is not easily resolved. She acknowledges this, as a 'lapsed revolutionary': on the one hand, the threat of Maoist violence played a significant role in forcing recalcitrant landlords to finally make terms with the Sangam. On the other hand, it is the long and painstaking work of the landless that brings things to this point by the early 1990s. The Sangam's insistence on legal title to land makes for a lasting settlement in favour of the landless, contrary to occupying land and planting "red flags" in fields (307). The landless are forced to recognize that only the state provides legitimacy, the ability to build a life around a piece of land which can be passed on.

> The strength of this memoir is that these questions—of responsibility, of the ethics of representation and mediation— are left for readers to think about, to push beyond the writer's harsh self-criticism.

Through her own voice and that of her friends and co-workers, Gita's story conveys more than the bare facts of exploitation and struggle. It underlines the durability of these exploitative land/caste relations whose persistence across generations and spaces produce different futures for the landless Madiga, and their landlord's descendants, now settled in metropolises across the world, oblivious to the founding violence of their privilege. Thus, this is an account that allows us to approach this socio-political terrain from a densely subjective standpoint—an 'I' that is resolutely part of a 'we', formed by the history it records, and conscious of being so formed. Certainly there are many political communities, which find extended mention in the book, such as Hyderabad's active feminist groups and the Ambedkarite politics of the post-Karamchedu (the massacre is discussed in some detail in the book) moment. Gita chooses, however, the Sangam's work in Ibrahimpatnam as her political home and the main 'we' in this story. Hers is a mediating voice whose strength comes from being an outsider to both worlds; it speaks with an inside view only afforded to strangers.

The 'I' in the 'We'

The question of mediation arises at every level in Gita Ramaswamy's memoir. The writing of this memoir for English readers, to make these memories and histories available for a global readership is—as she and her co-workers recognize— a political act in itself. Nevertheless, for a radical politics still invested in a certain immediacy linking experience and action, there is something uncomfortable about the significance of the mediating figure. This discomfort cannot but be recorded by someone as sensitive to the problem of representation as Gita. In the beginning she writes with disarming honesty, 'fearfully' opening her fraught political journey up to the scrutiny of readers, who she hopes will 'read it with some sympathy for the immature thirty-year-old that I was' (24). Even the accomplished memoirist is not entirely comfortable with being anything more than 'an instrument' in the Ibrahimpatnam 'struggle' (23). She is unprepared, therefore, for the painful discovery of her own importance for the struggle: her co-workers remember with regret and a sense of betrayal her sudden withdrawal , a result of being 'burnt out', and 'deeply flawed' (421-426). The strength of this memoir is that these questions—of responsibility, of the ethics of representation and mediation— are left for readers to think about, to push beyond the writer's harsh self-criticism.

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The 'lapsed revolutionary' is today a recognizable subject of political women's self-narratives. In fact, Telugu country has proved especially rich in what we might call the 'After Revolution' genre. A rough-and-ready list of titles might begin with the ground-breaking *We Were Making History* (1989), the more recent translation and publication of Kondapalli Koteswaramma's memoir *The Sharp Knife of Memory* (2015)— a project Gita Ramaswamy herself was closely involved in— and Sujatha Gidla's more experimental *Ants Among Elephants* (2017). Gita's own active participation in the Telugu political and literary sphere immediately calls these to mind. Placing this political memoir in a larger field of reading gender, caste and revolution together through the personal narrative, allows us to see both its singularity and its debts to the genre. *Land, Guns, Caste, Woman* is essential reading for anyone wanting to think about the concrete complexities of caste and gender relations that make up the intimate life of abstract categories like politics, citizenship, law and violence.

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