

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW**  
**MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

**[ISSN 2581-5369]**

---

**Volume 4 | Issue 3**

---

**2021**

© 2021 *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlmh.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com>)

---

This Article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Law Management & Humanities after due review.

In case of **any suggestion or complaint**, please contact [Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com](mailto:Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com).

---

**To submit your Manuscript** for Publication at **International Journal of Law Management & Humanities**, kindly email your Manuscript at [submission@ijlmh.com](mailto:submission@ijlmh.com).

---

# An Expedition: From Destitution to Demanding of Rights

---

MAITREYEE MISHRA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The past is a repository of all the experiences, achievements, discoveries and struggles of humanity. In fact, it is through our past that the present traces its way to us. If we come to think of it, in true sense it is all a continued reality. One such continued reality is of the hardships faced by dalits in India at the hands of brutal caste segregation. The book that I chose to review is called "Black Lilies- an Anthology of Telugu Dalit Poetry" by K. Purushottam. It is a collection of poetry written over a span of more than a century by telugu dalit poets (translated in English by the author himself) who were systematically and continuously ignored because of their places in the set oppressive social hierarchy. The idea and intent that went behind the creation of this anthology is what fascinated me immensely as it talks about giving a 'voice' to those who were forcefully muted at the hands of discrimination and bias. What makes it even more interesting is the use of poetry to display facts, express emotions and demand rights.*

*In order to truly understand and appreciate the essence of this creation I have tried to pay attention to not only what is 'said' but also what is 'intended'. I have divided this review into parts and categorically discussed each and every aspect of this book and finally after talking about all these facets, I have come to a conclusion, my own understanding of what it conveys and what it stands for. To state in one line- this book tells a story of an expedition; from destitution to demanding of rights.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is Powerful. It lays bare the deep ridden emotions, silently ruptures the rigidity of the superficial, challenges the set notions. Hence, being fully aware of the prowess of a verse and the emotions it unravels in a being, I chose K. Purushotham's collection of Telegu Dalit poetries, titled '**Black Lillies- An Anthology Of Telugu Dalit Poetries**', written over a span of over a century, to review. Poetry has always fascinated me, it makes me aware of the true sense of the being and this anthology was no exception.

Telugu literature, like any other literature has, for the longest time ignored dalit poets among

---

<sup>1</sup> Author is a student at Faculty of Law, University of Lucknow, India.

other underprivileged sections of society and has almost never accorded them the recognition and reverence they deserved. The author has divided the verses into three broad categories- **Written About, Writing the Self** and **Writing About** along with shining light on the evolution of Telugu literature concerning dalit poetries and how these have “forced” the Telugu literature to be more realistic. Poetries collected and translated by him harrowingly convey the harsh truth of systematic oppression faced by dalits in the name of caste segregation. Along with the primary idea of dalit philosophy or ‘**Dalitism**’ propounded by most of the verses, a few even venture on to explore the undercurrents of issues like **intersectionality** of oppression faced by different classes among the broad head of ‘Dalits’ especially Women. These verses represent, with a stark (almost pinching) accuracy, problems faced by dalit community like **hunger, oppression, discrimination, forced labour, illiteracy and crimes against women** and hence I find the theme perfectly in consonance and involving a substantial interplay of the issue of human rights mainly the rights involving the underprivileged section of our society. The following lines from Gaddar’s ‘Destitutes that We Are’ included in this anthology perfectly sums up my contention.

*“We Have mouths Unfed*

*We have villages that we don’t belong to*

*Though born human*

*We are denied recognition as humans”*

The author has done a remarkable job selecting and incorporating some of the most appropriate, diverse, inclusive and most importantly, powerful verses, written in Telugu by dalit poets from their works over a span of a century and has most carefully articulated them in a sequence that makes reading this anthology, a journey; one with ample surprises, emotions, knowledge and most importantly visualization of their day to day struggles. It offers the much needed English translation to some of the most prominent verses written in Telugu. This anthology is not only a collection of several literary enriching works, but it also tells a tale, an expedition from destitution to demanding of rights.

## **II. LAYOUT AND CONTENTS**

This book has a collection of 73 selections by 39 poets of the first generation to the latest in Telugu, translated to the truest of emotions in English by the Author himself. Mr. Purushotham gives a brief overview of the history of dalit poetries and how it has evolved and become more incorporated with mainstream poetry after a long string of ignorance. He tries to explore all the latent undertones amidst the common theme of caste based oppression like **Dalit Nationalism**

and **divergence of opinions among dalits themselves**. In his very apt introduction, the author takes the readers through the entire journey of evolution of dalit Telugu poetry, from the medieval *Mystics* to the present modern poetry more in consonance of present day issues surrounding the community. The first groundbreaking change in the Telugu literature in this direction was brought upon by the mystics' poetry, owing to which untouchables, for the first time ever, became the subjects of literature. It also instilled change within the community as it educated people on issues like self-respect, social inequality and untouchability. The **Reform Movement**, and associated literature, almost five centuries after the mystics, however, failed to hit the mark as it suffered a serious limitation of not conforming to the basic tenets and framework of Hinduism and the caste system and was labeled 'too extreme' and was mainly initiated as a reaction to dalits' conversion to Islam and Christianity. Then came the era of **Nationalist Poetry** and it too, like the former, failed to question the basis of caste rather neglected the whole issue altogether. The dalit challenges of discrimination and bound subordination were not given proper representation. The **Progressive Literature** of the 1940's too blatantly neglected caste specific exploitation. These socio-cultural specificities of caste, gender and ethnicity did not find much place in popular progressive works. The resultant of which, the poetry of the reform, the nationalist and the leftist period had limited appeal. Mass appeal lay in cultural troupes, ballads and folklores that dealt with day to day activities of the communities more.

As a result of systematic and continuing ignorance faced by the dalit poetry which was written parallel to the mainstream one, the efforts became more concentrated and the style turned more rigorous and critical of the oppressive ways of the society. Gurram Jashuva, a popular dalit poet expressed his criticism of the "complaisant and self-serving poets who were unmindful of socio-economic problems." The dalit poetry of this era, created a new space for itself. It provided a new locale in the panorama of literature deviating from the "sickeningly subjective romantic poetry" and the "revivalist neoclassical poetry." In essence, it did a wonderful job of re-linking literature to society. Adding another facet to the evolution of dalit telugu literature, the author talks about poetry resultant of several identity movements, some of which related to the issue of **inter-se untouchability** i.e. untouchability within untouchables. Some examples include writings about Madiga identity and proportionate access to reservation benefits.

The author, towards the end of his personal note also correctly discerns that Telugu literature has a long way to go as the dependant castes are yet to transition from being witten about to writing themselves. And he also expresses his eagerness as he is patiently waiting for the dependant dalit writers to enrich Telugu literature further by their innovative works. According

to him, the biggest achievement of dalit poetry has been its ability of reclaiming ‘dalitness’ in all its forms and resultantly shaping the mainstream poetry. It also played a remarkable role in ascertaining identity and generally used a simple and easy to understand and hence accessible language.

Following his carefully penned down personal note, is a collection of 73 verses by 39 poets written over a span of a century. It includes works of Gurram Jashuva, Kusuma Dharmana, Boyi Bhimmana, Sivasagar, Kolakaluri Enoch, Boya Jangaiah, G.R. Kurme, Gaddar, Kathi Padma Rao, Damera Ramulu, Shikhamani, Tullimalli Wilson Sudhakar, Yendluri Sudhakar, Jajula Gowri, Satish Chander and many more. Each poet has been assigned a separate chapter that does justice to their peculiar style of writing and adds coherence to the overall theme of the book.

### III. THEME EVALUATION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Anthology begins with the author’s overview of objectives sought and themes that are meant to be explored through this anthology. The contribution of dalit poets in Telugu poetry or literature has always been undervalued and rampantly ignored and author’s efforts in recognizing and representing the same deserve true appreciation. He also goes on to mention, in his overview as to how popular Nationalist and Marxist poets have mostly neglected caste specific exploitation and heed almost no mention to it and hence it generated a necessity for the people from the same community to write about their struggles as a hope that their struggles will get a voice and would generate popular support. This anthology also goes on to unearth the origins of some of the popular works which challenged discrimination faced by dalits inter-se mostly by the practice of untouchability by the higher classes to the lower classes which spiraled into several identity movements like the **Dandora** Movement. The overall theme is tinted by or revolves around the multicentric issues involving dalit identities including the dalit discourses-social, economical and political. Jashuva’s ‘**The Bat**’ is a vivid portrayal of destitution when he compares himself to a bat, “doomed and detested” each line of the creation is drenched in agony. Although we cannot say that it is all the book has to offer as it not only pleads for better treatment and quality life, but claims it as a right. Bhimanna’s work like ‘**My Hereditary Rights**’ and ‘**Arrears due to me**’ are apt examples. However, there isn’t just agony and anger, but also hope, hope that the time ahead will give back to them all that has been unjustly taken away as beautifully portrayed by Enoch’s ‘**Let Me Dream**’.

*‘Let me dream, don’t forbid the dream, they will be reality tomorrow.....’*

*The darkness should ensure sunrise, Let me Dream true democracy”*

The undercurrents of Nationalism and women’s rights although not explored as desired, do find

a mention. The single most enticing thing about this book is how it has managed to remain coherent and continuous even though it is a collection of works spanning numerous decades, covering different aspects of the dalit struggle and written by people, though belonging to the same community but have very different experiences and struggles which reflects in their works. It is as if, Mr. Purushotham has, most carefully, articulated an ornament, beading together, the rarest and most glorious pearls. The translation, done by author himself is not at all monotonous and does justice to the moods and diversity of the collection.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This book has been a near perfect amalgamation of the emotional overtones and factual interpretation. This book fulfills its primary objective truly well i.e. giving a voice and representation to the struggles of the Telugu Dalit community and recognizing the work of Telugu poets and according them the generally denied importance in the literary world. The personal note by the author himself proves to be extremely beneficial as the reader learns about the history and evolution of dalit poetry in a phasal manner. It also helps us develop a better understanding of the verses subsequently given and arranged ever so articulately by the author. Although, as a reader, I would have been more content if it included works of or collections on dalit women as I could not find adequate representation (just a single woman author **Jajula Gowri** finds a mention through a verse titled *I will Avenge*) Other than that, I can contently say that reading this book was an insightful experience. It does claim dalitness in all its forms. And I will recommend the same to anyone who wants to understand the caste struggle in a nuanced fashion. Throughout the entire review, I have mentioned several times how reading this book felt like a journey, a journey through different times, through themes, through styles and through different ideologies and concerns. This enticing journey as a result, gave me a perspective, a fresh and new one to look at the problems surrounding the dalit community. Enrichment from reading the beautifully crafted verses was a convenient corollary.

\*\*\*\*\*