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Sathyavathi: Navigating Caste, Poverty, and Educational Inequality

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Abstract— The Biographical and autobiographical accounts of Dalit women offer important insights into the multidimensional realities of gender, caste, and class oppression in India. The life of Sathyavathi, a Dalit woman from the Madiga community in Telangana, is chronicled in Vasanth Kannabiran's *Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender*. Her journey from extreme poverty and social exclusion to community leadership represents a remarkable struggle for dignity and self-assertion. The interrelated frameworks of caste discrimination, economic hardship, and educational inequity are used in this essay to analyse Sathyavathi's experiences. Sathyavathi was excluded from both dominant castes and marginalised communities since she was born into a Dalit household that was marginalised. Her life story highlights the widespread consequences of poverty, such as child labour, starvation, and restricted access to educational resources. Despite these challenges, she persisted in her studies and became a social activist and student leader. This study makes the case that Sathyavathi's life serves as an example of resistance against structural oppression and emphasises the transformational power of education and group activity using textual analysis and secondary academic sources. By illustrating how autobiographical narratives subvert prevailing social institutions and offer alternative histories of marginalised communities, the paper advances Dalit feminist discourse.

Keywords— Telangana, Dalit autobiographies, poverty, educational inequality, caste discrimination, Dalit women, social resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit writing has become a potent tool for expressing the real-life realities of India's historically under-represented groups. By highlighting the realities of caste oppression, social exclusion, and resistance, it subverts prevailing narratives. The challenges and goals of the Dalit community in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have been extensively documented thanks in large part to Telugu Dalit literature. U. S. Saranya claims that Telugu Dalit writing serves as a literary and sociopolitical movement that aims to reclaim marginalised voices and reveal caste-based injustices (Saranya 444). In a same vein, Thummapudi Bharathi notes that Dalit poetry in Telugu has developed into a protest literature that acknowledges Dalit identity and challenges social structures (Bharathi 62).

The autobiographical stories of Dalit women hold a unique place among the various strands of Dalit literature. These accounts highlight the various levels of oppression that Dalit women face as a result of the intersections of gender, caste, and class. According to Gopal Guru, Dalit women "talk differently" because neither Dalit male narratives nor mainstream feminist language can fully capture their experiences (Guru 83). Their works reveal discriminatory practices that go unnoticed in more general conversations on social justice.

Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender by Vasanth Kannabiran is a significant work of Dalit feminist life writing. The story follows Sathyavathi, a Dalit lady from Telangana's Madiga caste, as she overcomes significant social and economic obstacles to become an activist and community leader. The story details her encounters with institutional prejudice, severe poverty, spousal abuse, caste discrimination, and lack of access to education. It also demonstrates her tenacity, leadership, and dedication to social change.

Sathyavathi's life story has relevance that goes beyond her own struggles. It provides insightful information about the structural realities that rural Telangana's Dalit women must deal with. Dalit women's memoirs expose how caste and class oppression coexist in daily life, challenging mainstream portrayals, as noted by Shome and Pandey (36). Sathyavathi's experiences highlight the obstacles to educational mobility, the crippling impacts of poverty, and the continuation of caste discrimination even among marginalised communities.

Gogu Shyamala notes that modern academics and activists also highlight the story's relevance. "So far, most of the books on Dalit activists featured them only as victims, but this book touches completely a different dimension of the marginal class which also has the potential to fight against the discrimination" (*Sathyavathi's Life Can Inspire All Dalits*). These findings highlight the text's significance as a story of resistance as opposed to victimisation.

Vasanth Kannabiran, the book's author, emphasises the story's inspiring aspect as well, saying that "the life of Sathyavathi can inspire the entire Dalit community to fight for their rights" ("*Sathyavathi's Life Can Inspire All Dalits*").



The transforming potential seen in Dalit personal tales is reflected in this remark.

Three interrelated aspects of Sathyavathi's life are examined in this essay: poverty, educational inequity, and caste discrimination. The essay examines how institutional oppression affects individual lives and how activism and education become instruments of empowerment by examining her experiences and placing them within the larger framework of Dalit feminist discourse. The study makes the case that Sathyavathi's life narrative is a potent example of Dalit women's tenacity and their continuous fight for social justice, equality, and dignity.

II. REVIEW LITERATURE

According to Gopal Guru (1998), the interaction of gender and caste has created a distinct social status for Dalit women. Their experiences are very different from those portrayed in mainstream and Dalit feminist discourses. He highlights that because Dalit women's persecution is unique, they "speak differently." This paradigm aids in comprehending Sathyavathi's identity and complicated conflicts.

The autobiographies of Dalit women are examined by Anindita Shome and Somjeeta Pandey (2020) as stories of resistance against economic and caste oppression. They emphasise how life essays give voice to under-represented groups and reveal social injustices. Their research shows that autobiographical literature serves as a potent instrument for social critique and empowerment in addition to serving as a personal testimonial.

Preeti Singh (2022) investigates how Dalit women writers use autobiographical narratives to record their experiences with prejudice, violence, marginalisation, and social injustice. She contends that memoirs offer true stories of under-represented lives that are frequently overlooked by popular literature. Her writings highlight the value of life writing in exposing hidden truths and opposing prevailing prejudices and social institutions.

Nikita Verma (2025) examines how patriarchal oppression and caste prejudice interact in the autobiographies of Dalit women. Her research demonstrates how self-awareness, education, and tenacity can be used as tools of resistance against societal boundaries. Verma emphasises how Dalit women have evolved from being victims of structural oppression into strong, independent people who confront injustice.

Sai Babu (2015) examines the socioeconomic circumstances of Dalit women in Telangana, emphasising social marginalisation, poverty, and illiteracy. He illustrates how these difficulties still influence their daily lives and restrict their chances for advancement.

His study offers important background information for comprehending the difficulties and challenges that defined Sathyavathi's early life experiences.

According to Julia Guenther (2016), autobiographical works by Dalit authors in Telangana challenge prevailing social assumptions by constructing alternative identities. She highlights how life writing can help rebuild one's identity and prevent marginalisation. Her research demonstrates how Dalit groups use autobiographies as platforms for social change, self-representation, and dignity.

Sanjay Kumar (2024) talks about how Dalit literature may bring about societal transformation and awareness. He contends that literary narratives motivate collective resistance, promote critical thinking, and reveal structural oppression. Dalit writings, according to Kumar, are tools of social reform because they give voice to under-represented groups and inspire action against injustice.

In order to achieve Dalit women's empowerment, Prof. (Dr.) Visweswara Rao Chenamallu (2026) emphasises the importance of education, self-awareness, and proactive initiatives. He contends that social engagement and personal development lead to emancipation. His writings provide credence to the idea that Sathyavathi's life was a journey from oppression and marginalisation to self-realization, empowerment, and dignity.

III. OBJECTIVES

To investigate how caste prejudice affects Sathyavathi's social and personal life

To examine how poverty influenced her upbringing and schooling

To investigate the difficulties Sathyavathi has in obtaining and pursuing further education

To examine how gender, caste, and class intertwine in her life story

To assess her path as an example of societal change, empowerment, and resistance.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender by Vasanth Kannabiran serves as the main text for this study's qualitative textual analysis. Sathyavathi's experiences are contextualised and interpreted within larger socio-cultural and historical frameworks using secondary sources, such as academic papers, books, dissertations, and journal publications on Dalit literature, Dalit feminism, caste studies, and educational inequity.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Sathyavathi's Life Was Determined by Caste

Additionally, Sathyavathi's educational and career opportunities were influenced by her caste throughout her life. She consistently faced obstacles that kept her from reaping the rewards of school on an equal basis with others, despite her outstanding academic achievement. Despite not having access to essential school supplies like slates, notebooks, and textbooks, she continuously performed exceptionally well in her coursework. However, the structural disadvantages brought about by caste could not be eliminated by intellectual excellence alone. She failed to find steady work for herself even after rising to the position of student leader and actively helping other students secure admission, scholarships, hostel rooms, and job prospects. She apparently lost out on prospects for upward mobility because she received several interview call letters for government jobs only after the interview dates had passed. These instances demonstrate how systemic prejudice and institutional indifference frequently function covertly, preventing marginalised people from advancing despite their credentials and diligence.

The psychological aspects of caste oppression are also revealed by Sathyavathi's experiences. Significant emotional distress was brought on by persistent humiliation, distrust, and social marginalisation. Her reputation and self-esteem were seriously harmed by the accusations that she had misused organisational funding and that her right to own a home had been questioned. The fact that she considered suicide at this time illustrates the severe psychological effects of discrimination based on caste. Chenamallu notes that Dalit women's path to self-emancipation is frequently characterised by battles against institutional obstacles and deeply ingrained social biases (Chenamallu 125). But in the end, Sathyavathi's life is more about perseverance than failure. Her perseverance in carrying out her activity in spite of numerous obstacles illustrates the transformational power of resistance. "The life of Sathyavathi can inspire the entire Dalit community to fight for their rights," said Vasanth Kannabiran ("Sathyavathi's Life Can Inspire All Dalits"). As a result, her life not only highlights the persistent realities of caste persecution but also shows how strong, independent, and capable Dalit women can be when confronting oppressive systems.

B. Discrimination Based on Caste in Marginalised Communities

Sathyavathi's experience of prejudice within Dalit communities is among the most remarkable features of her life.

Even among marginalised communities, caste hierarchies still exist, as demonstrated by her marriage to a Mala church father. Internal conflicts and ideas of supremacy still exist between the Madigas and Malas, despite the fact that both groups are classified as Scheduled Castes and have a shared history of social marginalisation. Sathyavathi's life serves as an example of how caste prejudice may occur inside oppressed communities, perpetuating the very structures that have historically marginalised them, rather than just between upper castes and Dalits.

Sathyavathi expected friendship and emotional support from marriage, but instead she experienced emotional abuse, rejection, and humiliation. Her spouse viewed her as socially inferior and ridiculed her on a regular basis due to her Madiga ethnicity. He verbally harassed her, questioned her character, and questioned her chastity on a regular basis. In addition to being acts of personal cruelty, calling her a prostitute and persistently questioning her about her virginity were manifestations of deeply ingrained caste and patriarchal biases. Such approach demonstrates how social relations are still influenced by ideas of purity and impurity, even among marginalised communities. According to Singh, Dalit women frequently face prejudice from both dominant castes and their own social groupings, where patriarchal and caste-based attitudes are still prevalent (Singh 12).

The prejudice Sathyavathi encountered in her marriage is indicative of a larger social reality where Dalit women are subjected to various forms of oppression. Her husband's actions serve as an example of how patriarchal power and caste prejudice can combine to perpetuate women's subjugation. She was perceived through the prism of gendered suspicion and caste preconceptions rather than as an equal partner. According to Verma, the autobiographies of Dalit women demonstrate how caste-based discrimination exacerbates patriarchal dominance (Verma 1917). This claim is amply supported by Sathyavathi's experiences, since her status as a Madiga lady left her susceptible to humiliation based on both gender and caste.

Her marriage's breakdown also underlines the psychological and emotional effects of this kind of prejudice. Marriage turned into yet another source of oppression in her life rather than a source of stability and societal acceptance. But Sathyavathi was not going to stay a helpless victim. Her choice to go on in face of humiliation and abandonment shows incredible fortitude and self-respect. She turned personal anguish into a source of resilience and power by facing these obstacles.

Her experiences highlight the intricacies of caste connections in underprivileged communities and show how internal hierarchies and prejudices must be addressed in the fight for social justice. Sathyavathi contributes significantly to Dalit feminist discourse by challenging both patriarchal dominance and caste discrimination through her life story.

C. Patriarchal oppression and gendered violence

Sathyavathi's social and economic status as a Dalit woman exacerbated the patriarchal violence she endured. Women from marginalised communities are frequently denied the social support and safety that women from dominant groups have in many caste-based systems. As a result, they are more vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Sathyavathi's experiences show how patriarchal dominance operates through larger social frameworks that normalise women's subordination as well as within the household. The social climate that frequently favours male power while stifling women's opinions made her husband's charges and dehumanising actions possible.

Her friend suggested the match and Sathyavathi agreed. Because he was a Mala and she was a Madiga his family did not approve. So they went through a simple ceremony in front of her house. But soon he started harassing her saying, "You have met so many men and moved around with them. How do I know you are a virgin? (Kannabiran 41)

Her emotional assault is a reflection of the larger situation of Dalit women, whose battles often go unnoticed in both caste-based movements and mainstream feminist discourse.

She was also subjected to societal humiliation and loneliness as a result of her marriage's failure. Regardless of the situation, a woman is frequently held responsible in rural society when her marriage fails. She is expected to take on the responsibility of upholding social respectability and protecting the family rather than being showered with sympathy. Therefore, Sathyavathi's choice to leave an abusive relationship constituted a fundamental challenge to patriarchal standards. She affirmed her right to self-determination and dignity by refusing to put up with humiliation. She became an agent of resistance instead of a victim of tyranny as a result of this action.

Her experience also shows that resistance can manifest itself in ordinary choices that go against unfair social norms rather than through coordinated political activity. It took tremendous emotional fortitude and self-confidence to have the guts to start over after being abandoned. Chenamallu notes that Dalit women's routes to self-emancipation frequently entail overcoming both internalised societal constraints and external discrimination (Chenamallu 126).

This process of self-emancipation is best illustrated by Sathyavathi's life. She defied patriarchal oppression and redefined her identity beyond the constrictive norms forced upon her by caste and gender through tenacity, resolve, and an unflinching dedication to her self-respect. As a result, her narrative becomes a potent representation of the empowerment, agency, and resistance of Dalit women.

D. The BftW Debate and Institutional Casteism

Sathyavathi encountered caste bias even after starting the Rural Awareness and Development Society (RADS) and attaining professional achievement. The scandal surrounding her brother's financial malfeasance accusations is a notable example.

Bread for the World (BftW) consultant Y. L. Jayaraj's study turned up no proof of financial mismanagement. However, Jayaraj asked that Sathyavathi's recently acquired home be connected to her company. This demand was a reflection of a deeper prejudice: the idea that a Dalit woman could not lawfully get property on her own.

The episode shows how suspicion and surveillance are common ways that institutional prejudice functions. Sathyavathi realised that she was being targeted due to her caste identification rather than any misbehaviour. Despite official pledges to equality, the episode illustrates what academics refer to as the persistence of caste bias inside contemporary institutions (Ratnam 17).

Sathyavathi was so humiliated by this occurrence that she considered suicide. She was only stopped from doing so by her coworker Krupa's intervention. This incident brings to light the emotional toll that Dalit women leaders bear as well as the psychological effects of caste prejudice.

E. Social Exclusion and Poverty

Another significant topic in Sathyavathi's life is poverty. Hunger, uncertainty, and continuous hardship characterised her early years. She and her siblings were in a precarious position within the family because they were the offspring of her father's second wife. The first wife exploited and mistreated them, and later Lakshamma, the oldest daughter, did the same.

According to Sai Babu, unequal access to land, education, and work prospects has historically been associated with poverty among Dalit women in Telangana (Babu 493). These structural realities are exemplified by Sathyavathi's experiences. Her life was filled with hunger all the time. In order to eat a full dinner, she frequently waited until temple festivals or neighbourhood events.

Her early work was just as important. She went into jungles to gather firewood, harvested tamarind, and collected cattle manure with her siblings.



She was in risk from snakes, scorpions, and wild animals because of her actions. These incidents demonstrate how poverty compels youngsters to work at the expense of their education and personal growth.

F. Work, Hunger, and Survival

The story emphasises Sathyavathi's extreme poverty on several occasions. She struggled to meet her basic needs even after she was elected as a student leader. In order to get soap for bathing and laundry, she cleaned restrooms and toilets. These kinds of occurrences highlight the daily humiliations that come with abject poverty.

Her sense of self-worth was impacted by economic hardship in addition to her material circumstances. Barriers that many fortunate people never face were established by the inability to pay for clothing, food, and transportation. After going without food for two days, she eventually found it difficult to borrow five rupees.

Despite playing a crucial part in maintaining families and communities, Aruna Priya contends that Dalit women's labour is often unnoticed (Priya 686). Sathyavathi's story challenges prevailing notions of success and merit while bringing this invisible labour into the public eye.

G. Structural Barriers and Educational Inequality

One of the most significant themes in Sathyavathi's life is education. Despite her outstanding intellectual skills, she faced several challenges when trying to get an education. Her father's reluctance to send her to school was a reflection of societal views that devalued education for girls.

When she eventually started school, she was at a disadvantage due to her age and didn't have access to textbooks, slates, or notes. She did, however, continuously achieve academic success. Her accomplishments serve as an example of the perseverance needed for Dalit students to thrive in unfair educational institutions. Sathyavathi admits,

I was good at my studies and in class, so I never got beaten by my teachers. As I went up to higher classes I stood first. I had no books, so when my classmates went to sleep with their books beside their pillows I would quietly steal them, read them at night, and return them to their places" (Kannabiran 19).

Studies of Dalit communities frequently address the issue of educational disparity. Chenamallu contends that because education empowers Dalit women to confront oppressive systems, it serves as a vital instrument of self-emancipation (Chenamallu 125). The life of Sathyavathi provides compelling evidence for this claim.

Her choice to go away from home to pursue her studies is an important act of defiance. She defied caste-based and patriarchal limitations by putting education ahead of family expectations. This choice was a watershed in her path to empowerment.

H. Support from the Community and Mobility in Education

Sathyavathi encountered several challenges, but she also profited from the assistance of friends, dormitory guards, and kind officials. Her academic advancement was made possible in large part by these people. Apart from her uncle, Bhimaiah as well as the hostel warden, Devaprabha, the collector, Pamalu who was a Dalit by caste helped Sathyavathi complete her education.

When the SSC exams were due he asked her what her plans were for the future. She told him that her mother wanted her to become a nurse so that she would have an assured income, prestige and a good future. He advised her to continue her studies and appear for the civil services. She explained that she had neither the support nor the resources to aim that high. He told her come and him after her exams. After her tenth exam when she went to see him he asked her to make a list of her requirements. She did that and within a week he sent what she had asked for with his peon to her hostel. He had even added the tailoring charges for the dresses she needed. And so Sathyavathi joined the Government Junior College in Sangareddy for the Intermediate course (Kannabiran 33).

The support she received shows how crucial group cooperation is to eradicating systemic injustices. Dalit autobiographies frequently highlight support systems that assist people in overcoming repressive circumstances (Guenther 361). This observation is supported by Sathyavathi's experiences.

Her success was a result of the combined efforts of those who saw her potential and encouraged her goals, rather than just being an individual accomplishment.

I. Student Political Awareness and Leadership

In addition to changing Sathyavathi's personal life, education promoted political consciousness. She became a student leader during her intermediate studies, helping others find jobs, scholarships, hostel housing, and admittance.

Her political awareness was further enhanced by her membership in the Students' Federation of India (SFI). She took part in initiatives calling for better student housing and more scholarships. These kinds of initiatives show how social activity and education are related.

Sathyavathi was the Andhra Pradesh Convener of women's hostels. She mobilised students to protest against increased mess charges, demand better facilities and better food. During one agitation they marched to the Assembly, pushed through the gates and approached the lawns. The police used tear gas and lathis, they fell, became unconscious and were sent in jeeps to different places. Sathyavathi was taken to the police control room. Marri Chenna Reddy, then chief minister, sent a car to fetch the four leaders, Sathyavathi S D S Ratnam, Satyam and Tulsidas, to discuss their demands. They decided that they would not meet him in private--after the tear gas and lathi charge he would have to come out and make his commitments in public. They had to agitate again to get their demands (Kannabiran 35-36).

According to Rathore, Dalit women's leadership shows their potential for social change and contradicts prevailing beliefs about political engagement (Rathore 3193). This leadership is demonstrated by Sathyavathi's activism.

J. Discrimination in the Workplace and Economic Uncertainty

Despite her leadership skills and stellar academic record, Sathyavathi had a difficult time finding steady work. She was essentially denied prospects because many interview call letters for government employment arrived just after the interview dates had passed.

This story demonstrates how structural disparities continue to exist even after a person has completed their schooling. When institutional impediments persist, academic achievement by itself does not ensure social mobility. According to Chinna Rao, because inequality still prevents advancement, Dalit groups have frequently stressed the need for equal access to employment prospects (Rao 126).

As a result, despite her qualifications, Sathyavathi was forced to take daily wage work. Her experiences highlight the shortcomings of meritocratic narratives that overlook systemic injustices

K. Social Transformation, Self-Assertion, and Resistance

Despite facing poverty, exclusion from school, and caste prejudice, Sathyavathi's life is ultimately a tale of empowerment and resilience. She turned individual sorrow into group action through activism, education, and organisational leadership.

... Sathyavathi's childhood that suddenly brought back patches of memories that when stitched together revealed an extraordinary life. The magnitude of her survival and the significance of her achievement is unbelievable.

Form starvation, discrimination, denial to struggle for an education and grow into a figure respected for helping the women in her area to survive violence and live with dignity is no small achievement" (Kannabiran ix-x)

Her experience is a prime example of what Chenamallu refers to as Dalit women's process of self-emancipation (127). Instead of continuing to be a helpless victim, she became a leader dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for underprivileged groups.

Gogu Shyamala summarises the story's wider significance by stating that "Sathyavathi, confronting caste, class, and gender is a rare attempt to show the struggle of a Dalit woman in rural Telangana" ("Sathyavathi's Life Can Inspire All Dalits"). In a similar vein, Vasanth Kannabiran highlights the inspirational aspect of Sathyavathi's life, saying that "the life of Sathyavathi can inspire the entire Dalit community to fight for their rights" ("Sathyavathi's Life Can Inspire All Dalits").

As a result, Sathyavathi's story goes beyond personal narrative to serve as a testament to the tenacity of Dalit women. It shows that even deeply ingrained oppressive regimes can be overthrown by education, group effort, and self-belief.

VI. CONCLUSION

The life narrative of Sathyavathi, as told in Sathyavathi: Confronting Caste, Class, and Gender, is a potent testament to the interrelated realities of poverty, caste discrimination, and educational disparity that Dalit women in India face. She experienced social exclusion, economic hardship, and patriarchal tyranny from a young age because she was born into a marginalised Madiga household. Her experiences show that caste discrimination reinforces barriers to social mobility and dignity by operating both within marginalised populations and through dominant social structures. She was denied of basic requirements due to extreme poverty, and her dreams were challenged at every step of her life by scholastic barriers.

Sathyavathi showed incredible fortitude and tenacity in the face of these adversities. Her main tool for empowerment and resistance was education, which allowed her to confront repressive systems and become a student leader, social activist, and community organiser. Her story serves as an example of how social support, political consciousness, and individual tenacity can turn marginalised circumstances into chances for leadership and social transformation.

Gogu Shyamala notes that Sathyavathi's story transcends victimisation and emphasises the ability of marginalised people to fight prejudice and stand up for their rights.



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In the end, her life serves as a motivational illustration of self-emancipation and emphasises the significance of social justice, education, and group effort in attaining equality and human dignity..

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