

Caste Resistance: Dalit Identity, Dignity, and Assertion in Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*

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Abstract—The biography of T. N. Sadalakshmi is presented in Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* as a significant story of Dalit caste consciousness, resistance, dignity, and political assertion in contemporary Telangana. Sadalakshmi, who was born into a *Bhangi/Mehtar* community, entered a political arena that was traditionally dominated by the upper caste and caste hierarchy. Her political career shows that Dalit assertion may function both inside and outside of political institutions. Her political career becomes an ongoing fight for caste dignity and respect as a result of her persistent challenges to untouchability, caste discrimination, unequal Dalit representation, and the marginalisation of *Madigas*. In contrast to societal stigma, this research explores how Sadalakshmi's caste identity becomes a source of political consciousness. It examines her vocal opposition to untouchability, her leadership in the Telangana movement, her criticism of the Scheduled Castes' unequal representation, and her endorsement of the need for Scheduled Caste subcategorisation. Additionally, the study places Satyanarayana's biography in the context of research on Dalit women, Dalit autobiography and biography, caste identity, political representation, and Dalit feminism. The study contends that Sadalakshmi's political relevance stems from her capacity to fight both internal injustices within Dalit communities and dominant-caste power, as well as to turn caste-based exclusion into collective assertion.

Keywords— political assertion, caste consciousness, Sadalakshmi, caste identification, Dalit dignity

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, caste has historically functioned as a structure that determines dignity, access, acknowledgement, representation, and involvement in public life in addition to being a system of social classification. As a result, Dalit groups have struggled to convert statutory equality into meaningful social recognition as part of political democracy. Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi*: Because it chronicles the life of a Dalit woman whose political career grew against strongly ingrained caste hierarchies in Hyderabad and Telangana, *The Political Rebel* is important in this context.

The biography allows for an analysis of how caste identity becomes politically significant via resistance, as opposed to merely portraying Sadalakshmi as a singular political figure.

Sadalakshmi's life serves as an example of how caste identification can change from being an enforced social location to a conscious political stance. According to the biography, she "made a deep study of the Dalit movement in the Hyderabad state" and acknowledged "the oppression among the sub-castes of Dalits" before to completely engaging in politics (Satyanarayana 34). This finding is important because it shows that her caste consciousness extended beyond resistance to upper-caste dominance. She also started to notice disparities in Dalit groups. As a result, her political philosophy evolved around a more expansive understanding of social justice, according to which Dalit emancipation necessitated acknowledging the variety of Dalit experiences.

K. Satyanarayana's opinion that Dalit identity should be viewed as a political identity created through fights for equality rather than just as a fixed birth identity helps to explain the significance of such caste consciousness. His research on Dalit identity and representation highlights the connection between political mobilisation and caste experience. (Wiley Online Library) Sadalakshmi's political career offers a tangible example of this procedure. When she entered electoral politics, her *Bhangi/Mehtar* identity did not vanish; rather, it became a key component of her political philosophy.

In a similar vein, Gogu Shyamala's research on the lives of Dalit women highlights the importance of biography as a way to retrieve caste histories that have often been overlooked by conventional historical narratives. Because biography enables the experiences of a Dalit woman to become a historical archive of caste relations, her method is especially pertinent to Sadalakshmi. Such work shows how caste manifests itself through institutional discrimination, political exclusion, everyday humiliation, and recognition problems rather than portraying it as an abstract entity.

An early and significant turning point in the evolution of this political consciousness is represented by Sadalakshmi's struggle with untouchability. She learned that Dalit attendees were required to sit apart from upper-caste members during a political event. "Mr. P.V., you are insulting and humiliating us," was her prompt reply. "I'll object" (Satyanarayana 47). Her response is significant because she opposes the normalisation of caste prejudice. She insisted that "you should protest...it's a social evil" when people in her immediate vicinity clarified that such behaviours were widespread (47). An apparently common social activity is transformed into a political issue in the episode.

Because it highlights the unique epistemic stance from which Dalit women communicate, Guru Gopal's seminal analysis of Dalit women's speech is helpful in this context. Because Dalit women's experiences are influenced by their caste location, their stories cannot be easily integrated into broader narratives of caste or women's emancipation. In a similar vein, Sharmila Rege's research on Dalit women's testimony makes the case for considering Dalit women's own stories as interventions that produce knowledge. Therefore, Sadalakshmi's refusal to keep quiet signifies the rise of a caste-conscious political voice in addition to being an act of personal bravery.

Additionally, the biography situates Sadalakshmi in the context of Hyderabad's broader history of Dalit political organization. Her political growth was impacted by the actions of previous Dalit leaders as well as the concepts of Babu Jagjivan Ram and B. R. Ambedkar. She eventually rose to prominence in politics, holding positions as deputy speaker, minister, and legislator. However, caste prejudice persisted despite her political successes. Conversely, she frequently encountered dominant-caste hierarchies as a result of her political position.

Therefore, the current essay makes the case that *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel* should be seen as a story of Dalit political assertion and caste opposition. It looks at how Sadalakshmi challenges unequal representation within Scheduled Castes, how she challenges untouchability and dominant-caste authority, how she turns caste identity into political agency, and how her political actions support a larger conversation about Dalit recognition and dignity.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A helpful conceptual framework for comprehending Sadalakshmi's political life as a transition from social marginalisation to self-defined agency is provided in "Self-Emancipation and Dalit Women" (2026) by Prof. (Dr.) Visweswara Rao Chenamallu. The study highlights

Dalit women's ability to confront systems that have historically denied them recognition, voice, and dignity. Sadalakshmi is a prime example of this procedure since she doesn't wait for her identity to be acknowledged by political institutions. Rather, she actively participates in those establishments and opposes their caste system. Her public interventions show that the oppressed subject must become a political actor in order to achieve self-emancipation.

Because it establishes biography as a means of recovering Dalit histories, Gogu Shyamala's dissertation, "Using Biographies to Read Caste Histories" (2018), is especially important for the current study. Her focus on Telangana's Dalit women shows how individual life stories can highlight more extensive caste oppression and resistance systems. In a similar vein, Sadalakshmi's life story transcends personal accomplishment to document caste dynamics in Telangana. Through her life, readers can comprehend how caste functioned in governmental institutions, political parties, social groups, and Dalit communities.

Sadalakshmi's importance as a Dalit politician is highlighted in Mangesh Dahiwele's "Sadalakshmi as a Dalit Political Leader" (2021). He points out that she hailed from a Bhangifamily and went on to become the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly's Deputy Speaker and Minister of Endowment. Dahiwele emphasises that she frequently ran for office in a field dominated by males from higher castes. His analysis is significant because it places her political success in the context of Indian politics' caste system. Additionally, he highlights the inconsistencies in Dalit politics, especially the distinctions across Scheduled Caste groups.

Sadalakshmi's significance as a political figure who linked local goals with social justice is highlighted by Nakka Anil's "The Telangana Movement and Sadalakshmi" (2024). According to the report, Sadalakshmi was an important political player in the independent Telangana movement rather than just a participant. Because she was a Dalit woman trying to lead a movement in which dominant-caste political actors held significant influence, her authority was contested, making her leadership more significant when examined through the lens of caste.

In order to place Sadalakshmi within the broader intellectual history of Dalit women's assertion, Susi Tharu's "The Question of Dalit Women" (2014) is helpful. Tharu highlights caste disparities among women and questions systems that portray women as a homogeneous category.

Her reasoning clarifies why a general concept of female leadership is insufficient to comprehend Sadalakshmi's political identity. Her political experience and the communities she represents are significantly shaped by her caste.

In order to reform Dalit communities, Muddepaka Narender's "Political Engagement of Dalits" (2023) highlights the significance of Dalit women's political engagement. He contends that political engagement gives Dalit women the ability to fight against long-standing systems of exclusion and promote community interests. Sadalakshmi, whose political actions have always aimed for more representation and acknowledgement for marginalised Dalit communities, can directly benefit from this paradigm. Additionally, Narender notes that societal discrimination, a lack of institutional support, and exclusion from political leadership are ongoing obstacles to Dalit women's political participation. These remarks shed light on the challenges Sadalakshmi faced while building her political career.

Thummapudi Bharati's "The Literary History of Telugu Dalits" (2008) offers a more comprehensive cultural framework for comprehending Sadalakshmi's life story. In addition to bringing disadvantaged caste experiences into literary and intellectual discourse, Telugu Dalit writing has been crucial in questioning prevailing historical narratives. By transforming the life of a Dalit political leader into a historical and cultural text, Satyanarayana's biography takes part in this tradition. As a result, Sadalakshmi's life is included in the larger endeavour of rescuing Dalit voices from historical marginalisation.

Because it highlights the connection between life writing and the formation of Dalit subjectivity, Guenther Julia's "Subjectivity and Autobiographical Writing" (2016) on auto/biographical writing and subjectivity formation in Telangana is especially pertinent to the current investigation. A biography can create a political subject whose experiences reflect larger collective histories; it is not just a chronological account of occurrences. In a similar vein, Sadalakshmi is portrayed in *The Political Rebel* as an active caste-conscious subject as opposed to a helpless caste oppression victim.

III. OBJECTIVES

To investigate how caste identity is portrayed in Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*.

To examine Sadalakshmi's opposition to discrimination based on caste and untouchability.

To investigate how caste consciousness evolved in Sadalakshmi's political life.

To examine her fight for political acknowledgement, Dalit representation, and dignity.

To investigate her involvement in the demand for Scheduled Caste subcategorisation and intra-Dalit caste disparities.

To assess Sadalakshmi's political career as an important Dalit assertion story in Telangana.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In addition to secondary research on Dalit identity, caste resistance, political engagement, Dalit women's life writing, and Telugu Dalit literature, the study uses qualitative textual analysis of Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*. The examination looks at identity, dignity, representation, political agency, and resistance through the lens of Dalit studies and caste-conscious literary criticism.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Political Consciousness and Caste Identity

Sadalakshmi's conversion of caste identity into political consciousness is the main significance of her life. In the caste system, her *Bhangi/Mehtar* identity might have served as a sign of social disgrace. Rather, she used this disadvantaged identity as a foundation for political connection with oppressed groups. According to her biography, she entered politics at a time when political parties were looking for Dalit candidates to fill restricted seats. However, her involvement soon surpassed the limited purpose of electoral representation. She became aware of the disparities among Dalit sub-castes after researching the Dalit movement. According to Satyanarayana, she "found that there was oppression among the sub-castes of Dalits" (Satyanarayana 34). One of the most significant aspects of her caste consciousness is established by this statement: she believed that Dalit identity was internally distinct.

This dimension aligns with K's broader argument. According to Satyanarayana, Dalit identity can develop into a political stance influenced by fights for equality rather than only being a biological or inherited category. His research on Dalit representation highlights how collective mobilisation gives caste identity political significance. Sadalakshmi's political career serves as an example of this exact change (Wiley Online Library). After going into mainstream politics, she did not deny her caste status. Instead, she challenges the conditions associated with that identity by using her political power.

The transition from caste experience to caste resistance is exemplified by her first significant encounter with caste discrimination.



At a political event connected to P. Sadalakshmi and V. Narasimha Rao noted that Dalit participants were kept out of the area used by upper-caste people. She was surprised by the occurrence because it involved discrimination within a political organization that openly condemned untouchability. “Mr. P.V., you are insulting and humiliating us,” she said right away. “I’ll object” (Satyanarayana 47). The statement’s identification of humiliation as a political issue makes it noteworthy. Discrimination based on caste is viewed as an attack on dignity rather than as a regrettable societal practice.

The emergence of caste consciousness is further demonstrated by her conviction that “you should protest...it’s a social evil” (Satyanarayana 47). Because they frequently experienced untouchability, her fellow Dalit volunteers had normalised it. But Sadalakshmi won’t take repetition as an excuse. A key factor in the development of caste consciousness is the contrast between politically opposing discrimination and actually experiencing it.

Additionally, the episode highlights the value of speech. The stillness surrounding caste is broken by Sadalakshmi’s speech. Because her speech originates from a particular caste location, Gopal Guru’s claim that Dalit women “talk differently” becomes pertinent in this context. Her protest is both collective and personal at the same time. In addition to speaking as a person who has experienced insults, she does so on behalf of Dalit communities whose dignity has been violated.

B. Political Space, Caste, and the Recognition Issue

Sadalakshmi’s political career shows that caste discrimination is not always eradicated by joining political institutions. The established social order is challenged by her participation in mainstream politics. Despite running for office multiple times in a “male dominated upper caste orientated field of politics,” Dahiwele notes that she went on to become Deputy Speaker and Minister of Endowment. Her accomplishment must therefore be interpreted as an intervention in the caste geography of political power rather than just as an individual triumph.

During her tenure as a legislator, deputy speaker, and minister from 1957 to 1967, she showed that Dalit participation might go beyond just symbolic presence. She was able to question established interests and get involved in governmental activities because of her authority. However, her political standing was never quite stable. The book frequently shows opposition from powerful political figures who were uneasy about a Dalit woman holding autonomous power.

The essence of caste opposition lies in the conflict between formal political representation and substantive recognition. Even if they hold an institutional position, a Dalit representative may still face caste discrimination. As a result, Sadalakshmi struggled not just to go into politics but also to use her position of authority without compromising her caste consciousness.

This aspect of Sadalakshmi’s career is explained by Narender’s claim that Dalit women’s political engagement may be used to change Dalit communities. When excluded communities are allowed to express their own demands, political participation takes on significance (Narender 1497). This idea is frequently illustrated by Sadalakshmi’s politics.

C. Opposition to Dominant-Caste Rule

One of the best illustrations of Sadalakshmi’s caste-based political statement is the Telangana agitation of 1969. Sadalakshmi took on leadership duties within the Telangana PrajaSamithi following Chenna Reddy’s detention. She insisted on accountability for the movement’s financial resources. Chenna Reddy responded fiercely, saying, “Yes, I will definitely ask you.” You are responsible for the public funds (Satyanarayana 83). Her speech exemplifies democratic responsibility, but it also has a caste component because, in a movement controlled by socially dominant people, her authority as a Dalit woman was being questioned.

“A dalit lady leading the movement was not palatable and digestible to the upper caste men,” according to the biography (Satyanarayana 83). This discovery shows that even within a movement purportedly focused on regional justice, caste hierarchy might function. Thus, the episode casts doubt on the notion that political movements are inherently liberating. Caste hierarchy was not always eliminated by regional identity.

Sadalakshmi responded by strengthening his political engagement rather than withdrawing. She sold her personal jewellery to fund the movement when members of the upper caste refused to contribute monetarily. Particularly noteworthy is her statement that she would not permit the movement to cease “because of its dalit leadership” (Satyanarayana 84). The statement designates Dalit leadership as a target of opposition. She was aware that caste bias had a role in the opposition to her rule.

The politics of recognition are further illustrated by the fact that historical narratives did not adequately acknowledge her role. Satyanarayana wonders, “Who would write the history of a Dalit woman from a scavenging community?” (Satyanarayana 84).

The question goes beyond Sadalakshmi. It brings up the question of whose political effort is remembered and who becomes visible in public history. Therefore, Dalit assertion necessitates both control over historical memory and access to political power.

Because it highlights the significance of bringing marginalised voices from the periphery to public political discourse, Daisy Mahanta's study of movement narratives and marginalised women is helpful in this context. In a similar vein, Sadalakshmi's experience shows that involvement in politics does not ensure historical acknowledgement. As a result, her fight functions concurrently in both political practice and historical memory.

D. Dalit Dignity and Voice Politics

Sadalakshmi's fight against caste prejudice is essentially one of dignity. According to Sabharwal and Sonalkar, caste and untouchability prevent Dalit women from receiving full social and physical acknowledgement, resulting in "exclusion-induced deprivation" (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 74). The idea of exclusion-induced deprivation is particularly helpful for comprehending Sadalakshmi's early political experiences, even if their study looks at the broader structural condition of Dalit women.

She rejects humiliation as a socially acceptable state in response to untouchability. She wants more than just equal access to political gatherings, food, and space. She insists that Dalit participants' humanity be acknowledged. In this way, dignity becomes into a political concept.

Ambedkar's criticism of caste is pertinent since it denies equality through graded social status as well as economic arrangements. This status structure is specifically challenged by Sadalakshmi's political actions. She refused to recognise social position as a foundation for political authority, as seen by her actions toward influential politicians. She had "not even an iota of inhibition and inferiority in her face," according to the biography (Satyanarayana 109). The core of Dalit claim is this psychological shift.

Her capacity to challenge influential political leaders can also be explained by her refusal to show inferiority. She might demand accountability by speaking directly to high-ranking politicians. As a result, her caste awareness turns into an ethical precept: political power cannot be subservient to caste hierarchy.

E. Dalit Assertion and Sub-Caste Consciousness

The biography's discussion of disparities within Dalit groups is among its most significant contributions.

Sadalakshmi's political awareness did not assume that constitutional protections were equally beneficial to all Scheduled Castes. The relative marginalisation of the *Madiga* community worried her more and more.

Her belief that the Mala community had progressed faster than *Madigas* and that the advantages of reserves were not shared evenly is documented in the biography. Instead of growth confined in a single community, she promoted "horizontal uniform development among the Dalits" (Satyanarayana 109). This stance shows that sub-caste consciousness and Dalit consciousness can coexist.

The desire for Scheduled Caste sub-categorization made the problem very important. The demand to divide the Scheduled Caste reservation quota among the A, B, C, and D categories is documented in the biographies. Sadalakshmi backed this demand because she thought the Scheduled Castes' most disadvantaged members should receive constitutional benefits.

The larger body of research on Dalit identity, which increasingly acknowledges the internal variety of Dalit communities, can be used to understand her viewpoint. In a similar vein, Dahiwele notes Sadalakshmi's backing of the *Madiga* movement and recognises the sub-caste contradiction as a significant issue in Dalit politics.

Her stance is significant because she rejects an oversimplified interpretation of Dalit unity. According to Sadalakshmi, unity cannot entail keeping quiet about internal injustices. Recognising disparities in historical exclusion and access to representation is necessary for true unity.

F. Dalit Communities and Political Representation

Sadalakshmi's politics constantly linked social justice with representation. She did not view holding political office as an individual accomplishment unrelated to the needs of the community. The portrayal of marginalised Dalit groups was a recurring theme in her public activities.

A key turning point in this political trajectory was the *AdiJambava Sammelan*. She organised a sizable assembly of *Madigas* and presented their complaints to political figures about representation and reservations. She was frank and combative in her criticism. She said in one speech that Mala and *Madiga* candidates received differing employment recommendations from political figures (Satyanarayana 115).

This action is significant because it turns caste grievances into a topic of public political discussion. A complaint that could continue to be discussed in the community becomes a political accountability issue. Thus, Sadalakshmi serves as a go-between for institutional politics and community consciousness.



This situation closely relates to Narender's argument that Dalit women can advocate for community interests through political engagement. When political actors confront systemic injustices instead than merely holding reserved seats, representation takes on significance.

G. Opposition and the Significance of Dalit Leadership

Stereotypes regarding Dalit political agency are also contested by Sadalakshmi's political leadership. She was more than just a reservation beneficiary. She developed into a political leader who was able to organise large-scale protests, challenge government policies, and face powerful politicians.

She was able to talk fearlessly, which contributed to her political power. She continued to be involved in politics even after losing elections. Her perseverance shows that election achievement alone cannot be used to gauge political recognition. According to the author, she carried on with her public life and continued to support political causes following her defeat.

Understanding Dalit political agency requires an appreciation of this tenacity. Sadalakshmi's life demonstrates that resistance can also take the form of long-term involvement, organization, public speaking, community mobilisation, and unwillingness to back down in the face of loss. Dalit struggle is typically portrayed through protest moments.

This tenacity can be explained by Chenamallu's focus on the self-emancipation of Dalit women. Developing the ability to identify one's own political objectives instead of relying on prevailing institutions for approval is a key component of self-emancipation. Sadalakshmi's career serves as an example of this process because of her frequent political engagements.

H. Historical Memory and Caste Consciousness

The topic of who is remembered in political history is one of the biography's main concerns. Despite Sadalakshmi's significant involvement to the Telangana movement, it was not sufficiently acknowledged in the prevailing narratives. The caste politics of historical memory are revealed by Satyanarayana's query regarding who would record the history of "a dalit lady hailing from a scavenging community" (Satyanarayana 84).

Because life writing can offer an alternate archive through which disadvantaged identities become historically apparent, Guenther's work on auto/biographical writing is pertinent. Thus, Sadalakshmi's biography serves as a remedy. A Dalit political lady who had been partially wiped from history is restored to it.

The significance of Dalit writing in subverting popular literary and historical narratives is further illustrated by Bharati's research on Telugu Dalit literature. The biography of Satyanarayana contributes to this larger endeavour of reconstructing caste history by recording individual lives.

I. From Dalit Assertion to Caste Stigma

The shift from caste stigma to caste assertion is the most important change that Sadalakshmi's life represents. Her Bhangi identity was linked to one of the caste system's most stigmatised professions. However, she went on to hold influential positions in politics. This shift does not imply that caste is no longer important. Rather, it shows how caste identification could serve as the basis for political awareness.

This change is further supported by her subsequent involvement with the *Madiga* movement. According to the biography, the MRPS office ran out of her home and she contributed to the political climate that supported the demand for Scheduled Caste categorisation (Satyanarayana 115–16). Her contribution shows how her later political activism and previous caste consciousness are related.

Thus, her politics cannot be reduced to self-interest. She kept bringing up issues of equitable political participation, communal dignity, and caste representation. The main course of her life is the change from a socially stigmatised caste identification to a politically aggressive identity.

J. Sadalakshmi and the Dalit Intellectual Tradition in General

Sadalakshmi's political philosophy can also be placed within Ambedkar's intellectual heritage. Her involvement with Dalit political activities and her affection for Ambedkar are documented in the biography. Although her political ties were not always in line with Ambedkar's organisational politics, her emphasis on equality, representation, dignity, and the eradication of caste resonates with Ambedkarite ideas.

Because it allows readers to comprehend such political lives from the perspective of lived caste experience, Rege's focus on Dalit women's testimony is especially pertinent. Dalit intellectualism need not be limited to academic literature, as Sadalakshmi's political activities show. Caste knowledge can be produced through political behaviour itself.

In a same vein, Guru's analysis of Dalit women clarifies why Sadalakshmi's voice cannot be viewed as solely an extension of popular political discourse.

Her actions come from a social position that has traditionally been denied power. Thus, her insistence on public speech is an epistemological challenge to the caste system.

K. Caste Opposition as a Group Declaration

In the end, Sadalakshmi's caste resistance goes beyond personal demonstrations. She keeps trying to turn her personal experiences into group political mobilisation. Her followers learn a lesson from her fight against untouchability. Dalit leadership may be at the center of regional politics, as evidenced by her leadership of the Telangana movement. Her support of *Madigas* turns subcaste complaints into a political issue about how constitutional benefits should be distributed.

Understanding Dalit claim requires an awareness of this collective dimension. Sadalakshmi's political views were never divorced from local issues. She promoted wider Dalit interests, organized *Bhangi/Valmiki* groups, and backed *Madiga* political representation. Her politics thus exemplify what Anandita Pan says about the concept of an intersectional standpoint: political knowledge can challenge dominant forms of knowledge and arise from marginalised social locations.

Sadalakshmi's refusal to let caste dictate the boundaries of political potential is ultimately what makes her significant. She enters caste-based institutions, yet she doesn't give up her identity there. Rather, she challenges the same systems that have historically excluded her group by using institutional power. Therefore, her life exemplifies a shift from caste marginalisation to political assertion that is caste-conscious.

VI. CONCLUSION

Sadalakshmi's life is told as a compelling story of caste opposition, Dalit dignity, and political assertion in Y. B. Satyanarayana's *Sadalakshmi: The Political Rebel*. Her experience shows that caste identity is not just a sign of social shame but may serve as a foundation for political activity, collective mobilization, and consciousness. Her leadership in the Telangana movement, opposition to dominant-caste rule, struggle with untouchability, and support for *Madiga* representation all demonstrate a persistent dedication to caste justice. Her vision of Dalit emancipation is complicated and internally challenging because her politics acknowledge the injustices that exist within Dalit communities. Thus, by centering on a Dalit woman, the biography aids in the reconstruction of Dalit political history. The legacy of Sadalakshmi is the transformation of caste marginalization into collective assertion, political voice, dignity, and representation.

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