

Praying to Poshamma is for good fortune, not religion

Joopaka Subadra

Abstract *This interview was conducted in Hyderabad, India, in September 2019. Joopaka Subadra is a poet, writer, critic and a very significant figure in the Dalit movement. Here she talks about her views on literature and the alien concept of religion for her community. She dwells on the simplistic formulation of patriarchy by the mainstream, for her, hunger is patriarchy and is more violent than any other form.*

Anu: I request Subadra Ma'am to read one of her favorite poems from her book Ayyayyo Dammaka.¹

Joopaka Subadra: Thank you, Anu. Ayyayyo Dammakka, this one is on the Madiga women and their men. All their men can all play the dappu [drum], but the women cannot play it, they're not allowed to play the dappu. However, she puts in a lot of hard work in its making, in the production of the dappu. Yet the Madiga woman is banned from playing it. After working so hard on making it, she does not have any rights to it. This I have observed in my family. I saw it while visiting my paternal aunt. Why is it like that? Her articulation of what she thinks about this has not appeared in the literature at all. So, I wrote about that in Ayyayyo Dammakka. Let me read it:

Though Mallanna was just a *vetti* slave to the world,
he was quite popular in our wada;
and just because I had worn the *baasikam*,
I became his slave, Ayyayyo Dhammakka!²



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¹ This bilingual interview was conducted at the Round Table India Office, September 2019. The transcription and translation were done by Sundeep Patterm. The interview was facilitated by Karthik Navayan and recorded by Deepa Myneni.

² Translation of the first verse of the poem Ayyayyo Dhammakka by Naren Bedide (Kuffir). *Baasikam* is a ornament worn during the wedding ceremony.

Anu: Could you tell us why you use the phrase ‘Ayyayyo Dammakka’? What is the background?

Joopaka Subadra: In village hamlets, it is a children’s game. In the evening, or whenever they find the time the children sit in a circle, their legs stretched out to meet in one place, like a flower, all the kids, girls and boys, sit in this aesthetic formation. Children, say, below 10 years of age (play this game). They sit, and one of them chooses to start it, maybe kids who speak confidently or those interested in stories. They stand up recollecting the stories they heard from their mothers or grandmothers - all these stories are of women - they narrate them: “This person who left from our village, a certain Dammakka, a certain Balakka, at her house, the husband beat her, the mother-in-law pushed her into a well, or the village head beat her, molested her, having been molested, she wandered off somewhere ... they cut Dammakka’s hair off, cut her nose, ears off ..”

In this way, they narrate stories, one by one. The narrated stories are painful ..., they talk about the pain, but also of her bravery. Everything comes in. Her good times come in, her pain comes in, her struggles come in, the issues she opposed come in, the whole environment around her ... social, economic, caste, gender, gender among gender, everything is narrated. So, in that way, with such issues, these stories are only on women, for women. As the story is narrated, all the kids sitting around listen with rapt attention. Once the story ends, they shuffle in the circle, beat their chests, lamenting “Ayyayyo Dammakka, Ayyayyo Dammaka, Ayyayyo Dammaka” [Oh no! Dammakka! Alas! Dammakka!]

Once they’re done with one story, another kid stands up to narrate another story. That’s how it goes on... very interesting. I wondered, why should I not keep this as my book’s title? This game, such an interesting game, for all these kids. Dammakka, Poshakka, Mallakka - why are they telling each other these stories? I was very intrigued. How did this turn into a game? Also, the name ‘Dammakka’, it became a song, became a game ... Why should I not use it? These are my ancestors’ stories! For this reason, I titled my book ‘Ayyayyo Dammakka’. When we say ‘Dammakka’, it has the Buddhist philosophy, it has Dalit philosophy, further, it has a culture, struggle, pain, gender, villager - different struggles, every pain, every happiness, they’re all in here. This, I have seen, and also participated in. I liked it a lot. This is a part of my life, why not show it to the society? Thinking in this way, I titled it ‘Ayyayyo Dammakka’.

Anu: So, this is the women’s history. Even when they are not written down, these stories of all the women in the village or family appears to be recorded in this game!

Anu: Who tells these stories to the children? How do they learn them? Is it passed down from generation to generation?

Joopaka Subadra: Yes, yes, the elderly folks at home tell them. The young people all go out to work. Who stays at home? Elderly women and men, and young children. Give them food, and when they’re crying, they tell the stories ... when the kids cry “mother is not home yet, father is not home yet” they tell them these little stories. The children receive the stories in this way. Who told them [the elderly] the stories? Their elders told them... We hear of this among other

communities too. The stories of ancestors continue being told in this way, in a folk manner. So, that is the base.

Anu: When did you start writing poetry and when did you make this connection? This is your Dammakka. You are taking the stories of all those ancestors and now sharing with another set of children, making your own circle of story tellers.

Joopaka Subadra: Growing up, I was very keen on literature ... I am the only one in my family to study up to M. A. degree. My parents had 12 children, and I'm the 11th. No one else went to school. We had land, we owned land but no studies. Many people said "You have lands, but no one is able to read the land documents ...". All my siblings, they got married by the time they were 7 or 8. I didn't even see these marriages, being the 11th child. People said, "Why don't you send at least one of the kids to school?" So, they put me in a hostel. And when it's a social welfare hostel, it had to be communist, and people like us were the base. They told us "You folks are the victims in society, victims of caste, of poverty ... write songs..." So, the songs, that was the way... [I read] a lot of literature - Communist literature, Russian literature, Chinese literature, American literature. Indian literature ... when it came to Indian literature, what was there? Puranas, Bhagavata, Ramayana, only these ... it's either these or Marxist writings. But, what do they have to do with us? We have nothing to do with puranas [mythological texts], nothing to do with itihahas [quasi-historical texts], and nothing to do with Ramayanas.

Once, when one of my teachers said "Ey we're all Hindu...", I went home and asked my mother: "Avva, our teacher says we're Hindu ... what does Hindu mean?" She replied "I don't know, child, I've never heard of this either. I've never heard the word." "But why does the teacher call us Hindu? What does Hindu mean?" "I don't know child. We're the Poshamma people, Yellamma people, Mala people. But what is Hindu, I've never heard of it, child."

I kept thinking 'But, why is the teacher saying Hindu?' That word. It says I'm Hindu on my certificate, but we don't know of the Hindu word, in my community, family, surroundings... So, I kept wondering, where is this word from? Why did we get it? No one was objecting to it, but I was struggling with that word. I also asked my relatives, the ones who'd gone to school, who were perhaps 10th class dropouts, and they said "They just keep us like that, they just take us that way..." It is painful to me even now, my certificates saying I'm Hindu. We don't know about Hindu - the word Hindu, the religion Hindu, all that surrounds it, the poojas... we don't know. We know Pochamma, we know Yellamma, we know the neem tree, anthill, riverbank ... all these are gods for us. We don't worship statues; we don't have those things. We have the *gadde* [elevated seat], but that is also meant to signify nature, nature gods. But, this way, [them] saying Rama is our god! When I said "Avva, they're saying Rama is our god," she replied "Ey who's that guy?" Who is Rama? We didn't know at all; we didn't even know of the name Rama. I said, "Rama, Ramayana, they say. Rama, Seeta, you have never heard?" She said, "He's not among us, he's someplace else, we don't know of him, child ... they [upper castes] sing of him, he's not for us. No way Rama is our god, child." Enkateshwarlu? "No, Enkateshwarlu is not our god either." "Who are our gods then, avva?" "For us, more than gods, we have our goddesses, Yellamma,

Poshamma, Uppalamma, Maisamma, these are our goddesses ... those gods, they're not for us, child."

I was struggling a lot with [difference] between mainstream studies and the environment at home. Further, all the pictures in the textbooks, they were not our pictures. They [the women in the pictures] were all wearing these full sarees, sarees with borders, and the jewelry. Our jewelry is different, gantilu, mukku pogu, siga, gundlu. And then, our festivals were different. All this was a lot of differences. It was a big struggle. [I kept thinking] This is not ours, not ours. Even though I was studying it, I was saying "Avva, this is not ours, this language is also not ours. This language is strange, not ours." Saddi. You know saddi? They call leftovers from the previous night saddi. That is the mainstream. But for us, packed food, meant to be eaten outside, that is what we call saddi. But what is in the textbooks? Saddi means leftover food. Teacher is saying "we don't eat saddi". When I said "Teacher, we eat saddi. We pack it for eating outdoors. You're saying we don't eat saddi, but we eat it." she said "Ey, how will you eat saddi? Maybe you cook at night and eat the leftovers in the morning." Like this, she used to suppress, she used to insult.

And then, the Godavari river in Macherial. We used to call it Ganga, not Godavari. The teacher was saying, "This is our Godavari."

"No teacher, this is our Ganga, teacher."

"No, Ganga is near Varanasi, not in your place, that is called Godavari."

"No teacher, that is Ganga."

This way, a lot of struggle was there. I was thinking, this is not our studies, this is not our literature, this is not our history, this is not our words, this is not our culture.

When the teacher asked, "What do you do with your teeth?" some said, "we bite into fruit", others said "we chew on food", I said "I often chew on bones, teacher." She said, "Chi chi, why would you chew on bones, what is that, bones ... sit down." Everyone laughed. So, I should not speak of what I eat. I must hide it. And how were the other kids, the majority of them? They would follow whatever was in the books. My culture, my food habits, my surroundings, my language, my mother, my father... my father would tie handkerchiefs around his head, stick a cigar behind his ear... their bodies, their clothes, their fashion of wearing them... all of this we could not see in our books. I kept thinking "my people are missing." Yellamma, Pochamma were nowhere to be found in the textbooks. However, around our family, our gudem [hamlet], our community, Yellamma, Pochamma, Sammakka, Sarakka, these were the names. In the books, we were seeing names like Padmaja, Kameswari, Sri Lakshmi, Katyayani. But I didn't know these names. Rameshwar, Rameshwari, Rajeswari, Raja Rajeswari, Karunambeshwari, Kadambeshwari, Triambeshwari arerere ... I find it hard to get my mouth to say these. Our words flow so effortlessly ... Rajanna, Yellakka, Mallaka, Rayanna ... We don't even say Rajanna, we say Rayanna, Rayakka, Bhadrakka. Actually, my name is Bhadrakka. My teacher said, "Hey, Bhakrakka? What Bhadrakka? Should be Subadrakka ... akka, what akka? Just say Subadra." So that is how my name was changed. That is the tragedy of my name ... Subadra ... what is Subadra? We did not know of Bharatam [Hindu mythological text, which has a character named Subadra] ... we never read Bharatam. What Subadrakka? We know Bhadrakka. Who is Bhadrakka? Bhadrakka is a tribal name, SCs name, a Dalit name. This is how my name became Subadra.

So many contradictions with my life, language, culture, everything, I didn't see any of it in these textbooks. So, I read, read, read... I read so many books... Marxist books, [found them] so detached [from my reality]. Indian books, Ramayana, Mahabharata, were all detached. In Telugu, progressive and communist literature, like Chalam, Kutumba Rao, Kandukuri Vireshalingam... all are by brahmins. But I never saw myself in them. Where am I? Where is my picture? Where is my history? But that is progressive, they are all calling them progressive writers. But where am I? No, we didn't see our history, our language, our surroundings, our women.

But I finally struck at it with Jashuva. Jashuva wrote about Dalit women, he wrote very well. But everywhere else, I am absent. I read a lot, because my interest is in literature. Where am I? I want to see my name. I want to see Yellakka, I want to see Mallakka ... Where are our women, where are they? In this way, I kept searching, searching, searching. I only found in Jashuva's works, Dalit women ... the Dalit woman is suffering, alone. Dalit men are also writing, but they could not capture the soul of the Dalit women. I concluded, Ok, [we're] absent. And so, I want to write.

Basically, I am not a writer. But, after seeing all this, I knew we need to write about ourselves... through Ambedkar ideology. We all came from the same ideology. Do you know about Rajni Tilak? She was first attracted to the communists. Then to the Dalit movements. And finally, she stopped at feminism. But we did not stop at feminism. For her, it was all about feminism ... [in which] all women are the same. It is not true. Even with patriarchy, it is not all the same. So, we have to write ourselves. I have to write about my own pain. When everyone writes about their own pain, it is wide, it is deep. We have to write for ourselves. So, I started writing, I started writing with that knowledge and awareness.

Anu: You've created a first line of literature for Dalit Bahujan women. Tell us what happened once you wrote. What happened to Telugu literature, to women? Have they started to read? Now they're going to see Mallakka and others because you have introduced them into the literature.

Joopaka Subadra: They are all reading, but those in the mainstream just ignore it. Our people are very interested. They're saying "Oh, this is our language, this is our words, this is our history, these are our expressions, this is our experience. Oh, nice! Oh, I want to write like this."

Anu: Throughout the time you were talking about looking for dalit women, you were talking about the gods, the female gods. And you also said, that in your certificate they made your religion Hindu. You know that Mallakka is not Hindu. What is the word for religion for us? Do we even use the word religion?

Joopaka Subadra: No, we don't use 'religion'. For us, it is just a part of nature. Poshamma is the Dalit woman leader, she is the doctor. Maisamma, she is the engineer. They provide service for the society, for the village, for their surroundings. They are eminent personalities, Dalit women. On the other hand, the way the [Hindu goddesses] are depicted, she is protected in Vishnu's heart, she's protected in half of Shiva's body, she's protected on Brahma's tongue. But for our goddesses, there is none of that. They're self-asserted. I liked that a lot. Who is the husband of Poshamma?

Don't know. Who is the husband of Yellamma? None. They are more than a man. They're not protected and sheltered women. They're all Nature. They are great leaders who served society. Hence, we are recognizing. Sammakka, Sarakka, Yellamma, Maisamma, Poshamma, Uppalamma, Ooradamma, all are village goddesses. They spent time for society. They struggled for men also. [We have] no male priests, there's no brahmin priests, you will not find a brahmin priest in the temples of Yellamma and Maisamma. These days, they're coming in the cities, because there is food, there is identity, poojas and rituals ... Even this, is to cultularize, to Hinduize. But originally, they're absent. They say "chi chi, bonalu [Bahujan festival and rituals], chi chi... Maisamma and all that, it is for them, not ours ..." "Ey, don't go there." our friends were told. "Our mother told us to stay away from there ..." They would treat even the goddesses as untouchables. Yeah, non-vegetarian gods. "Ey, don't go there." they used to say.

Anu: You questioned the use of religion, that they called you Hindu. But religion itself, the way you have described, is not there.

Joopaka Subadra: Yes, we're not calling it 'religion'. Once in a while, when in difficulty they might pray "Oh, Poshamma, protect my son." That is all. No accompanying tithulu [lunar calendar days], varalu [weeks or repeating time patterns], nakshatralu [stars, astronomy], and the special times... they did not have all these. Yellamma, she gave good fortune. Poshamma, she gave good fortune. Praying to Poshamma gives us good fortune. That's all, that is not called religion. They don't wear bottu [mark on forehead]. Once in a while, if things are not going well, they might offer a hen or coconut and a prayer. But this concept of religion, a continuous process of rituals, continuous beliefs, there's none of this. Then and there, they think of it and then forget about it. They get busy with work, with nature. Nature is the god for us.

Anu: Once you write it's called poetry. But, in our world, we sing songs, that is poetry. So, do you see your mother, grandmother as poets? Dalit women or Bahujan women are natural poets?

Joopaka Subadra: Yes, natural poets. [They combine] a lot of history, experience, everything. It is a great meta-source for me, and it has very good words, good dialects, good expressions. I'm taking from there.

Anu: As you publish more and the mainstream starts recognizing your poetry, tell us some experience of how the mainstream is understanding your poetry, perhaps with the example of the poem you just mentioned, about raindrops.

Joopaka Subadra: They don't understand. They say "What Subadra? Why don't you write in mainstream Telugu? That Telangana Dalit woman dialects you are taking. No Subadra, why don't you write in mainstream? I don't understand your words." But, one feminist told me this about [my poem] 'sinuku puula siire suTTawaa' [Wrap me in a raindrop flowered sari]: "This is so beautiful. You write of the rain as a man. I am so interested ..." This is the one poem she said she liked from the whole book.

At that time, there had been no rain for a long time, no rain at all. Too much sun. No rain for 5-6 years. We're all part of nature, right? They [the poets?] humanize everything, every situation, they humanize even Nature. The land says to the rain, sinuku puula siire suTTawaa [Wrap me in a raindrop flowered sari]. You should pour down heavily and wrap me up like a sari - that is the concept, or symbol. There had been no rain for about 5-6 years, All of the land had dried and cracked up. When I saw that, it reminded me of a woman whose husband had gone somewhere, and she was alone at home with her children, being heartbroken at the husband's absence. That is what I wrote.

Where did you go, dark clouded rainwallah?
Haven't heard from you in so many days
Didn't know whether you had died
Or were alive
When we drove the wind
To bring news of you, it crossed the seven seven seas and
Returned after winnowing the deserts,
May thieves rob you! May someone die in your home!
So many years! Where did you eat?
Where did you sleep? Where did you stay?
It seemed like all tales had been burnt
Even when we pierced our eyes no sliver of a cloud turned dark,
Had you become a tree among trees, a hill among hills:
We had no idea; from saplings to grown trees, everyone among us has been crying in bushels
Life had become purposeless like we were meant for carrying wood to the ghat
Pearly lake chains*, golden crop beads and
Armllet streams were all pawned somewhere;
Springs from my eye mountains splintered in the sun and
Dried in streaks all over my body,
My leafy torso had turned into withered straw;
Come from the east like a Thumma** grove
Come from the west with beaming milky smiles
Come from the north with thunders
Come from the south in great showers;
Won't you come and paste on me a blouse dotted with glistening pond mirrors?
Wrap me in a raindrop flowered sari?

[Naren Bedide's translation of Jupaka Subadra's Telugu poem 'sinuku puula siire suTTawaa' (from her collection of poetry 'ayyayyO dammakka').

* the lake chain refers to a series, chain, of uniquely designed large irrigation tanks built by the Kakatiyas (11th to early 14th century) in Warangal and other districts in Telangana, which would fill up sequentially during the monsoon rains.

** Thumma: Babul, acacia arabica.]

Anu: How did the upper caste women poets understand this?

Joopaka Subadra: Seeing this, my upper caste women friends ... they're all my friends, I don't have any personal issues with them. My issue is with the 'isms' and their 'upperness'. So, many of them called me on the phone, saying "You wrote so well, you wrote of the rain as a man. This poem is so wonderful, it gave me so much joy. I'm very impressed, wonderful poem." What I wrote is different ... What did I write? Land, sky, lack of rain ... but the way she interpreted it, I could not see it that way, I thought "that was not the way I meant it." But when you [Anu] spoke about it, I felt, yes, that is how I meant it, it agreed with me. As in, yes indeed, this is the basis on which I wrote it... I am a part of nature; I am not something separate from nature. My life is not one that stays untouched by sun and rain. On seeing it that way, I humanized it, but she men-ized it.

Anu: If the Bahujan audience recognizes the Bahujan poet, is it more satisfying? Or is it more satisfying when the mainstream recognizes?

Joopaka Subadra: For them [upper caste writers/readers], some of them, they see a difference. They've gotten bored of all the stereotypical language, stereotypical expressions, stereotyped experiences. They're getting bored. So, this they see as something different. But its depth, its breadth, its pain, they don't want it. Just "that it different, nice, ok, leave it there." But we don't want that kind of interest, that kind of limitation. On seeing [my work], "yeah, Subadra writes well in Telangana [dialect]" What does she write well about? That, they don't talk about. That, they're silent about. What am I writing well about? The 'what' is missing. She's writing, that's all. "She writes well in Telangana [dialect], writes well in the dialects, has a powerful expression." But what is it about? What is the content? They miss the content. When other books have a release today, the reviews will come out tomorrow. Their own folks, from this one and that other one, the reviews will all come. But with this one [my book], they stay silent, very silent. Ignore, just ignore. That is also literary politics. Content, they won't talk about content. That is very painful for us. They don't want the content - what is she writing about? They're talking about how she's writing. But we don't care about how she's writing. What is she writing about? That is important. Content is important. They're seeing the frame and going bravo! What is in the frame? They just ignore, the mainstream literary circles.

Anu: What is your wish for Dalit women poets, younger women? What do you want them to think about, to write, to share?

Joopaka Subadra: Get organized. They are all there as individuals. Get organized. I tried, to some extent, to get organized. This one time, all the women writers were invited. Some women, who had a communist background, all upper caste, they invited us. There, I said, all of these writers that you are labeling as emancipators of women, for instance Kandukuri Vireshalingam, when it came to our women, a BC woman, he introduced as a prostitute. He introduced with such abusive language. In his 'kavula charitra', history of [Telugu] poets. He introduced with abusive language. 'Muddu palani', that is her name [the poet]. So, when you say he's a reformer for women, how is a reformer, how is he a reformer for us? Maybe, he led a struggle to emancipate your women. He wrote for you, he wrote for brahmin women. But he did not write for Bahujan women. When he

did have to write about Bahujan women, he introduced her in abusive language. How can we? How can we consider him as a reformer? No, we do not consider him as such. I said “Throw Vireshalingam out [of the canon of emancipators]”. They did not see this coming, “aa, Vireshalingam aa?”

And then, Chalam. Everything he wrote is on women, but never the Dalit woman. We don’t claim him as our emancipator, as a writer for our emancipation. We’re not claiming him. But you’re saying that he wrote for all women - that is a lie. He wrote about brahmin women, women who never stepped out of home. Our stomachs cannot be filled unless we step out. They wrote about women who never stepped out. “They need to step out, move about with freedom, have sex with freedom, the restrictions on sex for them must go,” this is what they wrote about. [I questioned “But why do we have to carry him on our shoulders, as our writer, as our emancipator? Yes, he did it for you, did a lot of service for you. Why should we? Not for all of us, just for you. Say he did it for you, not for us.” It became a huge quarrel.

Similarly, their so-called writers, why are they all limited to being brahmin? Savitribai Phule, Jotirao Phule, they sacrificed their lives to work on women’s issues. From people who severed tongues, cut off thumbs [they saved us] ... They fostered your unwedded girls [that got pregnant]. Why don’t you recognize them? They are our emancipators. They’re the ones who educated us, got wells dug for us. They worked for you, for your women too. Ambedkar wrote in the foreword for the Hindu code bill that it is for the freedom and fraternity of Hindu women, not for us. All the feminists and leaders over there [in the meeting], Brahmin, Kamma, Reddy women, they did not oppose this directly. They said things like “Yeah, ok, ok, this is also good narration, good insight, good understanding.” But in the reporting next morning, it was all theirs. Nothing of our argument, the issues we brought up.

It was then that we started ‘matti poolu’ [mud/earth flowers], SC, ST, BC, minority women got together and set up an organization named ‘matti poolu’. But how difficult to keep it running! There is a story, ‘nookamma gnanam’ [crumb knowledge]. Brahmin and kamma women with left movement background came together and set up ‘pragatisheela [progressive] democratic writers forum.’ One of them wrote a story, ‘nookamma gnanam’ [crumb knowledge]. In the story, she wrote so abusively of Dalit women, equating their knowledge to that of frogs in a well. The image on the book cover was [of a Dalit woman] in a pink sari with a blue border, it was so grotesque. She wrote in a very ugly manner, dismissing the knowledge of Dalit women as no knowledge at all, calling them frogs in a well. They have no education; they know nothing of the world ... But the symbolism for themselves, she uses horses and elephants, she wrote using those symbols. Reading that story is so painful. They are progressive women writers! The thing is, we exist as individuals in various kinds of employment, some are unemployed. For us to get organized, it is very [challenging] ... For them it is easy, they have all the resources. That is very painful. It was then that we set up ‘matti poolu’. It is still there, but it is not [backed by resources] like theirs. But it made an impact. We did oppose them. Our history is different, consciousness is different, this difference was exposed in a big way in literature and in the mainstream. If we get some support, a lot can be done.

Further, I asked, in all of their feminist literature, right from the beginning until now, where are we? Be it our words, be it our caste, caste-gender, has anyone written in support of us? Our movements, the beedi workers movements, or safai karamchari movement, we don't see anywhere. We hold all that work, household work or any other kind, all work needs to be respected. But the ongoing movement has only been about demanding that household work be valued. And it is in the hold of upper caste women. To clean up and dispose of the excreta of their own children, they say "this is very unfair, even the men have to do it, and if not, even we refuse to do it" ... but in truth, they don't do it, it's all done by their servants. This has become the agenda. 30-35-40 years, there's no other agenda. Just this: patriarchy. But we're cleaning up and disposing of public shit. On this, there will be no agenda, no discussion, nothing. When we raise the issue, they suppress it. We spoke out many times. But no. "This is the time for that, we'll see later ..." They're just not talking about it. You're claiming to represent all women and speaking about it at the international level, right? This, this is what needs to be discussed. The unequal wages, the lack of means to provide dignity to labour, let's talk about that. We will talk about it, come behind us, come with us. We're talking about it, support us. You have cornered all the resources.

All patriarchy is not the same. In our patriarchy, there is no land, our patriarch has no resources in his hand. He's in a great deal of frustration, there's nothing to eat, there's no kUra [meat curry dish] when he gets home, there's no food, can you imagine how it is for him? But when their man comes home, with everything in his control when he comes home, he gets his body massage, and she serves him good food, takes care that the kids don't cry and bother him, makes sure he can relax. But the Dalit woman is not in this situation. She's also gone out, she's also earning. What her husband earns may not come home, but her earnings do. When he asks for the meat curry, there will be a quarrel. Domestic violence, you're talking about your domestic violence. We say that our domestic violence is a lot crueller than yours. What is greater than the cruelty of hunger, Anu? Food, the cruelty of hunger, can you imagine how it will be? They're talking about that kind of domestic violence, but not about this kind of domestic violence. Our patriarchy is not the same as that kind of patriarchy. This guy is a slave, a slave. But that one is not a slave; he is in fact the controller of all resources. But our men are not like that. We cannot call this the same patriarchy. A chakali [washerwoman caste] washes the soiled clothes of women in his village, whereas your men cannot even wash their own clothes ... how can you say that patriarchy and this patriarchy are the same? This is what we're talking about. You're going on about patriarchy, same patriarchy. "Once patriarchy is gone, we'll all be emancipated." But we don't have your kind of patriarchy, we have a different kind of patriarchy. Here, he has no food to eat, not just him, no one in his family has enough to eat.

We have several bigger issues than patriarchy. We have to deal with caste. Because of caste I don't have a job, because of caste I do not have an education, because of caste I am sweeping the roads, because of caste I am cleaning excreta. Brahmin women, Reddy women, why are they not involved? Why doesn't the government question? Everyone can do this work, is it not? No, they will not do it. You [Dalit] folks, if you have no food, you will come running, come to work as bar dancers, come for cleaning excreta, come as cleaners in the railways. Why are the others not coming? We don't have another source; you have 100 sources for the choosing. We don't have that. Only because we are untouchable women, we are SC women, we are Dalit women, we lost all the human rights. It is my right to study, to have a job, to live. But in the Indian context, where

am I? Anna Bhau Sathe says that the burden of whole land is being borne by the Dalit woman, that this land is living on the backs of Dalit women. Yes, that is correct. [The land is borne] not by any varaha avataram. This land is living off of our sweat.

These [Dalit] women, they can just look at the land and tell you what can be grown. “No sister, candi [yellow pigeon peas] will not grow here, pesaru [green gram] will not grow there, paddy will grow well there. See how the soil is, like jaggery lumps” the women may say. How do they know? They pour some water from a coconut shell to check and say, “too much rock here, we will not find water digging next to it either ... there, there we will find water, sister.” Such knowledge! Such women, being ridiculed, being abused as having nookamma gnanam [crumb knowledge], how painful is that? And the abusers are [supposed to be] progressive! Progressive writers! That is supposed to be the mainstream, and no one else is opposing them, not even Dalit men, you know, Anu. I will send that story, please get it translated if possible. It says “They’re incapable, they don’t own anything, don’t have a fistful of nookalu [broken crumbs or grits of rice], what are they going to achieve...” It is full of humiliation like this. And they call it progressive literature.

Who will speak? Our men don’t speak, they go silent. Some of them even have a good chemistry with those women [upper caste women writers]. Another thing, Anu, they don’t value their own Dalit women. But when it comes to those women, they’re full of praise, treat them like goddesses. Whatever they say, these men will be in awe and cheer for them. That is how it is. Who is the support for us in society? Rarely Dalit women like us get educated, join the movements, search for where we are in those movements, do the research and conclude, no, we are not in them, we have to begin on our own, but we should have some support, right? They [upper caste women] have lots of support. They have Kandukuri, Chalam, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, numerous brahmins. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, all of them. Who do we have? No one. Our men won’t support us. Even for them, our knowledge is nookamma gnanam. Tell me, where are we supposed to get support from? We are bearing the weight of the whole land. We’re engaged substantially in agriculture; we save the seeds [for the future].

My mother used to say, just note the philosophical thought here, for the deepam [lamp], she used to say deepam malupu [turn the lamp]. Not aarpu [extinguish], she used to say malupu, meaning turn it for tomorrow, deepam malupu bidida, she used to say. I used to wonder, knowing only the textbook language, ‘This is strange, why does she say malupu instead of saying aarpu?’ But she wouldn’t say aarpu, she always said malupu, deepam malupu, turn it for tomorrow. What great philosophy! So, it is there, like a mine. It needs to be mined. These women need to gain political power. Yellammas and Pochammas need to come to power.