Chapter 2

**Literature: Madigas writing**

**Three Telugu poets in translation:**

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Yendluri Sudhakar 2002.  
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Yendluri Sudhakar is a well known and widely respected Telugu poet and short-story writer. His poetry is more accessible in English than most, in this book especially. It displays his Telugu originals on one side of each opening, the translations, by several different translators, on the other. There are also two informative appreciations of his work.

Four of the translations are included here: ‘An Autobiography’, ‘A New Dream’, ‘Dakkali Girl’ and ‘Mysamma’s Death’. They are an inevitably inadequate introduction to his large and exceptionally varied range. ‘MO’, the translator of these four, is the main translator for this volume.

For the impressive title poem, ‘Neelika / Darky’ and the many others, please enjoy them on the pages of the book itself.

Two paragraphs (p.185/6) from Tallavajjala Patanjali Sastry's appreciation make an appropriate introduction:

‘Look at what he has done. He is one of those Pochampalli weavers - most evocative motifs, elaborate artistry and if there is a grammar to weaving (and not technique) Sudhakar is an exquisite weaver. His seemingly straight style has a special charm and his cunning employment of metaphors, though not unfamiliar, sound fresh and untouched. Sudhakar does not care for brevity. Any number of his poems - on his widowed mother, Shakeela, his own diabetes, Godavari et al pitchforked him to the front of leading Telugu poets. But as I have been saying he has a niche as a different dalit poet. In saying this I also refer to his prose work though technically I am out of bounds.’

‘Street sweepers are a familiar sight in India. So when Mysammas die, earth doesn't exactly tremble. Look at his opening lines describing her. Clad in a blue saree with a blazing red dot on her forehead, Mysamma appears accompanying the dawn. The allusion is to the cult goddess Mysamma who presided over water and land. Like a Goddess cursed she walked the earth and perished. The legend of Mysamma in different forms appears in texts. He remembered her as a boy pedalling down the road where she worked. The boy in fact was trying to rescue her (on her powerful presence) from the mists of legends. It is a racial memory packed in four separate sentences. The give-away is in the name. Such cult allusions are strewn all over his poetry.’

[p.15/7]
An Autobiography
My autobiography was released in the palace of wonders.
Felicitations on the open stage.
As garlands fall on my neck
Wounds of yester years startle.
When flowers are showered on my head
Deep inside thorny whips flail.
As felicitation addresses are read out
Inside my intestines knives of humiliation pierce.
As incantations ring behind me
In my ears are spread the flaming cries of smoking lead.
When they sat me on the dais
I recollect the face of my grand father
Made to stand at the outskirts of the village.
When glasses full with water are put before me
Scenes of kneeling and drinking water
Touch me as hot deserts.
As a shawl is spread around my shoulders
The vague figure of my blouseless
Grand mother cuts my heart.
As silk clothes are presented to me
The coarse rags of my grand father
Hang on the clothesline of my eyes.
When I am invited to festival feasts
Nights of cast away food
In the cattle sheds come to memory.
As time prostrates at my feet
Clay feet of my shoeless great grand fathers
Move in my mind.
If my childhood teachers are seen on any road
My thumb hides itself in the fist
As a hen encountered by a hawk.
When parrot like, admirers of Rama
Appreciate my poetry in exclamations
The poetry of my race sunk in the soil
Accosts me cruelly.
When colourful cross roads waiting
Invite me with festoons
Golden swans are all too eager to
Take just five steps with me instead of the seven.
The dust of my forefathers' bodies
Breathes anew from their undergrounds.
When women unseen by the sun
Compete in their choice of marriage for me -
Heads struck, limbs cut flare up in me still.
When temples and the new gods
Wait patiently to pay tributes,
Temple bells laugh ironically in semi-darkness.
I have risen as a fifth sun.
Tearing the dark clouds of the four walls.
My rays of blood today
Reflect on the face of the moon.
In the light of the new sun
Time will read my autobiography
As a text book

(1993)
- Translated by ‘MO’

[p.31]

**A New Dream**
You -
Skinning the five elements,
Once nailing the sky
Once nailing the under world
Soaking skin on the
Seven seas.
For you
The sun and the moon should
Become a pair of shoes !
Head lowered, may be with
Hunger or is it insult -
Making shoes with your own skin,
Grand Father !
I dream of this world
Becoming a toe strap
Kissing your greater toe

(4-10-96)
- Translated by ‘MO’

[pp 47-51]

**Dakkali Girl**
Believe it or not!
Really that young Dakkali girl
Weaving a date mat
Is a Queen!
As her mother follows her like Renuka Devi,
And father with trap ropes on his shoulder,
Singing Jambu Purana, playing on the solo string,
A bunch of hounds around him -
The earth, a spinning nomadic top
Around their stomachs.
That untouchable girl
Used to move in my tender heart like a puppet.
As the girl entered our ghetto
Riding a donkey
It looked as if Jesus entered Jerusalem.
As winged white ants hovered over her like
Three crore deities
She came tugging up a rainbow to the donkey's tail.
In the whiteness of her calf eyes
Sticky moon shone like red meat.
Her smile with tartar of teeth
Was beyond all measures of beauty.
For that lass's non-Brahmin slang
Even Saraswati can't write the music key.
In childhood I used to drink
Donkey milk as well as mother's milk.
I saw my mother in the donkey the lass used to bring along.
I felt as though a season of milk set foot in my stomach.
Donkey Milk! Donkey Milk!! At her call
The face of our street shone like Arundhati star
Becoming braying donkeys, we gathered round.
With one look at us -
There floated the bliss of a mother breast - feeding
In the maternal eyes of that donkey.
The lass looked like a Buddhist beggar girl
Before our huts for a mouthful of rice or gruel
Of a cupful of hands.
Even the four faced God looking at her
Forehead couldn't tell
Whether her guts are crying or her lips smiling.
If only rice had eyes
Every dry particle would have cried.
The girl wriggled between
Untouchability and hunger
Like a fish in a dried up tank.
We had at least a hut for our heads
Under the roof of the sky.
The girl wandered like a nomad.
In a nation where the foul urine of cows
Becomes pious libation
The untouchable girl had faith only in the donkey.
I always think of that girl.
I talk even in sleep, giving her a morsel
Taking it out from my own stomach.
I dream of her being a step higher than mine.
That Dakkali girl is not seen any more,
Nor my childhood donkey mother!
Both move round inside me.
She stands at the junction of reservations
Demanding her share.
I hear the horn of a buffalo blowing inside me
I see soft grains of rice as knives sharpening within me
Waging a new war against my own ‘higher than thou.’

(6. 9.1998)
- Translated by ‘MO’

Dakkali : Those born of Jambavant's flank. Sub caste
of Madiga, a fifth caste. Nomads.
Jambu Pura : A very ancient myth, tribal in character.
Four-faced God : Lord Brahma.

[pp 129-31]
Mysamma's Death
Our alley in the morning
Used to shine like a silk lalchie pressed.
She used to sweep the lanes
With love as of bathing children.

Her coarse blue saree
An apron-like cloth with checks across
A broom like the waist of a python
A dot on the forehead like a red signal in darkness,

Our Mysamma
Looked like a Municipality Mother.
Menstrual cloths, and dirty linen
All collected
And carried off in a push cart
She looked like Mother Ganges
Washing away all pollution.

Waking up with the morning star
I still remember the strange sound of sweeping.
I who wasn't even as tall as
Her broom stick can never forget our Mysamma.

Mysamma ! Mysamma !
I see a mother in you, Mysamma
For cleaning my own dirt just for love
Though not related by blood.

Coming as yourself a gift,
Asking for a few coins to buy a cup of tea,
At Christmas or the morning after Diwali night -
Is a never fading memory.

'Don't throw rubbish at door steps,' Mysamma,
Whoever listened to your lessons of cleanliness?

Like the cine actor's black money
Dirt grew by the day, foul smell spread
Through the rotten dustbin.

I thought you had fever and so didn't come.

Never thought you would go away leaving no trace
Letting loads of dust remain in our unchanging lives.

Mysamma ! Mysamma!!

As I ride my bicycle
Through the lane of the grave yard
Your memory touches me like a fragrance.
The lane that looked like a washed dhoti
Now hangs its head with the crown of pollution.

Our black dog wails at nights
Rolling in the dust heap -
Maybe remembering you.

(1985)

(An elegy to our Municipal Sweeper)
- Translated by ‘MO’
1. The sun fastened to a knife

We are the ones living below your habitation
And we are the lighter ones
We are the ones inhaling the stink
Discharged by your elevated mansions

When I was amputated
Pounding stones to fortify your foundations,
It was the limb that I lost
The limb that grew into such a tall mansion

When I collapsed, neck wounded,
Pulling the cart of manure on an untrodden way
When our feet suffered sores
Carrying you in a palanquin and
Massaging your unstrained bodies,
Haven’t you called me a buffalo?
Haven’t you termed us beggars?

We are the ones living below your habitation
And we are the lighter ones
How long can you keep the lids shut on our eyes?
To open the eyes with vengeance is imminent.
Fastening the sun to a knife,
When we walk thunderously
Filing my waist’s knife on flint stones

When the sickle’s handle in my fist squeaks
While chopping diagonally,
The forest should now shudder;
It should now produce
The sound of an uprooting tree

The minority caste-Hindus
Should now step down
At the shrieks of chendalas, the wretched
Who gauged the earth

Telugu original: “Poddunu Kattiki Gatti”

2. Stench of Cemetery*

I am the one burning dead bodies
Thrusting down the blazing body with a stick
Shoving the burning pyre-wood into a heap.

I am untouchable
I gather in my loincloth fistfuls of rice
Left at the penultimate destiny of the body
Only after the bier is shifted

When I was the crow among the crows
Awaiting the food offered to the souls of the dead
When I was the one
Offering a couch to the dead body
Fastening sticks of length and breadth
Scaling hillocks and cutting the trunks
Chipping thorns and chopping twigs
When I was the log burning the body into ashes,
It’s you who would
Knock away everything, as an eagle grabs chicks
You, the one who penned the stinking-nonsense of
Cock and bull stories,
In the mind’s silt my body is stirred
By the crowbars of repeated atrocities

_Dvija_, the twice born!
You branded me the wretched
I set my foot in the hymn of your incantation.
You only know the delight of incense sticks
I would show you the burial-stink
And the stench of the cemetery.
Here you listen now
I will sing with my filthy voice
The noise of your skulls
Even before you reach the pyre

*Telugu original: “Begaronni”, one belonging to a Dalit sub-caste*
whose traditional occupation is to burn/bury the dead bodies.

3. Faeces

Carrying on the back
A bucket, a broom and a tin tray
My trace on the earth having been slippery
At the site that’s touched by me
Outcast that is

Drawing faeces from shitting-enclosures
Washing the stink and odour of time
In the manholes of sewers,
I would cap the stench into a snuff-casket

I wouldn’t mind being termed a pariah
In the lingo of your tongue
But when I’m called the wretched caste
It rings in my ear as a buzzing fly

Offering a pitcher of water for washing your anus
And shoving off heaps of shit,
When I stretched out the tin tray for a copper
Didn’t you name me a scavenger?
Being scolded, sporting an innocent face,
Did I ever scorn anyone?
Having endured the stench,
I covered myself
With my occupation as the quilt.

I’m not a rogue to drag into the street
Someone’s squabbles.
The service of the priests,
Filling their bellies to the brim in temples
Chanting credible hymns and the clans of devotees
Was it of any use to anyone?

I am the only one who’s authentic
I would plaster you with faeces
Till the roots of your caste are crumpled

"Telugu original: "Jaathnaara" (Excommunication)

4. Hard bullock meat

Attending to the time’s turns
Being the residue of hunger around the threshing floor
Being the hard meat of cultivation’s services
Our labour agreement the floor on which we are threshed
The bonded labour having become a yoke
Is anyway stirring on our necks!

When my skeleton keeps sentry
At the ridges of wet-fields,
The merciless thorns of the caste fence
Shredded my body

While your caste is the sunflower
At the way of your farm-shed;
Either a dry palmyra frond or a worn-out chappal
Beckons as a symbol of our occupation and
The trace of our house

We could outline the imprints on leather
Only when your feet moved about on our finger-tips;
My face a round black stone beneath your white feet

Folding together
The travails of hunger and
The stirring bowels of the belly,
The yield of my skin processed leather
Melting cassia
Soaking in lande, the trough
While chewing a piece of the liver

As the solid walk of your chappal
Trampled on my heart,
I am the one who could see
The generations of my ancestors
Crushed under your walk

It’s anyway known to me -
The knack of skinning by
Binding the feet of the calves of caste.
Having become the bubbling up of
Marking nuts boiled in the earthen casket of oil,
I am filing my tools, awaiting
The moment of glimpsing my full length shadow
In raw blood

Telugu original: “Saanem Tunakalu” (hardened pieces of dry bullock-meat)

5. A novel knock on the eyes

My harvesting-floor, when an animal dies,
Is but the slaughtering slab.
Peeling off the skin to mix with lime
Smearing alum with the hands that butchered
Sifting cassia to soak the skin in lande, the trough
Carrying the stench day long,
We processed the skin stubbornly.

Fastened the leather of bucket-hose
Wetting with drops of tears.
My caste's
The early factory of artisan occupations
We’re the ones who honoured our occupation

The tail of life being a bullock’s neck-strap
Our trace having become a blister in the knot
Our pot being at the end in the row at water,
Our abode is wailing behind the village

Maadiga,
A grand name for the bonded labour.
What’s there to find by measuring immeasurable depths
Each step of this pit has a generation of insult

How else can my crushed pulse throb
Except as pain when compacted by trampling feet

Being a leader either ritually or as a ploy
Bowing to the one of the caste Hindu
How’s it that you’re fishing as a beggar ra?
Did you negotiate to mortgage the caste
In the mystical game of dice?
Do you feel ashamed or insulted?
Hasn’t the chewed up residue dried out?

You the Dalit betrayer,
Don't ever bow as a hangman!
If the reserved seat goes astray in future
Is there anyone to pity you?
Is there a term to address you?
Struggle to walk on
The moulded path laid by the leader

Join the Dalit masses
Lest you might spill over or get disturbed in the pathway
Be vigilant!
As a knocking-bird on the magical banyan tree
As the one serving from our bowl,
He, the caste-Hindu, is ready
To prick these eyes ra!

Telugu original: Kallameeda Kotha Varnasaaruva

6. Feats of drum-beats

I am the one who glued my palm
To the heel of your foot's thinned sole
I am the one
Who adorned your worn-out chappal
Grafting my skin

Lacing my nerves into strings of your tender feet,
When the bullock’s eyes wailed as flowers
On the straps of your chappal that I decked,
I joined them wailing!

My grits are the grains
Under your feet in the washing-pan.
I'm the butcher sharing raw meat on the slaughtering slab
When offered an aged bullock for slaughter

I am the one who lifted first
The fathoms-deep fountain-spring
In the bucket-hoses.
Is there someone to calculate
The perforations on my palm?
My resonating drum at your ritual is
The very skin flattened with moulds and tools
Yet … When the chisels of 'whore son' and 'widow son'
Pierce my bosom,
The scrap left in the lande is our treatment
You, the one of caste-arrogance
The one of amorous tunes and bathing games
My drum, hanging on the peg, knows my gushing agony

I am the one
Who picked up a rupee placed in the soil
Tumbling myself – the belly and the brow – in the dust
To present you amusement

I remain untouchable in spite of the feats I perform
This body had been mortgaged before we were born
This wealth sank in the marsh of your caste men
Beckoning us with waving hands,
It's our own drum that begot tinkling flames
Dripping tender rhythm

The skin that we peeled the layer from with the knife
The leather that’s fastened on the frame of the dappu
The drumsticks have changed the rhythm
We are now stepping our feet to approach with
The feats of the tiger
Telugu original: “Oddulu Tirikkuntu”

Notes
1 Lande is a huge oval-shaped earthen container dug into the ground up to the edges; it is used by the maadigas for soaking and processing animal leather.
2 The predator bird that strikes the eyes of the rabbit-prey to kill and eat it.
3 A bullock-drawn spherical bucket of about 100 litres, fastened at one end with a diameter of 12-inch leather hose, that holds and releases water as the bullocks tread to and fro drawing the bucket. This device, called mota, was the means of irrigating fields, especially in Telangana, till the emergence of diesel pump-sets in the 1970s.
4 Dr B.R. Ambedkar.
5 As the bride’s mother pours water, the father washes the feet of the groom who stands in a brass pan in the Hindu marriage ritual. The left-over grains of rice used in the ritual are taken away by the maadigas who beat dappu for the ceremony.
Kakka - Ellaiah's first novel (2000)


Dr Darla Venkateswara Rao receives award, Delhi Dec. 2007
Is it an offence to be born here?
English rendering: Dr J. Bheemaiah

I feel a shiver down my spine
If any comments on my birth

I don't know how many theories exist
To show the birth of the universe

But, there exists a single premise
It is the women of my caste folk
Who are hereditarily made
To be their mistresses

For the feudalists
I am a sexual object
I am destined
Only to amuse their heart

I am a prey to their sexual thirst
I have been crushed as Mathangi for centuries

About their birth
The puranas are piously recited
I too feel like dragging pochamma or poleramma
Onto the racchabanda
To grill them to declare
To whom I was born, and
Who was born of me through whom.

For one thing I am in doubt:
Except those born of the feet of the gentry
Will not those gods taste the ‘youth' of others?

Notes:
1. A woman from a lower caste is also known as Mathangi, Basvini or Jogini. In the name of the village deity, she is thrown open for marriage with anyone coming forward to take her. Already married dominant upper castes use her to satisfy their sexual thirst. They never treat them as their wives of their own caste. Rather they keep them as mistresses. In that way almost all people take advantage of the nature of her ‘marriage' and sexually exploit her.

2. Poleramma/Pochamma: The village deities worshipped by the dalits.

3. Racchabanda: A round platform constructed in the heart of the village where disputes are resolved.

In school and in the lap of mother

English rendering: Dr.J.Bheemaiah

Had I not been born in this caste
I would have thought in a different way
It is good that I was born here, in this caste
For I know now what humiliation is …
   For I learn what love is …
   And what is to love one and all

My countenance would change
Whenever classical literature became the lesson
I would think whether I should disappear
   Or I should flee or I should protest
All eyes would focus on me en masse
I would feel like questioning the creator
   As to how many times he would kill

I don’t know
Whether I escaped humiliation
Even in my mother’s womb …
The other day I asked my mother
Why my father’s sore in the leg
   She said in confusion
Assuming that I was learning to question
“When you were still in my womb
   A terrible storm struck
All the villagers thronged the headman’s house
   I entreated for a little space
I was not allowed even to touch the shed
   For a fear of death by defilement

   Terrible winds
   Terrific thunders
   Tumultuous rain:
   Nobody knew what would happen
   In that moment
The uprooted trees came to my rescue

   The storm receded the next day
   I quivered with hunger
   I felt dizzy and fell down.
   To the headman’s house
   Your father went again
   He begged to save me

We are destined to serve the upper castes
   He begged for little gruel;
They said they would give it for firewood

   While collecting firewood
   He hurt his leg - there was a deep cut
   His stomach was empty
   Despite all that, he won gruel at last

   I gulped it a little
   But it did not stay in my stomach
   Your father knew why after tasting
   That it was only rice water!”
May be innumerable instances of grief
Hidden in the depths of the hearts of my parents
Which, though one may plead
They never,
Never have they revealed

It is good that I was born in this caste
For I have learnt to love human beings

I have suffered humiliations
I have suppressed my fury
Or else, innumerable murders
I would have committed!

For Telugu originals of Dr Darla's poetry, see his Madiga Kavulu site.
At the 23rd Dalit Writers National Conference in New Delhi, 9th/10th December 2007, he received the Dr. Ambedkar National Award of the Bharatiya Dalita Sahitya Akademi, presented by Dr. S.P. Sumanakshar, National President (see photograph above).