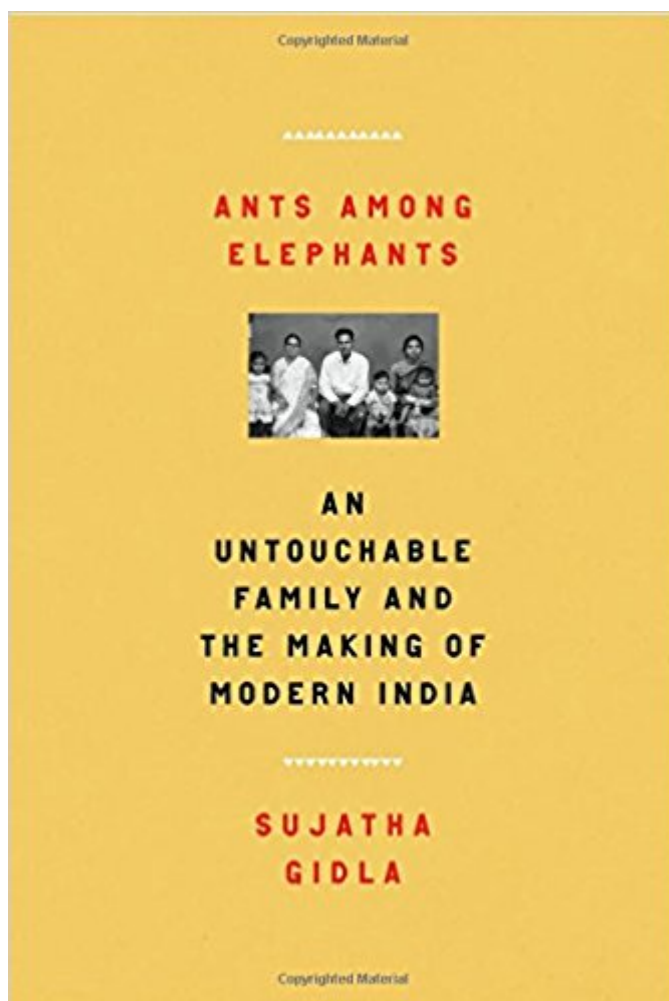


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# Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family And The Making Of Modern India



## Synopsis

"Ants Among Elephants is an arresting, affecting and ultimately enlightening memoir. It is quite possibly the most striking work of non-fiction set in India since *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo, and heralds the arrival of a formidable new writer." —*The Economist* A New York Times Editors' Choice The stunning true story of an untouchable family who become teachers, and one, a poet and revolutionary Like one in six people in India, Sujatha Gidla was born an untouchable. While most untouchables are illiterate, her family was educated by Canadian missionaries in the 1930s, making it possible for Gidla to attend elite schools and move to America at the age of twenty-six. It was only then that she saw how extraordinary — and yet how typical — her family history truly was. Her mother, Manjula, and uncles Satyam and Carey were born in the last days of British colonial rule. They grew up in a world marked by poverty and injustice, but also full of possibility. In the slums where they lived, everyone had a political side, and rallies, agitations, and arrests were commonplace. The Independence movement promised freedom. Yet for untouchables and other poor and working people, little changed. Satyam, the eldest, switched allegiance to the Communist Party. Gidla recounts his incredible transformation from student and labor organizer to famous poet and founder of a left-wing guerrilla movement. And Gidla charts her mother's battles with caste and women's oppression. Page by page, Gidla takes us into a complicated, close-knit family as they desperately strive for a decent life and a more just society. A moving portrait of love, hardship, and struggle, *Ants Among Elephants* is also that rare thing: a personal history of modern India told from the bottom up.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Unsentimental, deeply poignant . . . *Ants Among Elephants* gives readers an unsettling and visceral understanding of how discrimination, segregation and stereotypes have endured . . .

[Sujatha Gidla] writes with quiet, fierce conviction, zooming in to give us sharply drawn, Dickensian portraits of relatives, friends and acquaintances, and zooming out to give us snapshots of entire villages, towns and cities . . . In these pages, she has told those family stories and, in doing so, the story of how ancient prejudices persist in contemporary India, and how those prejudices are being challenged by the disenfranchised. Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times Book Review* “A remarkable family history . . . *Ants Among Elephants* may well be eye-opening not just for non-Indians who will recoil in righteous horror from the intimate details of caste discrimination but also for many Indians, for whom the lives of Untouchables take place out of sight . . . In this book of nonfiction one reads of real people fighting real cruelty with real courage and grace.” Tunku Varadarajan, *The Wall Street Journal* “With her luminous command of fine details, Gidla manages a difficult and admirable task: she takes a tremendously personal memoir and renders it with such clarity that it tells the broader story of a place and an era.”

James Norton, *Christian Science Monitor* “The sheer immensity of India’s history, geography, politics and peoples would be hard to condense under any circumstances . . . [but Gidla] brilliantly narrows the scope by explaining the tumultuous events of 20th-century India through her own family’s strife-ridden lives. Priscilla Kipp, *BookPage* “[A] brilliant debut . . . Gidla is a smart and deeply sympathetic narrator who tells the lesser known history of India’s modern communist movement. The book never flags, whether covering Satyam’s political awakening as a young and poor bohemian or Manjula’s rocky marriage to a mercurial and violent man. Gidla writes about the heavy topics of poverty, caste and gender inequality, and political corruption with grace and wit. Gidla’s work is an essential contribution to contemporary Indian literature.”

*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) “An astonishing account, fired by compassion and lit up with a fierce sense of justice, filled with unforgettable characters raging against the violence and oppression that lurks under the surface glitter of modern

India. Siddhartha Deb, author of *The Beautiful and the Damned* “*Ants Among Elephants* is a fascinating and moving portrayal of one family’s struggle to live.”

Lee E. Cart, *Shelf Awareness* “In *Ants Among Elephants*, Sujatha Gidla gives us a family history that deeply humanizes key figures in India’s Naxalite movement while also revealing an India that few outsiders will have encountered. Gidla’s uncommon position and background

equip her to approach her subject not with mere curiosity, or, worse yet, pity and condescension, but to tell the stories of some of India's most disenfranchised people from their own perspectives and in their own voices. This is an impressive and important book that should be read by anyone with an interest in modern India. • Preeta Samarasan, author of *Evening is the Whole Day*

Sujatha Gidla was born an untouchable in Andhra Pradesh, India. She studied physics at the Regional Engineering College, Warangal. Her writing has appeared in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. She lives in New York and works as a conductor on the subway.

This story of an untouchable family who became teachers and political leaders . It is completely absorbing. I have visited India 5 times over a period of 40 years and have witness the social segregation of these people . At one time it was believed that if their shadow crossed your path - one needed to go home to shower. This is still very prevalent even though the Indian government has set aside reserved seats in higher education and the job market. In spite of this - slums and absolute poverty still flourish! A story true even today!

This book opens the reader's eyes to a way of life that is hard to see. Generations of suffering were depicted on these pages. Family members braving circumstances no one should be subjected to. I believe this is an important read. It contains essential information for anyone who does not want to turn a blind eye to discrimination happening in this world. To poverty and abuse. Having said that, I wish the book had been written differently. It began with the author talking about how difficult it has been to gather the stories about her family. And it ends with her own story. But in between that, it read as if she were writing a term paper. Impersonal. I wish she could have interspersed her own story with that of her family members. I wish she would have told the reader how she came to be a conductor on the subway in New York. I found it confusing to hear her refer to her own mother by her mother's first name. To her own childhood self referred to in third person. For me the impersonal nature of most of the narrative was disconcerting. After all, the characters depicted are her own family members and their friends and associates.

This is a devastating, inspiring and highly informative book by a clear-thinking and courageous author. I read this book in two days without putting it down. The biggest eye-opener for me was how casteism is perpetrated by Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Communists -- everyone. Casteism is even

perpetrated by Dalits towards other Dalits. This doesn't exonerate Hindus or anyone at all--it just shifts the framework away from Hindus being the only perpetrators. While I am left with more questions and doubts than answers about caste and how to dismantle it, this book increases my resolve to continue my work to build a progressive and pluralistic, anti-caste Hindu society. I recommend this book highly.

*Ants Among Elephants* is a wonderful book that very intricately weaves caste, gender, class, one family's history, and the political history of Telugu speaking people in the 20th century. Despite the heavy subjects, Gidla also captures the everyday, minor moments that make up life during that time by writing about funny memories, personal preferences, logistical difficulties, and more. She balances both the everyday and the larger issues perfectly. It's a really great book: very accessible and captivating. Definitely a must read book!

Even though I planned to spend much longer reading the book, I finished my first reading of "*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*" by Sujatha Gidla. I found it compelling with several threads running through. Parts reminded me of '*Nirjana Varadhi*'. But in such books, we do not see the 'intimate enmity' faced by Dalits. Then there are parts of the family life of author's mother Manjula which are as powerful of parts of '*Asamarthuni Jeevayatra*'. Fortunately, it is also a story of struggle and survival of some talented people despite handicaps. There are also the comical and tragic aspects of revolutionary meetings. Escape to foreign lands to escape caste to some extent. Should be translated in to Telugu soon.

I found it difficult to put down the book *Ants Among Elephants*. It is a riveting personal account of both pain and suffering under the caste system as well as real life struggle against oppression. I would highly recommend it to anyone who wants to learn more about Indian society.

Fascinating, well-written and thought-provoking. A must-read for those interested in the subjects of caste oppression and modern Indian history. Got it after reading the very positive NYTimes review and I'm glad I did.

The importance of caste in India is pervasive, and this book tells it by the eyes of a dalit, a untouchable. The book is a little bit repetitive and the literary technique of the author is not the best

I ever read, but it is worth reading. This type of book has precedents: the best one I know is Devil in a blue dress, Walter Mosley.

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