

## Book Review

by

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**Enoch, Kolakaluri. *Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories*. Translated by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar. Ratna Books. 2021. Pages 256. Rs. 448/-**

Dalit stories are a powerful and necessary addition to the literary canon. The stories in *Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories*, written by a Dalit writer, Kolakaluri Enoch, and translated into English by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar, offer a unique perspective on the experiences of those who have been historically marginalised and oppressed in India.

What strike most about the stories in this collection are the rawness and honesty about the realities of Dalit lives without creating too brutal a picture of the existential oppression that is their daily lot. At the same time, these stories do not shy away from the problematics of discrimination, violence, and poverty. The tyranny is equivocal in terms of the perpetrators, both human and Nature. The contradictions in Dalit circumstances are also many. While the police bash up Obulesu, who receives Nature's bounty, the teacher couple digs an essential well that ends with a boulder instead of water. Bright Sudhakarrao's aspirations to be a doctor gets crushed by the verdict of a court of justice. While Sudhakarrao succumbs to the circumstance, Dr Simha turns his circumstances to become a successful cardiologist where his caste becomes inconsequential. The anti-Dalit Minister and the pro-Dalit VC, both ironically being Dalits themselves, espouse completely opposite values; eventually, conscience wins and power succumbs. Along with the pathos of the Dalit reality, hints of humour and sarcasm can be traced in stories like 'What's the Weapon?', 'Somersault', and 'Liberation'.

In addition to their raw honesty, the stories offer unique insights into the culture and traditions of Dalit communities. For example, although most characters are invariably burdened with monetary loan from the local moneylenders, it hurts their self-respect the most if the lender mentions this in the public. That would be the worst form of persuasive torture

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by the lender to subjugate the Dalits of their own volition. In each story, the self-esteem of the Dalits comes to the fore, be it not picking up the coolie money thrown at them, not paying obeisance to the unduly abusive members of the higher caste or challenging their taken-for-granted attitude that “Dalits can’t revolt”. Redeeming characters, Achary, Vinayak, the VC, the munasabu, Kodandam, and such others, provide the ‘touch of love’ and succour for the unfortunate Dalits. Some stories draw on folk tales and oral traditions, as ‘The Crows’, showcasing the cultural heritage of these communities. Universal ethics and morality that uphold humanity form the underlying core of the stories to contrast the acts of the scheming against the Dalits.

The third-person narrative gives voice to the characters, such as Sonabolu, Venkataramudu, Fakirappa, and even the multiple wives of the village heads or the prostitutes in the small towns, who have been silenced for far too long.

Certain powerful images interplay with the emotions of the characters. When young Sonabolu went forward to accept his ‘coolie’ money for the display of his superb artistry, he had to almost bare himself in the public, an imagery that captures how the Dalits have to relinquish their last particle of dignity to receive the pittance that is legitimately theirs. The sarcasm wrenches the heart. The complex and layered imagery in the title of the book, the same as the title of the story, ‘Asprishya Ganga’, the untouchable Ganga, weaves through each story creating the dark colours of illegitimate subdual of the Dalits. The sarcasm in the imagery is caustic and pervading as is the inherent paradox. In the story, the wife and their house both bear the name Godavari. The river Godavari considered the elder sister of River Ganga, and called the Southern Ganga, is equally sacred, yet the character, Godavari, is an untouchable. Govindalu, who gets the water spring into the well, is also an untouchable. One of the primordial elements, water, that sustains life knows no boundaries between a Dalit and a non-Dalit. The ‘sami’, the owner of well, and not a Dalit, resolves the distinction by drinking the leftover water that Govindalu has drunk. The river Ganga herself, who bears the ultimate power of purification, has become an untouchable, since the concept of untouchability has polluted the body and the soul of the society through Dalit repression. The writer tries to resolve this in the stories just as Vinayak has done, in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact manner. The narrative style is straight forward without fringes and negative emotions.

One conspicuous aspect in the stories is that women have been underscored only as subservient to men, Dalit or non-Dalit. Not a single woman protagonist has been projected in any story, whereas certain male Dalit characters have been shown to even transcend their circumstances.

Overall, Dalit stories are an important and necessary addition to the literary circle. They offer a perspective that is often overlooked and ignored, and they challenge us to confront the injustices that continue to exist in India. *Asprishya Ganga and Other Stories* offers all these aspects to the reader. These stories reclaim the history and culture of the Dalits, suppressed, and erased by dominant castes for centuries.