



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**NITCHENA METLU (THE LADDER STEPS) BY MODUKURI JOHNSON :
A REFLECTION OF AMBEDKAR'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY**

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Email: naveenchukkakumar@gmail.comDoi: <http://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9309>**ABSTRACT**

Following in the footsteps of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyothi Rao Phule, etc., many Dalit writers have come up with vibrant literary works that vehemently condemn the social injustice done to the most populated groups of people (castes), which are deliberately kept at the lower rungs of the ladder-stepped social structure of India. Having been influenced by the writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the pre-independence social thinkers and Dalit writers of India, many educated, downtrodden people boldly came up with their writings, hacking the social injustice done to them and their people in the name of the caste system. A good amount of literary work has been produced by many authors in regional languages, enlightening the lower and poorer sections of Indian society. Among many authors of Telugu Dalit literature in pre-independence and post-independence eras, Modukuri Johnson is one, who created himself an individual identity as a social thinker, writer, cine-writer and dramatist. He got a very good name and fame as a social thinker. As a lyricist in Telugu cinema, he also has an individual identity. He wrote revolutionary works questioning the stigmatized social structure of India through his works "Nitchena Metlu" (ladder steps) and "Kaaki-Kavi (the crow and the poet). The play 'Nitchena Metlu' (*The Ladder Steps*) was a great success both on the stage and in book form.

Keywords: *Social Justice, Educated Down Trodden People, Lower, Poorest Sections.*



Modukuri Johnson was born in 1934 in Kolakaluru Village in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. His parents were Ratnamma and Guravaiah, who suffered a lot to bring their child up as an educated man. The name of Johnson was shot into zenith with the great success of his drama, *Nitchena Metlu*. According to the poet, *the ladder steps* symbolize the caste system in Indian society, which is full of disparities, deviations, and disturbances. So the works of Johnson brought about a great change in the Telugu-speaking areas of India, improving awareness among the masses.

The play 'Nitchena Metlu' (The ladder steps) of Johnson was written in 1976 for enacting on the stage during "Harijan Festivities in Hyderabad". The 'Ladder' Johnson refers to has only "Four steps". These four steps have been occupied by four varnas i.e., four prominent social sections of Indian society. But this ladder is carried by another section of Indian Society, which is an outcaste, not included in main society. The author questions why these four sections, (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra) which are on the steps; are carried by the 'Panchama' the fifth category or Dalit or outcastes. The authors vehemently condemn this social injustice and strongly advocates that this social structure has to be demolished by the untouchables. For this cause, the author says, all the people of all untouchable and discriminated classes of people must come together and unite and fight the injustice. He further says that the Dalit caste must keep aside their internal differences and first for this noble cause. The author playing the role of a poet makes the play immensely interesting and educating.

The Author, Johnson is quite relevant to today's situation. The two prominent Dalit castes of Andhra Pradesh or Telugu speaking state today, Mala and Madigas and their sub-castes are fighting among themselves for various reasons. A sort of animosity is prevailing among these castes which is shrewdly induced and injected into the minds of the people of these castes by guileful politicians and upper caste people for various purposes. These ill-clever politicians of upper castes want them to be poles-apart, forever with their internal clashes to keep them away from grabbing political power. This will ultimately benefit the forward castes and put the Dalits forever at the lower rung, which is the design of the crooked minds that created the caste system. The present trend was anticipated or foretold by the author even forty years before, in 1976.

In the beginning of the play, the author in the name of 'poet' (Character), enters and says.

"The four sectioned society of
four stepped ladder has not
stood on the ground nor floating
in the wind but proudly stands
by pitching into the heart of
ill-fated man bearing the weight of ladder
who is this unfortunate man
base, mean, servant or slave"

The poet, poignantly says that the Manu defined society has fixed its basement in the hearts of Dalits who are saliently bearing the total weight of the society despite the Dalits are even denied of minimum amenities and leading a despicable life.

The poet later questions the four stepped ladder society. "Who is that fifth man carrying all of



you, where has he come from? Now a conversation goes on between the 'Poet' and "Brahmin' who is the representative of the caste system and also at the top of the social ladder.

Poet : "(with the Brahmin)
You, who is at the top and higher
and above all and unreachable to
Others do you know who are beneath you.

Brahmin:(Proudly) who else knows, except me for
I am with Brahma Jnana (Universal Wisdom)

Poet : Thank God, if then tell who are beneath you
...
... who is that carrying the ladder

Brahmin: (With a laugh), Vaada... (Derogatory
remark) that,
He was not born to my father.

Poet : To whom he was born?

Brahmin: I don't know

Poet : Refer the Vedas and tell

Brahmin: Moved them upside and down, he
was not found

Poet : Then, read the epics

Brahmin: Even if histories are referred, his
origin is not found

Poet : But he is on the earth

Brahmin: May be appearing to the observers

Poet : Don't you watch them

Brahmin: No, he should not appear even in
the vicinity of our eye sight.

The Dalit or fifth man of the society, who
bears the weight of the Indian social system, who

carries the laden of the four hooded Cobra on his
shoulders has already proved his tolerance and
generosity. The verses of Satish Chandar strike to our
mind, which he speaks in his "Panchamaveda".

"The word "my mother' is always uttered
in your mouth
Though in scolding you have agreed that I
was born to my mother
You have confirmed it
Indeed we were born to our mothers".

Here Satish Chandra satirically says that the Dalits are
born to their mothers but not to the head nor to the
hands nor to the stomach nor to the legs of some
imaginary god. Our birth, he says is real on the
earth, as sons of the soil. Our great grandfather
Yekalavya was extorted during Bharatha period. The
same is still continuing today. He laughs at the
fabricated stories of human birth by caste defenders
who want to retain their hegemony somehow.

Towards the end of the play, the Panchama
(Dalit) gets Right to Vote". Now the four persons,
who are above on ladder steps, have started to come
down to the Dalits for the sake of votes and shows an
artificial affection on him and say 'you are equal to
us'. The poet, now says that the social exploitation
and pillage have transformed into political pillage and
exploitation keeping the original social stigma intact.
Now, these crooked minds have invented the ways to
keep this un-privileged sections under their
hegemony forever by bringing about an abyss among
this section. They always want these sections to be
un-united for the sake of their social privileges and
hegemony over them.



The author warns the untouchable sections to be cautious of these evil designs of vicious upper caste Hindus. He gives a message to them to be united to fight the injustice in Indian Society in every way possible. This idea of the author can be compared to the hopes of another Telugu work 'New Bat' (Kotha Gabbilam) by Sudhakar. In this the poet says that though the sub-castes of Dalits clash among themselves for Rights. They should unite for fighting injustice in the society. He warns the 'Dandora' leaders to be cautious of the gullible leaders supporting them. If the upper caste leaders resort to such and such designs to create a gap between Dalit castes, they will unite and teach those leaders a lesson.

"Though the Dalits split into two for Rights
If one is attacked with knife they will unite
and fight against crooked dreamers"

Much literature was produced during the post-independence era to fight the injustice in Indian society. The enlightened Telugu poets from Dalit communities raised their voices against social stigma and also to sensitize the outcaste masses to revolt against the cruel caste system, which is a major factor in injustice in all its forms. Johnson's impressions of the Dalit plight and future can be clearly seen today. The Ambedkar ideology that Johnson advocated in his works is a fitting one for today's case. But the irony is that the Dalit section is not realizing this.

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