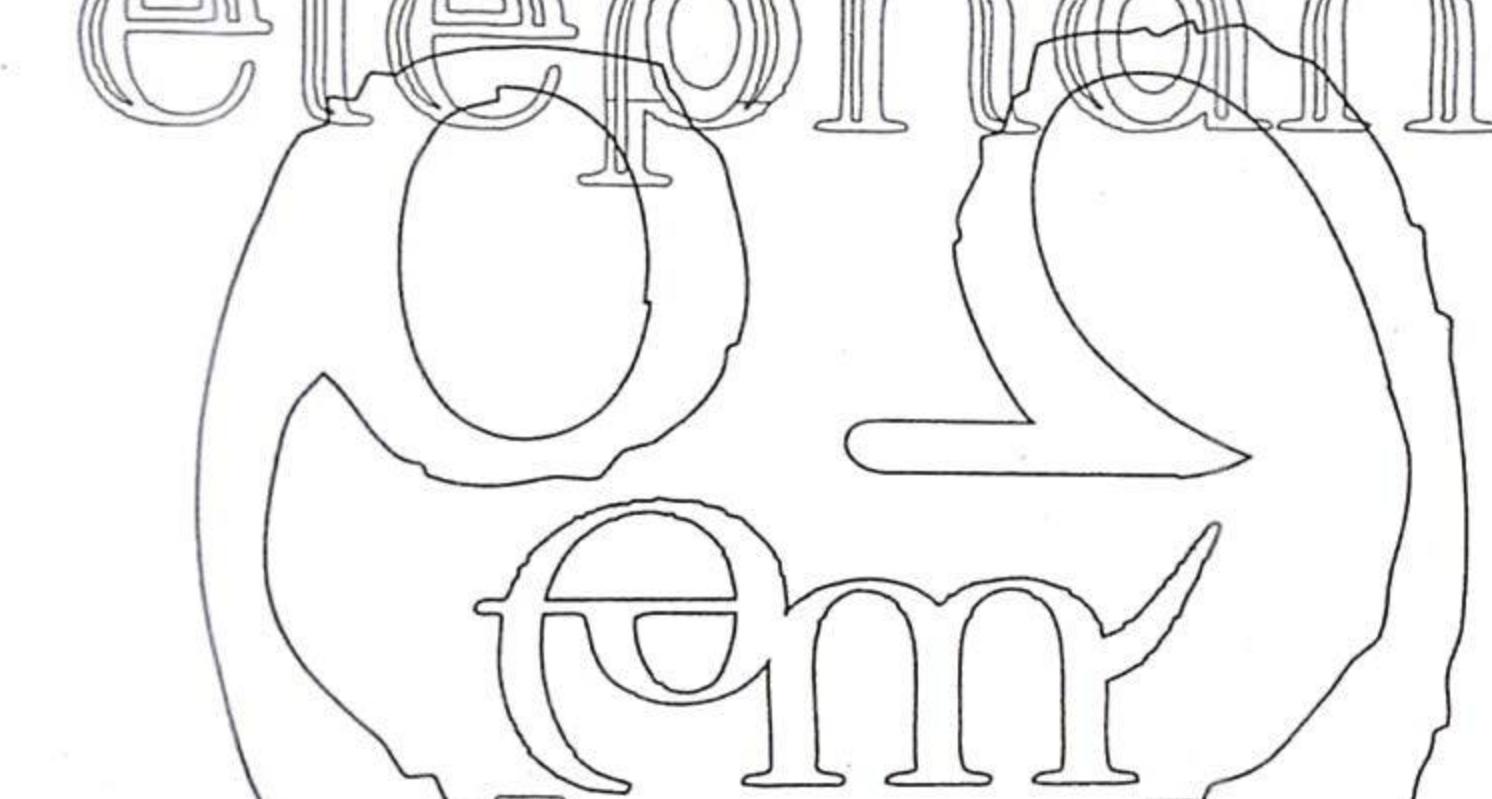


Father
maybe an
elephant
and mother
only a small
basket,
but...



gogu
shyamala

Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But...

© Telugu originals: Gogu Shyamala

© Translations: Individual translators

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Gogu Shyamala is a senior fellow at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She has edited *Nallappoddu: Dalitha Sthreela Sahithyam 1921–2002* (Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921–2002). This was followed by *Nallaregatisallu: Madiga Madiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu* (Furrows in Black Soil: The Stories of Madiga and Madiga Subcaste Women) in 2006. In 2011, she published a biography of one of Telangana's leading dalit politicians, T.N. Sadalakshmi (*Nene Balaanni, T.N. Sadalakshmi Bathuku Katha*), based on a series of interviews with her (forthcoming from Navayana in 2012 as *The Last Place for a Dalit Woman: The Life of T.N. Sadalakshmi*, translated by Gita Ramaswamy).

Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But... is her first collection of stories translated from Telugu.



Gogu Shyamala's World

ECOLOGY

Mota bavi: field well

This is a large agricultural or field well. Such wells can be up to half an acre in diameter. The walls of the well are built up with stone (granite) and the steps leading to the water are often a series of long granite slabs protruding out of the walls. Water is drawn using a very large aspherical metal bucket called a bokkena. It has a wide hole at the bottom, to which is connected a large leather pipe called the thondam (elephant's trunk). The lower end of the leather bucket is sealed with a knot on a thick rope (8–10 inches diameter) which automatically closes when the bucket is lowered into the water. When the bucket is raised, the system opens the knot so that the water is let into the irrigation canal. The bucket is raised and lowered by bullocks drawing the rope over a big pulley mounted

on a large iron frame that is fixed on a platform that overhangs the water at one side. The platform is usually built with stone, sometimes covered with brick and mortar. This platform is located on the high end of the well's wall (usually built up with the excavated earth). It is also located over the deepest point of the well to ensure water is always available to the bokkena. Jumping off the platform or the iron frame is both the safest in terms of depth, and also a mark of the diver's courage since it is from a great height. This mechanism was replaced by the diesel engine pump.

Ooru Jeruvu: village tanks

The relatively dry areas of what are today northern Karnataka and south-western Andhra Pradesh were irrigated through a series of upper-riparian tanks, sometimes linked through canals, that were built during the Vijayanagara period (1346–1550s) and maintained through the period of Kutub Shahi and Asaf Jahi (1550s–1947) rule in these areas that were part of the pre-independence Hyderabad state. These tanks are rain-fed (as against the older lower-riparian tanks in the river deltas) and made possible the opening up of dry and primarily pastoral areas for agriculture. Nineteenth century British surveys document a very large number of these tanks spread over the entire region. Some of them were large enough to irrigate thousands of acres. When maintained properly, these tanks were perennial and enabled the cultivation of cash crops such as cotton and indigo. In the areas that lay below the height of the tank, it was possible even to grow rice. Temples and upper

caste families generally held these irrigated lands while the lower castes cultivated rain-fed lands. Tanks were a centre of village life. Without adequate maintenance many of these tanks dried or silted up in the latter part of the twentieth century (older people in the village remember them in their prime).

Irrigation and water resources are key issues in the current (2009–) movement for a separate Telangana state. Their argument is that when the new dams that were built in the coastal Andhra area, not only were Telangana water resources diverted, this extensive irrigation system was laid waste.

CASTES/JAATI TERMS

Dalits/untouchables/OECs

Mala: untouchable village servants and agricultural labourers; they are a group of castes.

Netakaanollu are a mala caste of weavers. Begari are a mala caste who work in graveyards and cremation grounds.

Madiga: again a group of castes, untouchable agricultural labourers, leather workers; in these stories also musicians, dancers, performers. Chindu is a madiga caste. They are the keepers of caste history and bagotam performers. Dakkali is another madiga caste.

Sabbanda: artisanal castes, also agricultural labourers; not untouchable; sometimes referred to as sudrollu (sudra). Described in administrative schedules as Backward Classes (BCs) or Other Backward Classes (OBC), these include:

Golla: shepherd

Mangali: barber

Chakali: washerperson

Dudekala: a sabbanda caste of Telugu-speaking cotton cleaners who are Muslim

Gaundla/gauda/eediga: toddy-tapper

Balija: a land-owning caste; today often teachers

Besta: fisher people

Kummarai: potter

Kammari: blacksmith

Mudiraju/mutrasi: fruit and vegetable sellers

Salé/padmasalé: weavers

Mandahechu and gangireddhulollu: sudra/OBC

Panipatalollu: literally 'working-singing people'; refers to sabbanda and mala-madiga together

Upper/dominant castes

Brahman: priests, landowners; today bureaucrats and professionals

Kshatriya: a ruling group/caste

Komati: trading and business caste

Reddy, kamma, velama, kapu: dominant farming castes

Erpula, Jogini, Matangi, Yesa, Bairdla

Traditionally the *erpula* (soothsayer) was a woman from the *bairdla* caste. The *bairdla* are the priests of the untouchable castes, usually very few in number—maybe one family in a village. Among the upper castes, the *erpula*

woman is seen as a kind of prostitute, but among the subaltern castes she is seen as a priestess—a contradiction. In rural temples and in the temples of goddesses (Mahankalamma in Secunderabad, for example) the *erpula* woman is an oracle and a highly respected figure. In the temples of male gods, and in pilgrimage centres—Tirupati, Yadagirigutta, etc—there is no ritual function for the *erpula* woman. She is only "god's wife".

Technically speaking, *matangi* is the generic name for a madiga woman. A *jogini* is a woman who is dedicated to temple service from the madiga caste. *Jannah*, *erpula* and *yesa* are regional variations of the term *jogini* and refer to a lower caste woman who is declared as the (sexual) property of the whole village. *Jogini* are usually from the *bairdla* caste.

All *matangi* are not *jogini*—some are forced to become *jogini* in the particular situation of non-availability of *erpula* from the *bairdla* caste. Over time, this process of leaving women to the temple (like goats, sheep, etc.) has become a culturally accepted practice not only for the madiga, but also the BCs ('Backward Classes') or sabbanda castes. In such cases, especially when the 'donation' is made to pilgrimage centres devoted to male gods, the *jogini*, in the absence of any specific ritual function, respectability, and economic sustenance, may become a prostitute.

Diminutives—affectionate and insulting

Ra/Orey/Osey: Though these forms of address are acceptable in intimate and affectionate relationships, they are insulting when used in other contexts, and more so when addressing an older person. The suffixes *-vaadu*, *-odu* and *-adi*, which take different inflections in different

words—for instance chinduloda, dakkaloda—are also demeaning. Upper castes routinely use these forms to address mala-madiga people. They also demean and show contempt through the use of ‘half-names’ such as Elli (for Ellamma in “Ellamma is Troubled”), Antiga (for Antappa in “Baindla Woman”), Baliga (for Balappa in “A Raw Wound”) and so on. Even high-caste children would address a dalit elder by his/her name in diminutive, quite like a white youth would address a black elder as ‘boy’ during the days of slavery in the United States. However, when used by dalits to address fellow-dalits, the same diminutive would be a sign of affection, as seen in the story “Trace It!” where Pentadu, Chandrudu, Sammadu are used as endearments for Pentaiah, Chandraiah, Samaiah. Similarly a person called Muthyalaiyah can be ‘Muthyalanna’ (anna meaning elder brother) to a fellow-dalit and can even be shortened to ‘Muthyalu’, as happens in “A Beauteous Light”.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Jambavapuram: The madigas believe that Jambava existed before the earth, the sky and the waters and that he created the three gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Eshwar. The madigas are his descendants. The Jambavapuram is a collection of originary myths of the madiga. This collection is not in the form of an ‘epic’ of the Ramayana or Mahabharata type. It does not have a religious significance either—it is rather about the identity and original importance of the madiga caste. For this reason, the Jambavudu is referred to not as Jambava devudu (god) but as Jambavathatha (grandpa) or Jambavamuni (sage). The madiga cultural

identity is marked by allegiance to Jambava as the origin of humanity, i.e., the *aadi manavudu* (the first man) who emerges from the *Jambudweepam* (Jambu island). Legend has it that once the Hindu sage Vishwamitra and Jambava, sitting on two hills, entered into a debate and the former defeated Jambava through deceit.

Unlike the Ramayana, which separates humanity into different castes and communities in political and social isolation from each other, the Jambavapuram is about the association of different caste groups. In these myths, each caste is related to Jambavudu through a specific cultural genealogy, and the link is usually through leather. The recent popularization of the Jambavapuram has increased the rate of accretion of new stories that relate it to contemporary history, and in this trend a Hinduization has also been attempted. However, these initiatives have not succeeded. The dakkali retain the Jambava legend on palm-leaf manuscripts. Recently the Jambavapuram has been rendered in print by Jayadheer Tirumala Rao.

Chindu Bhagotam is a dramatic performance of a series of stories by the chindu, a sub-caste of the madiga. The chindu are primarily a performing community, a specific culture with closed family groupings that practice the Bhagotam. This performance has one story for each caste—starting with the Ellamma and Jambavapuram for the madiga, they perform Mala Chennaiah for the mala, then tales pertaining to the golla, the Pandava myth for the mudiraju, the Beerappa myth, etc. These are performed in different cheri and wada according to caste. These origin stories are owned by specific communities as markers of their identities.

OTHER WORDS

Agraharam: the brahman section of the village

Aapu: a water plant dried and used for thatch

Avva: generally grandmother; in some Telangana districts (such as Nizamabad) also mother

Bantu: a servant; sometimes can be prefixed to a person's name, as in 'Bantu' Pentappa in "Bainla Woman"

Betel leaf processing: On a fresh washed betel leaf, soft edible lime, which is generally sold in balls (sunnam kayalu), is applied and a little kasu is added. Kasu makes the mouth red. The leaf is then folded and chewed. Those who can afford it also add betel nut, cardamom, clove and coconut flakes to make it more sumptuous. When women meet during breaks from work and after their meal, they chew idem together.

Bhoodan movement: It was started by gandhian Vinoba (Vinayak Narahari) Bhave (1895–1982). Inspired by a tour of Telangana districts in 1951, Bhave invoked the gandhian notion of trusteeship and asked landowners to feel compassion for the plight of the landless and donate one-sixth of their land. Unlike serious land reform, this scheme had the government's support and yet was a failure, with invariably barren and disputed land being transferred to the landless.

Curing urn/landa: A very large clay urn that is dug into the ground. It is filled with water to which lime, tangedu bark, etc. are added, and the animal skin soaked for curing and processing. The leather is used to make dappu, footwear, bokkenna, water containers,

straps, whips and a variety of other things.

Dappu: A leather drum made and played by the madiga. The skills of madiga drummers and their powerful drums are legendary. The dappu is also played for ceremonial occasions and festivities (jatras, marriages, deaths) and during village theatrical and dance performances. Today dappu are a presence at all political meetings. Traditionally the dappu was used for village announcements (dandora) and was an instrument of communication from the rulers (kings/landlords/modern governments) to the ruled. However, with the rise of the Dandora movement (Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti, MRPS) in Andhra Pradesh in the mid-1990s, it has been transformed into a symbol of assertion and of solidarity among the various madiga castes. The message now is a return one—from them to upper castes and ruling groups.

Dora: The most powerful landlord in the village, the power centre. The dorasani is his wife. In contemporary times the dora may also be the sarpanch, the contractor, or the MLA (the intermediary between the government and the people) while his sons are engineers, doctors and lawyers. The dora, the karnam and the priest comprise upper caste power in the village.

Devuda, swamy: ways of addressing a priest; sometimes just an exclamation indicating Lord/God

Jaati: While the use of the term 'caste' may suggest an unshakeable, sanskritic hierarchy; jaati refers to many communities that may be fuzzy and not always easily

identifiable in the caste system. The term sub-caste is sometimes used. However, the madiga as a whole have criticized the use of the term. A number of castes together constitute the Scheduled Caste category, they claim.

Jatra: large, often very large, annual gatherings and festivities focused on a local deity

Jeldi: a water-related festival exclusively of the baindia, which they conduct with pots

Karnam: keeper of records of land ownership and use; uses a sort of joint handwriting illegible to others; they are brahman

Katta Mysamma: a village deity, guardian of the embankment

Kothalu: a proportion of the newly harvested grain that is customarily taken from the untouchable castes

Koora: a curry, vegetable or meat accompaniment for rotte or rice

Kunchi, kulla: A kind of head covering made with layers of old cloth. At dawn when women go out to sweep, it protects their heads from the chill; at the end of the day, it serves as a container to carry back the paddy they have earned.

Mantra-tantra: amulet, with a mantra inside it

Manyam: Lands gifted to dalits in recognition of vetti and other services performed for the village, in the pre-independence (Nizam) period; manyam lands are cultivated by rotation.

Metari: a community or jaati elder

Neeretollu: They are watermen. Traditionally belonging to the mala community, they were required to look after the tank and were given inam land as payment for this work.

Palodu, edurupalodu and avathalodu (in "But Why Shouldn't the Baindia Woman Ask for Land?"): All three groups are madiga. Palodu and edurupalodu refer to people who are closely related: they share work, and participate in family get-togethers and ceremonies. The vetti system of bonded or unpaid labour prevailed in the Deccan region. It functioned through a system of rotation. Thus in alternate years or alternate seasons, one group would have the responsibility/privilege of cultivating a piece of land, serving at the landlord's homestead, etc. Within the community, the one who holds the vetti at a particular point of time is called palodu and the one who does not is the edurupalodu. Avathalodu is also part of this vetti but the person is not so closely related and thus not part of familial activities. Vetti was abolished after independence in 1947, but continues to be practised in many places.

Pandiri: shelter constructed out of branches and leaves—like a pandal or tent

Pantulu: teachers

Patel: a generic term for an upper caste villager

Patwari: assistant to the dora

Poligoliga/poligalugani: 'May the village flourish/ May the crops be plentiful!'

Putti (of rice/paddy): A putti consists of twenty sacks

of 100 kilos each; in some areas it may be a little less; also a sack of paddy would weigh less than a sack of rice.

Rachchabanda: village square; the place where panchayats are held and where people gather to discuss village affairs

Razakars: Muslim militia in Hyderabad, headed by the powerful Kasim Razvi, before its takeover by the Union of India in 1948. In these stories, told from a dalit point of view, the term 'Razakar' refers more generally to the alliance of landlords, bureaucracy, rulers and militia that held power. This was the alliance under attack in the Telangana armed struggle of the 1940s in which rural dalits were the principal actors. The term is also often used in casual speech to denote the period before Hyderabad became part of the Indian Union.

Rotte: flat bread roasted on a griddle; usually made from a millet (jowari, ragi)

Shuddhi karma: purification rites, practised after a caste or other defilement, by the brahman

Shuddhi nilayam: enclosure where a brahman being 'purified' is kept in isolation

Tataki: In the Hindu epic, Ramayana, Tataki is a rakshasi (demon) and Rama kills her on the pretext that she is disrupting the rituals of the sages. But dalits argue that she was a dalit and an original inhabitant of the forestlands which were occupied by the upper castes. Even Valmiki seems to have mentioned that she had the power of one thousand elephants and took care of the forests. Since she fought against the upper

caste occupation of the forestlands and their plunder, she was branded a rakshasi.

Thatha: grandfather; often also used to address a respected elder

Thunga: There are two types of thunga-grass: one that grows in the tanks and streams, which is a thick variety that grows tall and is not eaten by cattle; and the other that grows in fields, which is soft and which cattle do eat. Both types are referred to in the stories.

Vetti: Forced labour—in pre-independence Telangana, the panipatala castes were forced to give such regular and free labour. In 'return' they were allowed to cultivate small inam or manyam lands, to be rotated among themselves.

Wada, keri, gudem: area outside the village (ooru) in which madiga, mala and other untouchables live; while the term 'wada' has been standardized through the new dalit literature, in regions bordering Karnataka the term 'keri' is used. 'Gudem' is used in the areas bordering coastal Andhra and in general for tribal settlements.

GAMES

Gilli-danda: A game that requires two sticks and an open ground. The gilli is the shorter stick tapered at both ends, and the danda is the longer stick with which the gilli, placed in a spindle-shaped hole in the ground, is hit. When the gilli is caught in mid-flight, the striker is considered 'out'. The game can be played with two players or more, and the rules are flexible.

Chedugudu or kabaddi: A popular sport that has now

gone international, chedugudu involves two teams of seven members, each occupying two equal halves of a rectangular field. A 'raider' from each team makes a foray into the opponent's side, holds her breath while keeping up a chant of 'kabaddi, kabaddi', and aims to 'touch' or 'tag' as many of the opponents as possible and reach back the field's midpoint. Each tag counts for a point. If the 'raider' is overpowered by the opponents, she is considered 'out' and the opponent scores. Being a contact sport that underscores the importance of touching and physically wrestling with other persons, the game has implications for castes that considered themselves 'pure' and resent the touch of others. In Tamil, chedugudu is called sadugudu.

A Note on the Translation

These stories are written in a variant of Telugu used by dalits in the Tandur region of western Telangana. Academic and official Telugu is sanskritized and has an upper caste, Andhra slant. The placing of the Tandur variant on the written page involves considerable artistry and not a little technical effort since it involves open battles and subtler skirmishes with the history of the standardization of official Telugu, its grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and even punctuation. Shyamala speaks constantly of her delight in 'remembering' a word, a phrase, a tone, a linguistic pun or joke.

The historical hub that enables this linguistic intervention is the coming together of (i) the Madiga Dandora in the mid-1990s with the demand for categorization of the Scheduled Castes for more equitable

access to reservation in education and employment; (ii) the movement for a separate state (whose most recent phase begins in 2009) in which the cultural domination of Telangana by Andhra is a key issue; (iii) the growth of the dalit movement in the 1990s, and of course, earlier (iv) feminist and (v) naxalite movements in these areas.

Each of these contributes to, and is in turn serviced by, the aesthetic of these stories, and the author's journey of self-discovery is also the refurbishing of a world and a community for this new moment. Educated readers of Telugu are baffled and exasperated by the strangeness of Shyamala's language even as they are charmed by its freshness, its vitality, and the laughs that appear where no one thought there would be one. The author's enjoyment—in the rehabilitation of her mother tongue, her caste, and her world as lived place—is only too evident. It may not be so obvious that this return involves critical engagement with reformist, gandhian, administrative—developmental, and even ambedkarian representations of the village—in brief with the history of the twentieth century.

Creating (or finding) a variant of English¹ that would not just mimic the strangeness that an educated reader of Telugu experiences, but actually carry the multiple charge

¹ All caste/jaati terms have been lower-cased in these stories; italics have not been used for Telugu words. For Telugu words that appear in the plural, an 's' is not added—this would amount to treating a Telugu word as an English word. So madiga could be both singular and plural depending on context, unless on occasion the Telugu plural is used, such as chindollu for chindu.

of the original, was a challenge that translation is not yet ready for. That is a loss. However, these translations have tried to maintain an alertness to the cultural politics of these stories. By translating the stories into a form of standard English, the translators have looked past the educated Telugu reader's estrangement, endorsed the author's pleasure in the reclamation of her tongue, and accorded the Tandur variant the status and dignity of a full-fledged language. That is a gain.



Lines that Cut to the Very Gut

K. Lalita

Gogu Shyamala's stories are a treasure-house of knowledge, skills, music and aesthetics of dalit life that are invisible to the rest of society. Stories such as these can come only from a life lived in a dalit world. They provide a window for us to peep in, to grasp, to understand, to digest and sort out. They leave us in awe, amazement, happiness and pain—all at once. The images and imagery come from the author's lived experiences that are in tension with the 'universal', with rich descriptions of skills that range from producing everyday needs to effortless ways of forgetting hunger. These stories do not have an explicit political purpose; they weave lives and small pleasures together with everyday work, life, relationships, food, play, music and culture. Here the individual has an organic connection with her family and community.

Shyamala's way of telling a story is refreshingly different. Dealing with children growing up in often hostile worlds, her stories are like the tiny, beautiful, multi-coloured wild flowers she reminisces about from her childhood. They have the freshness and fragrance of the wet earth after the first showers. They are earthy, sensual. They redefine body and beauty; sadness and happiness; work and leisure; merit and pride. Her stories are crafted such that they do not fit within any proclaimed ideological frame. The narratives point to new directions that signify the political without being pedagogic.

Her first story "Enuganta Tandri Kanna Ekula Buttanta Talli Nayam" (translated in this volume as *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*), published in 2002 in *Bhumika*, a monthly journal, was much appreciated by her readers for its feminist sensibility. The story—revolving around her mother, father and grandmother—helps Shyamala give full play to her experiences as a child: it opens with an idyll and ends in a scene of domestic violence. Shyamala was later amused when she saw a critic's comment that the conclusion highlighted a dalit woman's oppression. She felt it was completely unintentional and she did not mean to show her father in poor light.

Often, classics in short story writing, from both Indian and world literature, are products of the authors' cerebral worlds. Even when there is an attempt to recreate the physical and emotional worlds of the marginalized sections, they often remain interpretations. The themes in Shyamala's stories are varied, drawn from the worlds dalit communities inhabit, imbued with the flesh and

blood of dalit lives and culture. Shyamala's stories seem to inaugurate a new genre of "little stories" that speak of, in feminist scholar Susie Tharu's words, the "world of the little, subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions".

These stories—filled with nuanced descriptions of livestock and wild animals, crops, food, rituals—completely change our understanding of rural ecology and environment. We have one story where the village tank is the narrator, and she laments: "They dig bore-wells, cutting into my womb." Shyamala's stories also challenge notions that mainstream society holds dear. Ideas like 'merit', 'hard work' and 'self-respect' are turned upside down. The children, men and women Shyamala brings alive in her fiction are strong and persevering, yet vulnerable.

The stories propose a way of life that has a great deal of humour while forcing open the worlds we never see otherwise—the world of dalit customs, everyday life, traditions and rituals. We also see in a story like "Trace It!" ("Jaada" in Telugu), how music is an intrinsic part of dalit life; how 'song and work' (*pani-paata*) coexist for the labouring castes. Shyamala believes that the language she had known as a child, though some part of it has disappeared now, is the only way to recreate the worlds her memories inhabit. This is the language her elders spoke. This is the language that reflects a way of life—a life of work centred on agriculture, livestock, and lakes; a life where hunger lurks in every corner. Shyamala's Telugu showcases some of the terms, concepts and words that were once in use; a language that might be

facing extinction. This recalls Marathi dalit writer Arun Kamble's anguish in the poem "Which Language should I Speak",¹ where the grandfather hollers:

'You whore-son, talk like we do!
Talk, I tell you!'
Picking through the Vedas
his top-knot well-oiled with ghee
my Brahmin teacher tells me
'You idiot, use the language correctly!'
Now I ask you,
Which language should I speak?

For Shyamala, her stories are not just about memories of her childhood—she needs to visualize that world, and grab it from the deep recesses of her mind. Phrases she uses such as *deemana goyyalole urkutundru* (in "Father May Be...") referring to children darting around like dragonflies that signify speed and alertness; *sabbanda kulalu*, (in "Jambava's Lineage") referring to the productive castes (such as dalit and Other Backward Classes); *takanadaalante* (in "Madiga Badeyya") to collide with or confront the upper castes—are expressions even readers of standard Telugu would not be familiar with. The narrative, its idiom, theme and characters are rendered in a special language. As explained in the note on the translation, she uses a variant of Telugu used by dalits in the Tandur region of western Telangana. For instance, *paska tokkocchindi* is an expression used for walking on wild grass as opposed to walking on well laid

¹ Translated by Priya Adarkar. See *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Literature*, Ed. Arjun Dangle (Orient Longman, Hyderabad: 1992), 54.

out roads in the city. Similar expressions open up a whole world of difference between rural and urban life; they gently point to the privileges urban folk take for granted, compared to the life of the rural poor. This is the idiom she chronicles as a writer, capturing along with it a world that seems to be fading away—the tanks, the commons, the crops, flowers, fruits, plants, vegetables, greens, work implements, and the songs and games children played. What is notable is she does this without nostalgia—for the rural world of western Telangana, like perhaps any other part of India, is also brutal to dalits. Shyamala says she has been able to capture this idiom only with her dalit and feminist consciousness and not because of her earlier involvement with Left class politics.

While Shyamala's stories are not overtly didactic, we are coaxed into learning lessons from them. Work is not a painful thing, but a life-defining activity. Drought leads to worry and depression. Rains are important for mental health (not just for agriculture). Everyone has an important and special place in the family. Affection for children and getting them involved in productive labour are two sides of the same coin. In the universe Shyamala recreates, children are never given stale food. Think of endless discussions about government programmes for food security failing to provide a normal, decent, cooked meal to children in government schools!

Despite the fact that Gogu Shyamala has been writing for less than a decade her contributions have been significant. In 2003, she edited an anthology of dalit women's writings called *Nallappoddu: Dalitha Sthreeela Sahityam 1921–2002* (Black Dawn: Dalit

Women's Writings, 1921–2002). This was followed by *Nallaregatisallu: Madiga Madiga Upakulala Aadolla Kathalu* (Furrows in Black Soil: The Stories of Madiga and Madiga Subcaste Women) in 2006. Two of her stories—"Braveheart Badeyya", "Tataki Wins Again"—appeared in *Different Tales* (2008), an Anveshi project that featured stories from the lives of children who rarely find place in mainstream children's literature. In 2011, she published a biography of one of Telangana's leading dalit politicians, T.N. Sadalakshmi (*Nene Balaanni, T.N. Sadalakshmi Bathuku Katha*), based on a series of interviews with her (forthcoming from Navayana in 2012 as *The Last Place for a Dalit Woman: The Life of T.N. Sadalakshmi*, translated by Gita Ramaswamy).

Born in 1969 in Peddamul in Rangareddy district, Andhra Pradesh, Shyamala's childhood appears to be like that of any other dalit girl's, save for her family's decision to send her to a school away from her village. Her family realized that she did not have the physical strength to work in the fields. In Shyamala's words, "I was a weak child—having no strength required for hard labour and I couldn't work like other children." Her brother was a bonded labourer with a rich farmer's family, and her father was a daily-wage labourer. Her mother worked as an agricultural labourer and took care of home as well. Shyamala says they wanted to educate her so that she would have a restful life. She was admitted in a social welfare residential school.

Shyamala studied till intermediate (Class 12) and discontinued as she was drawn to various democratic movements such as the Marxist-Leninist movement, the

women's movement and the dalit movement with specific involvement in the Madiga Dandora movement (which demanded the subdivision of the benefits of reservation within Scheduled Caste communities in Andhra Pradesh). She returned to her studies much later, acquiring a law degree in 2006. Currently the coordinator of the dalit initiative at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad, Shyamala continues to be active in the Telangana struggle for separate statehood making a significant contribution as an activist and as a writer. Her political presence in all these struggles has contributed in raising newer challenges and questions for identity politics.