

# Bleak As Bleak Can Be

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## SORAJJEM

By Akkineni Kutumbarao. Translated from the original Telugu by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar  
Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 107, ₹295.00

A tale of unrelieved misery and despair where one atrocity merges into the next without any let up. A tale of utmost human suffering, of the unspeakable horrors that human beings wreak on their fellow human beings. The tale of a Dalit community in Andhra some seventy years ago.

It is the tale of Sorajjem (meaning independence) who was born on 15 August 1947. But she is no Midnight's child with their magic and might. Rather, she is an unfortunate born to the lowest rung of people in the Indian caste system; a Dalit, a Mala, belonging to Malapalli, somewhere in Andhra, where historically, the caste system was among the most rigid. The novel deals with the first sixteen years of the girl's life—and what a life it is for all the wrong reasons!

Sorajjem is the daughter of Yenkadu and Paddalu, both landless labourers. She has a much older brother, Tirapati, who is the senior *paleru* or general dogsbody to a Kamma landlord or *dora* as they were referred to.

Yenkadu and Paddalu accept their fate as their karma, and stoically continue to toil for their landlords under abysmal conditions. 'Even a corpse has to go to work', Yenkadu curses (p. 8). Not so Tirapati who chafes at his bondage and tries to overthrow the yoke that ties him and the other youths of his community to their desperate lot. Tirapati's ideas are alien to his parents and the older generation of Dalits. He is the head of a small coterie of reform minded young men who begin to question, to a degree, the actions and orders of the landlords. They do not take the injustice meted to them lying down. But, this continued resistance leads to inevitable tragedy in the society where might is the only right and right counts for less than nothing. Tirapati and two of his friends are murdered.

In this uncaring society Sorajjem grows up, first as a dung picker, then as a day labourer and so on. With her hopes of even a nominal schooling dashed, she, as per tradition, reconciles to her fate, working in slave-



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like conditions as a maid in some upper caste houses till she is sixteen when her looks attract the attention of a *dora*. She, who has already paid the price for being a lower caste, now stands the risk of paying the price for being a woman. A Dalit and a woman! But her mother, unable to bear the thought of the degradation that awaits her daughter, sends her away, perhaps never to see her again!

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A tragic heartrending tale, set some seventy years ago. But while it is tragic, there is nothing new in it. What is surprising is that the author, Akkineni Kutumbarao, is not a Dalit, but has succeeded in objectively capturing the lives of the Malas and other Dalits. Unremitting disasters, hopelessness, despair—all these and some more are described as they are and the author scores by not offering any overt opinion. He is telling a story and if the story is as bleak as can be, so be it. He is telling a story, the story of the downtrodden which, though in a specific area, at a specific time, becomes the story of the downtrodden in all of India. It loses its specific time and place and becomes timeless in its relevance. These events could have occurred anywhere in India or in any country where society is unequal. The timelessness of the narrative leads to its significance.

The English translation by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar tells the story faithfully and holds the interest of the reader. But, it is rather uneven. There are some effective descriptions that need no elaboration like:

By the time Yenkadu came near the hut, the pigs that were circumambulating the hut scattered and stood by the side. The environment was filled with the stench of pig faeces—a peculiar stench of filth—large, large flies, huge, huge mosquitoes, swarming on tiny, tiny muddy pot-holes... (p. 6).

Or the description of Sorajjem as a toddler,

... Sorajjem was walking about freely in the bazaars, with her head resembling a palm fruit nibbled by squirrels, an aluminum coin covering her privates without even a piece of cloth on her body (p. 21).

But, the narrative has a jerky quality about it. Too many swear words in every page. Curses like 'You mother...', bitch, whore, ... and many more. Not knowing the original, it is difficult to review objectively. But, as the translation is the work to be reviewed, it is fair to say that the translators should have used a freer flowing style, which would have been much less distracting. What is suitable to the original language may sound awkward in translation. Also, there are too many footnotes, some of them refining on the meaning of words in the text. This again is intrusive, and one does not know who the target audience is. The cover design by Annapoorna Sitaram and Shrabani Dasgupta is effective. A young girl, hand on her forehead stares—into her future?

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