

**GENDER, RELIGION AND LITERATURE:  
A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FEW TELUGU WOMEN POETS  
OF EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

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**Abstract**

*India, for it being a hospitable soil for many languages, literatures, religions and cultures make allowances and compromises of multitudes, in Indian way, to achieve the triumph of glorious transformation of the society. The Indian image of Literature, Religion and History prompts for the resurgence of human spirit, in association with language and its culture. It intends to provide a sense of security to individual as well as community. This sense of security in turn helps to generate the possession of socially accepted behavior, values, faith and unity among the community. Hence society can understand the wider range of the vision of our seers, prophets and poets, their thoughts and their writings. Unfortunately in Indian society, the social status of women had been inferior and they felt neglected, it is no wonder that women writers had not outwardly expressed themselves. However, even in such adverse circumstances, we hear some names of women here and there in Indian Literature, since Vedic period. Women poets like Ghosa, Saswathi, Romasa, Lopamudra, Apala, Viswavara, Gargi, Sulabha, and Mythreyi are a few among them. Indian literature by women, though it was struck with the limitations of varied kind in each period, had never given up on its creativity. Moreover, it challenged the changing times and made its presence felt throughout. Women seem to have also in their writings captured their overriding emotions with consciousness and sensibility, compelled with their experiences, their cultural ethos, caste and creed which they had inhabited. The present paper is going to project the panoramic view of some Telugu women poets of early twentieth century and their unheeded contribution to the Telugu literary corpus.*

**Keywords:-** panoramic view, community, Ghosa, Saswathi, Romasa, Lopamudra ....

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Unfortunately in Indian society, though it is hard to accept, the social status of women had been inferior and they felt neglected. It is no wonder in such adverse circumstances women writers had not outwardly expressed themselves. However, we hear some names of women writers, here and there in Indian Literature, since Vedic period. Women poets like Ghosa, Saswathi, Romasa, Lopamudra, Apala, Viswavara, Gargi, Sulabha, and Mythreyi are a few among them.

Indian literature by women, though it was struck with the limitations of varied kind in each period, had never given up on its creativity. Moreover, it challenged the changing times and made its presence felt throughout. Women seem to have, also in their writings, captured their overriding emotions with consciousness and sensibility, compelled with their experiences, their cultural ethos, caste and creed which they had inhabited.

The book, *Indian Poetess: From Vedic to Modern Times* made an attempt to bring representative "Indian poetesses" who belong to different ages (literary periods) and whose work is difficult of access (Margaret v). The book also represented women's work in different vernaculars with varied themes and poetic value; taking selected poems from Buddhist poetesses, from Vedic Sanskrit, from the mediaeval period (which is

known for its religious poetry) of the bhakti school up to the poetesses who wrote in English including the works of Aru Dutt, Toru Dutt, Ellen Goreh and Sarojini Naidu (Margaret 27). The book, with its English translations, gives a panoramic view of poetry; by Indian women poets over the centuries. Here is a stanza of an English translation of the Vedic poet Ghosha:

### A Prayer to the Aswins

I call to you, O Aswins, listen to my cry,  
And give your help to me as parents to a son;  
Friendless am I, bereft of relative, and poor,  
Save me, O save me from the curse which rests on me. (Margaret 29)

The poem talk about the poet's seeking boons by invoking gods like Aswini. It is a traditional song of prayer to the gods.

Many of the Vedic songs / hymns reinforce women's involvement in their lives. To put it precisely, Indian literature by women, though it was struck with the limitations of varied kind in each period, had never given up on its creativity. Moreover, it challenged the changing times and made its presence felt throughout. Women seem to have, also in their writings, captured their overriding emotions with consciousness and sensibility, compelled with their experiences, their cultural ethos, caste and creed which they had inhabited.

Though a few names of women and their creativity bring some strength to the above argument, there are instances where women were allowed very little to voice. The woman's social position as a subordinate/subaltern did not allow her to open her mouth before her social superiors. Hence her literary contribution remained unheeded. The story of Apala who contributed to Vedic hymns shows how she "was rejected by her husband, because she had a disfiguring skin Disease" (de Souza 1).

The stories of the religious poets of the bhakti school of the mediaeval period, reveal us the pathetic familial conditions and social situations they had encountered to reach their goal of divinity. The life stories of Akka Maha Devi, Meerabai and many more tell us of their persistent struggle to be relieved from familial bondages, which sometimes went to the extent of their death. In Telugu literature too we observe the similar struggle some lives and the insults and threats, as in the case of religious poets like, poet Molla of 16<sup>th</sup> c., Tarigonda Vengamamba and many more of such. The biographical

sketches of Athukuru Molla and Tarigonda Vengamamba, who were child widows, show the miserable social conditions in which they lived and how they had to fight with the society they lived in and with the families they belonged to (Rao, A.S.)

Though in India poetry by women, was observed since centuries, written on both religious and secular themes, very little of it got recognized and acknowledged (de Souza ). Even standard books of Indian literary history could document very little.

Eunice de Souza says: "Some of it has been almost entirely forgotten. Even standard histories of Indian writing [...] club a number of women together in one chapter, often mentioning some of them only in passing reference (de Souza xiii).

The rift experienced by many of these women poets in the male dominated society, still could articulate their inner voice and rendered it in the form of literature. Their articulation itself is a kind of protest.

The protest, whatever little there was made by the early modern women writers, is due to their century's long suppression, gender discrimination and their forced submission to the illogical, social and moral taboos that prevailed in the then society. In spite of facing such struggles, women could explore their glorious creative worlds and made their presence felt. Geraldine Forbes in her *Woman in Modern India* discusses in detail the social status of women in India:

Historically, women experienced [...] rules and prescriptions differently depending on their religion, caste, class, age and their place in the family hierarchy. There were women who lived up to the ideal of womanhood but there were also women who rebelled against these prescriptions (Forbes 19).

Despite the influences of such complex combination of customs, religious norms, patriarchy and women's subalternity, women writers happened to take lead in some genres as pioneers.

Bhandaru Achamamba was the first Telugu woman to write a biography of women achievers across the country titled *Abala Satcharitra Mala*. It is said that she was the first Telugu writer to have written the Telugu short story, a new literary genre in the Telugu literary field

Early Twentieth century of India has witnessed many social changes especially in the period between 1900 and 1950. One among such changes was the advent of English language . New educational reforms, received attention with the Charter Act of 1813

with the release of some funds by the British Government to encourage and spread education in India.

The acquisition of English language and their awareness of higher education brought in a radical transformation in women. This new learning gave them a new insight. It further roused a political consciousness and created an urge in them to take an active part in India's struggle for freedom. Thus, for the Indians, the new education had resulted in a new awakening.

However, Indian society had different views on women's education. Only very few girls from the elite families could avail the opportunity of getting English education despite objections from the then society and community. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), and gifted writers of Indian English, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu are a few names which come under such privilege.

These "new learned women," with their dynamic process of communication in English, voiced their feelings on political, economic and social conditions of the country in their writings. There was a visible growth of women writers in various Indian languages too around this time. They were eager to know more about women related issues taking place across India and outside. Women's journals made a lot of contribution in the production of a large corpus of women's writing during this period. In the Telugu language, there were magazines like *Gruhalakshmi*, *Anasuya*, *Hindusundari*, to mention a just few titles, meant exclusively for women. Many of these magazines played a major role during this period and placed hundreds of women writers on the literary front. There were a few magazines in Telugu, which were exclusively run by women editors and very successfully too. The list of women's journals includes:

*Andhra Lakshmi* edited by Kallepalli Venkata Ramanamma,

*Hindusundari* edited by Balantrapu Seshamma,

*Savitri* edited by Pulugurtha Lakshmi Narasamamba

*Anasuya* edited by Vinjamuri Venkatarathnamma.

Many Telugu writers like Bhandaru Achamamba, Kanuparthi Varalakshamma, Utukuri Lakshmi kanthamma, Gudipudi Indumati, Desiraju Bharatidevi, Tallapragada Viswasundaramma, and women freedom fighters and social activists like Durgabai Deshmukh, Kandukuri Rajya Lakshmi (wife of reformist Veeresalingam), and Maganti Annapurna Devi became active participants in such a socially vibrant background and

extended their contribution in many ways in addressing the contemporary women's issues.

The participation or role played by women in the nationalist struggle was not a simple story to be narrated as their involvement in the struggle had indeed helped in shaping a definite view regarding their mission. Starting from the time of Bakim Chandra Chatopadhyaya's "Bande Mataram" movement to Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi movement and the boycotting of foreign goods, women had been asked to take on public roles and they had indeed contributed to the nationalist movement.

Gandhi's contribution to women's status in India is unforgettable. His civil disobedience campaign brought a large number of women into public life during 1930-32. In fact Gandhi was the person, because of whom women actively participated in the freedom movements like Satyagraha movement, the Non-cooperation movement, Khadi movement, the Civil Disobedience etc. It was historically a landmark period, says K. Janaki, the writer of the book, *Role of Women in Freedom Struggle in Andhra Pradesh* when "for the first time in the history of India and that of the world that women were given great importance in the political movement" (Janaki 34).

Women of India, who had been involved in the activities of nation building and who had experienced the struggle and pain also recorded their heartfelt feelings and urges in the form of their writings. There is a lot of literature produced during this time by women writers and it brought into existence new literary genres. The advent of English language in India gave scope to some of these liberated minds. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu would stand among the first Indian English women poets and at the regional level, in Telugu, Bhandaru Achamamba is to be recognized for her being the first short story writer. She may be considered the first woman historian in writing women's literary history, titled *AbalaSacharitraRatnamalain* 1901.

Bhandaru Achamamba story, "Dhanatrayodasi" published in *Hindusundari* in 1903 is recognized as the first short story in Telugu literature. Till then there was no genre like short story in Telugu.

It is a laborious task to collect and rebuild women's literary history to know and understand the spirit and vitality of their consciousness which was newly felt by them in the early part of the twentieth century. During this period, a lot of discussion happened on the importance of women's education. Many articles were written and published by versatile women writers in various magazines of the period, which were run for women and some by women themselves. Many articles were written by women

in the magazines, *Telugu Zanana*, *Hindusundari* etc. The articles discussed topics related not only to women's education but also on the status of Hindu widows, parental care and responsibility of girls. Bhandaru Achamamba wrote a book titled *Abala Saccharitha Rathnamaala* (1901) which assumes special significance in this context as it introduces women, who have contributed richly to the knowledge and culture of the nation, by way of biographical sketches. These include some significant women from across the country such as Krupabai Sathianathan, Toru Dutt etc.

Utukuru Lakshmikanthamma a great scholar, had contributed a lot to the pool of Telugu literature and did literary service for around sixty to sixty-five years. Apart from writing poetry both in Telugu and Sanskrit Languages, rendered great service to the society. She was a woman socialist, a brave woman and an activist, in the Indian independence movement. Like Sarojini Naidu she was also a great orator and woman of letters.

Lakshmikanthamma also compiled another book on Indian Women writers titled *Akhila Bharata Rachayitrulu...* In *Andhra Kavayitrulu*, Lakshmikanthamma, recorded the contribution of Telugu poets, starting from the poets Chanamma and Prolamma (probably belonging to the 13th century) who were related to the family of Tikkana, who was one of the translators of the great epic, Mahabharata into Telugu language. When it comes to the literature produced during 1900-1950, a long and vigorous "new flow" is observed in Indian languages other than English. However, very little of this has been available until recently. Considerable research work on women's studies focusses on the early women poets has been done and it has in the more recent times unearthed and made available their work.

It was a pleasant surprise to see some of the Dalit women poets, who were found writing since 1890 thanks to the painstaking work undertaken by Gogu Syamala. Really, it is a remarkable thing to struggle and succeed in a society of deep social and class conflicts. The question of recognition and of acknowledging Dalit women poets by literary historians is a slow process.

As Telugu had a great tradition of women's writing, a considerable number of women writers starting almost from fifteenth century, had been observed beginning from Tallapaka Timmakka (probably belonging to the 15th century, for it was said that as Annamacharya, her husband lived between 1424 and 1503), Atukuri Molla, Rangajamma, Muddupalani, Madina Subhadamma and Tarigonda Vengamamba (mid-19th century) etc., contributed to its variety and richness. However after Tarigonda

Vengamamba, “there was no women literary production almost for half a century” says Utukuri Lakshmikanthamma in her *Andhra Kavayitru*(101).

But when it comes to the twentieth century it may be observed that the number of poets has multiplied. It is a period accompanied by social, political and economic changes and of reform movements that contributed to the upliftment of women by providing them formal education and other social benefits.

It is from the perspective of contemporary movements that women’s wishes, hopes, desires, emotions, encounters, failures and successes are to be studied. To know their passions, inclinations and intended expectations, literature is the only source (Vidmahe iii). In this regard, at the regional level, the role played by social reformists like Kandukuri Veeresalingam and others cannot be ignored.

The evil social practices that prevailed at the national level were equally experienced by the women of Andhra. Child marriages, *Sati*, enforced widowhood, *devadasi* system, dowry system are a few among them. To bring about a change in the status of Telugu women, the reformists and many social organizations made their effort. They have succeeded in their attempts by providing women with an awareness of their situation, especially through education. Some magazines and periodicals promoted the cause of women’s education. The efforts of the first feminist writer of Telugu, Bhandaru Achamamba (1874-1904) must be remembered in this context for her initiation of programmes for the social uplift of women and for her passion towards women’s education.

Indian women poets, particularly the themes of their writings, reflect in many ways the inner and outer spheres of their lives. Although the emancipation of women in India has always seemed to be limited, women projected their selves and identities through their literary talent. A study of these themes reveals the poets’ response to as well as their protest against the problems that prevailed in the society. It focuses on the poets’ response from woman’s point of view. It tries to see how they have faced the problem as women and as individuals.

Indian women poets both at pan Indian and regional levels owe a lot to Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals. These have mainly influenced middle class women. Many of these families came forward, allowing their women to receive education by attending schools and colleges. Male reformers like Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Gurajada Appa Rao, Chilakamarthi Lakshmi Narasimham and Raghupathi Venkataratnam Naidu along with many women activists like Bhandaru Achamamba, Kandukuri Rajyalakshmi, Kanuparthi

Varalakshamma, promoted women's education and sought to provide sound social status for women.

As though these women poets were paying a tribute to their mentors, the poets have produced a large corpus of literature on Gandhi and other leaders. The impact of Gandhi on women all over India has made them record their unforgettable moments which occupy the foremost place in literature.

We come across a theme of describing "wounded soldiers" in the work of the Telugu Poet, Oleti Nithyakalyanamma in her poem, "Swatanthrya Lakshmi." In this poem the poet describes the women volunteers who took part in the Freedom movement and who were beaten ruthlessly by the British police. The lady volunteers' bodies were beaten till their skin was torn by the police lathi:

Long soft hair was loosened, scattered and  
Spread up to knees  
The fair tender hands lost their bangles  
The whole body oozing blood  
By bearing the punishment  
Given by the police lathi...

Still, the women bore such painful and tortuous punishment to attain freedom for their mother land. This poem reveals the brave deeds of women during the Indian independence movement.

Poet Tallapragada Viswasundaramma wrote many poems related to the real struggle waged by women during their imprisonment. Poems like "The Lathi's Rule" (*LatiRajyamu*), "In the Women's Cell" (*Streela Cherasalalo*), "The Tower Clock in the Prison," (*Jailu Gadiyaaramu*), are a few on the theme of freedom struggle.

In the poem, the "In the Women's Cell" (*Streela Cherasalalo*), she displays the pathetic situation of women prisoners. This poem gives the real picture of freedom fighters during their stay in the prison. They were tortured, ill-treated and humiliated by wardens and matrons who resemble the rakshasas, the devils. She laments more for the "C" class prisoners who were tortured and more humiliated. This poem shows the poet's sympathy for her fellow women prisoners. Her poems on Sarojini Naidu, Gandhi and prohibition show her awareness of the social problems and issues:

When the tough guys of wardens are implementing  
Strict instructions, to keep us in discipline,  
We dwell without fear  
Though the rigorous imprisonment reminds us of the  
Mythological place Lankapuram,  
we remained there fearless,  
Not weak, but tremendous strength  
To bring independence to our country.  
Hence can break the chains of slavery  
To bring independence to our country.

The poem gives a mirror image of the then society where people indulged in activities which could bring freedom to the country.

Many poets proved themselves by writing poems on social problems which demonstrate their awareness of the problems in society of their time. They have responded to contemporary issues like the Sharada act, prohibition, women's education, women and their sense of belongingness, untouchability, widow hood etc. Madina Subhadramma, an early nineteenth century Telugu woman poet, seems to have responded to one such theme. Her poem "Why Women had to Lead Miserable Lives?" (*Heenamai Yunna Brathukela Maninulaku?*), is based on the pathetic and pitiable life led by widows during her period. She could succeed in portraying the society and the social status of women in her poem:

It is better for her to commit suicide  
than to be hurt and be humiliated by their sarcastic words.  
Why should women be humiliated  
And lead miserable lives?

The poem shows a woman's life in her desolate condition. The poem talks about the lady, leading the life of a single parent amidst poverty, with the responsibility of children, nurturing them without anybody's support, with friends behaving like enemies, with begging also not fetching much, and with God not being merciful to her. She laments why women should continue to lead such a miserable life.

Tallapragada Viswasundaramma wrote a poem, "**Widow's Agony**" (*Vithanthu Vilapamu*). The poet displays the drudgery of widowhood. She, being a child widow,

could express the pain even more effectively. The whole poem narrates the condition of the widow and her agony at not being accepted in social and family gatherings and functions.

We cannot decorate our hair with flowers  
Cannot use fragrant body sprays.  
Make-up items are banned for us  
Cannot express closeness to relatives.

With an agonizing tone, she concludes the poem wondering if anyone is there to rescue and offer these child widows a bright future.

In India there was the evil practice of getting their girl children married when they were very young at age, in the name of child marriages. This social practice resulted in early widowhood, which in turn brought many other related problems and evil practices. In fact, some of the women poets had been victims of these child marriages. It is curious to observe that almost all the poets in this work had been married. Unfortunately there were a few poets who were child widows. The biographical details of the 19th century poet, Tarigonda Vengamamba reveal that she was a child widow; she expresses the painful suffering of her widowhood. Kanchanapalli Kanakamba was also a child widow, but later she was allowed to go for higher studies; she proved herself to be a meritorious scholar.

The Sharada Act lighted the lives of many women of our traditional society and minimized the practice of child marriages. This act had brought responses from the poets too. A poem titled "Sharada Act", written by Nadivinti VenkataRatnamma, was published in 1929 in *Gruhalakshmi*. In this poem the poet expresses her happiness for ending the evil practice and shows her gratitude by saying it is time to celebrate its enactment:

The orthodox may grunt  
For the detriment of their sacred dharmas  
Cursing thee for indulging in acts of shamefulness.  
But thou art the triumphant of all your opponents.  
Let your deed be memorable and legendary.

Poets like Gyanamba, wrote on religious, spiritual and mystical themes. Lakshmibayamma and Ponaka Kanakamma (known as twin poets) produced a book on

these themes. Their book titled *Aradhana* (Adoration) and a few other individual poems published in *Gruhalakshmi* are available to us. Vinjamuri Venkata Ratnamma wrote a few poems on mystical themes. Her "*Nivedana*" (Offering) talks about the total submission of her selfhood to God. As she could not get a chance of viewing His face, she starts complaining about her bad luck. The entrance to the God's sanctum sanctorum was closed preventing her entry into the temple:

It seems I am not fortunate to see it before my eyes.

I must be ill-fated not to be able to enter your temple.

I tried many a time to enter your temple.

Except for listening to the resounding temple bells, I couldn't view you.

The door to your abode had been shut.

The writings of these Telugu women poets reveal the strength and their assertion, towards their commitment, their role and involvement in the freedom struggle. Most of these women poets had also responded to the other social issues that prevailed during the period such as widowhood, women's education, child marriage, Sharada Act etc. The present paper tried to project the panoramic view of some Telugu women poets of early twentieth century, the women writers' unique sensibilities and ways of expression and their unheeded contribution to the Telugu literary corpus.

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