



**Unmasking Injustice: Jashuva's 'The Bat'**

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**Abstract**

The recognition of Gurram Jashuva as the first modern Telugu Dalit poet in the 1990s marks a significant milestone in the Dalit literary movement in Andhra Pradesh. Jashuva should be acknowledged as an innovative social reformer and a pioneering writer. His choice of "The Bat" as a metaphor carries profound implications, especially for future generations of poets who can boldly experiment with new ideas and metaphors in Jashuva's footsteps. The bat, a creature typically considered repulsive and rarely granted the poetic reverence bestowed upon other romantic birds celebrated in both classical and modern poetry. This paper attempts to underscore Jashuva's specific contribution to exposing caste discrimination.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Existence, Reformation, Dalit, Caste

Many philosophers have emphasized how one's social existence influences one's consciousness. It is exceedingly challenging for any individual to escape this influence, as evidenced by the numerous writers who have candidly portrayed their lives in their works. This holds true for almost all writers, whether they express their societal experiences through creative or critical writing. The impact of society and one's way of life is particularly prominent in the works of writers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and Gurram Jashuva serves as a prime example in this regard.

In Andhra Pradesh, Dalit communities regard Gurram Jashuva (1895-1971) as the first modern Telugu Dalit poet, while non-Dalit communities do not share this perspective. Mainstream literary critics have conspicuously omitted Jashuva from the literary canon; a deliberate exclusion pointed out by Dalit communities. In response, Dalit communities organized his birth centenary celebrations in 1995, aiming to resurrect his literary legacy.



However, the author contends that such efforts do not effectively address the broader issues surrounding the construction of literary history and its categories.

The recognition of Gurram Jashuva as the first modern Telugu Dalit poet in the 1990s stands as a significant milestone in the Dalit literary movement in Andhra Pradesh. Jashuva's birth centenary celebrations in 1995 provided the backdrop for this recognition. During this period, special magazine issues were published, and extensive debates occurred in literary journals and newspapers, focusing on Jashuva's literary contributions. One of these debates in 1992 revolved around Jashuva's exclusion from "Vaitalikulu" (1935), an anthology of modern Telugu poetry.

The exclusion of Jashuva is often attributed to caste-based discrimination, as he belonged to a Dalit community. However, this explanation does not fully address the broader issues related to the construction of literary history and categories. Within the Vaitalikulu debate, Dalit critics successfully challenged the dominance of predominantly Brahminical upper castes in shaping the canon of modern Telugu literature. They positioned Jashuva as the pioneering poet who depicted Dalit life in modern Telugu literature and critiqued the caste system. This innovative perspective paved the way for a new Dalit literary tradition in Telugu. An eminent Dalit critic, Satyanaraya says:

The emergence of the Dalit literary movement in Telugu is closely linked with the rise of the Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh. The phenomenon of mass killings of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh began with the Karamchedu massacre (1985). Later, Neerukonda, Thimma Samudram, Chundur, Vempenta, Y. Cherlopally, and several other ghastly atrocities took place in the 1980s and 1990s. These atrocities gave rise to a debate on caste and caste-related violence in the public sphere. The Backward Caste reservation movement in 1986 and the pro-Mandal agitation in 1990 provided a context for a wider debate on contemporary forms of caste at the national level.

Satyanaraya, 2007: 99

Jashuva was born into a Dalit family in Vinukonda, a small coastal town in Andhra Pradesh. From an early age, he had to endure the humiliations inflicted upon him by the upper-caste communities due to his untouchable background. These wounds deeply affected his psyche and found expression in his numerous poems, which not only conveyed his pain but



also demonstrated a remarkable poetic richness. His lengthy poem, *Gabbilam* (The Bat), serves as a prime illustration of this.

In a unique way, Jashuva revolutionized the literary aesthetics within Telugu Literature by exploring novel and previously unexplored themes in his poetry. The humiliations faced by Dalits throughout various stages of life are prominently featured in almost all of his works. In "The Bat," the intensity of these humiliations is accentuated and simultaneously challenged. Indeed, Jashuva took the caste-based society and its oppressive nature to task in this poem.

The questions he posed were both radical in nature and rooted in logical reasoning. They dared to challenge the very foundation of a caste-based society constructed upon the fourfold *Varnashrama Dharma* as classified in the *Manusmriti*.

K. Madava Rao, who has translated Jashuva's *Gabbilam* into English, identifies the notoriety of *Manusmriti* as follows:

If an untouchable read the Hindu scriptures, he should be blinded, and if he hears their contents while a Brahmin is reciting them, he should be made permanently deaf by pouring boiling lead into his ears.

If a Sudra performs any of the functions of higher caste groups, the king should confiscate his entire property and drive him out of the kingdom.

Madhva, 1998: VI&VII

It is evident that Jashuva introduced fresh themes and metaphors into the realm of Telugu poetry. Notably, many prominent Telugu mainstream poets predominantly employed romantic metaphors that often diverged from the harsh realities of the caste-based society. Jashuva, having closely observed society, was able to discern its inhumane aspects and endeavored to present this reality from a wholly unique perspective. Jashuva found it essential to convey life's realities effectively through idioms and metaphors. In this process, Jashuva chose the "Gabbilam," or the bat, as a symbol to represent his anguish.

The bat is a creature typically regarded as repulsive and rarely accorded the poetic reverence bestowed upon other romantic birds, such as the nightingale, parrot, or peacock, celebrated in both classical and modern poetry. In this context, Jashuva's decision to employ



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the bat as a metaphor was deliberate, as it aligned with his objective of showing respect to marginalized communities within society. Systematically, he drew parallels between the life of a bat and that of a Dalit.

Jashuva's selection of this metaphor carries far-reaching implications, particularly for subsequent generations of poets who can boldly experiment with new ideas and metaphors following in Jashuva's footsteps. In this regard, Jashuva should be recognized as a social reformer and a trailblazing writer.

The poem "Bat" poses several fundamental questions concerning discrimination. It commences as follows:

In simplicity, content with a penny,  
In innocence, forgetful of all troubles,  
In suffering, suppressing hunger,  
Destined to live in penury,  
The untouchable,

This unwanted child  
Of the great mother,  
Bharat, that is India.

1998:1

The following lines encapsulate the life of a Dalit child who implores the bat to convey his suffering to the temple's guardian, where it takes shelter:

When you are hanging upside down in the temple  
Quite close, you will be to the Siva's ear. Narrate the story of my suffering to  
God  
Making sure that no priest is around.

1998: 11

Jashuva was acutely aware of the plight of women, particularly Dalit women, in the caste-based (casteist) Indian society. The following lines bear witness to his deep concern for the doubly oppressed women:

You silently suffer when men treat you as a mere tool in the kitchen  
We instill fear in wives not to challenge their husband's actions



We imprison women in the jails of religious rites

We destroy all the natural talents of women.

1998: IV

Jashuva is intensely aware of the caste-based discrimination prevalent in Indian society. In one of his poems, he metaphorically depicts it as a fore-hooded cobra. The poem reads:

The demon of poverty thrives  
Sucking this poor man's blood  
The four hooded cobras of Hinduism  
Frowns at his very sight.

1998: XI

Though the poet laments that:  
These cruel and crooked people  
Robbed me of my rights for ages

1998:94

He never succumbed to fatalism but retained his optimism. This enabled him to conclude the poem "Bat" with the following lines:

As he thus narrates his soul-stirring tale  
The Bat sheds sympathetic tears  
And leaves for the God's abode  
The Sun of Independence rises in the east.

1998: 97.

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