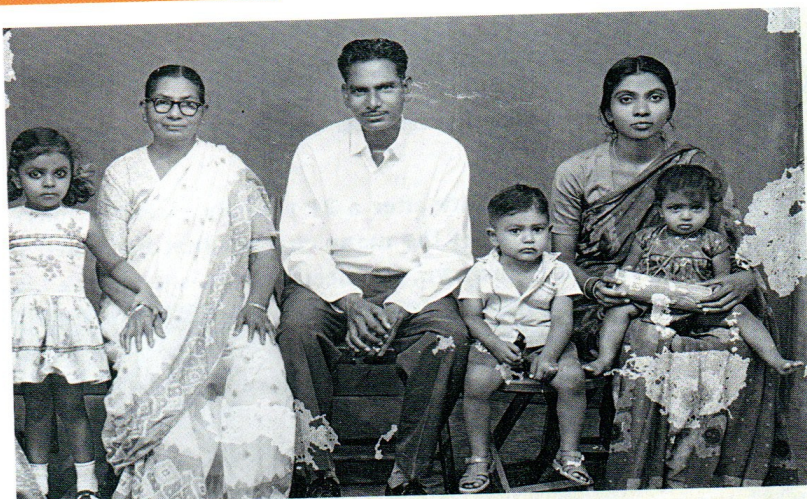


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The caste system in Indian villages



◆ Sujatha Gidla (left), with her family, Andhra Pradesh, India, 1966.

I was born in south India, in a town called Khazipet in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

I was born into a lower-middle-class family. My parents were college lecturers.

5 I was born an untouchable.

When people in this country ask me what it means to be an untouchable, I explain that caste is like racism against blacks here. But then they ask, "How does anyone know what your caste is?" They know caste isn't

10 visible, like skin colour.

I explain it like this. In Indian villages and towns, everyone knows everyone else. Each caste has its own special role and its own place to live. The brahmins

(who perform priestly functions), the potters, the blacksmiths, the carpenters, the washer people, and so on — they each have their own separate place to live within the village. The untouchables, whose special role — whose hereditary duty — is to labour in the fields of others or to do other work that Hindu society considers filthy, are not allowed to live in the village at all. They must live outside the boundaries of the village proper. They are not allowed to enter temples. Not allowed to come near sources of drinking water used by other castes. Not allowed to eat sitting next to a caste Hindu or to use the same utensils. There are

20 thousands of other such restrictions and indignities that vary from place to place. Every day in an Indian newspaper you can read of an untouchable beaten or killed for wearing sandals, for riding a bicycle.

In your own town or village, everyone already knows your caste; there is no escaping it. But how do people know your caste when you go elsewhere, to a place where no one knows you? There they will ask you, "What caste are you?" You cannot avoid this question. And you cannot refuse to answer. By tradition, everyone has the right to know.

◆ Sujatha Gidla, *Ants Among Elephants*, 2017

**Before you read**

1. Use the title and the picture to imagine what the text will be about

The text may be about a family and the hierarchical organization of Indian villages

2. Use the sources to introduce the document

The document is an excerpt from a book entitled Ants among Elephants, written by Sujatha Gidla and published in 2017

**Read** and pick out information about the narrator

the story is a first-person narrative. The narrator is a woman (on the left side of the family picture) and was born in South India, in a small town named Khazipet in the state of Andhra Pradesh. She is from a lower-middle-class family and was born an untouchable.

2. Identify the different jobs and use the culture tip to name their caste.

The caste system is a social class system, mainly used by Hindus. Once a job system, it became a **social system that segregates people**, though it tends to become less applied in Indian cities.

At the top of the caste system, there are **the Brahmins** : for example priests or teachers (academics)

then the **Kshatriyas** : the rulers, people working for the government and soldiers

the **Vaishyas** : potters (**potiers**), blacksmiths (**forgerons**), carpenters (**charpentiers**) and washers (**laveurs**)

And at the bottom of the caste pyramid, **the Dalits or untouchables** who work in the fields (**les champs**) or are street or latrine (toilets) cleaners. (**nettoyeurs des rues ou des toilettes**)

They all live separately according to their caste.

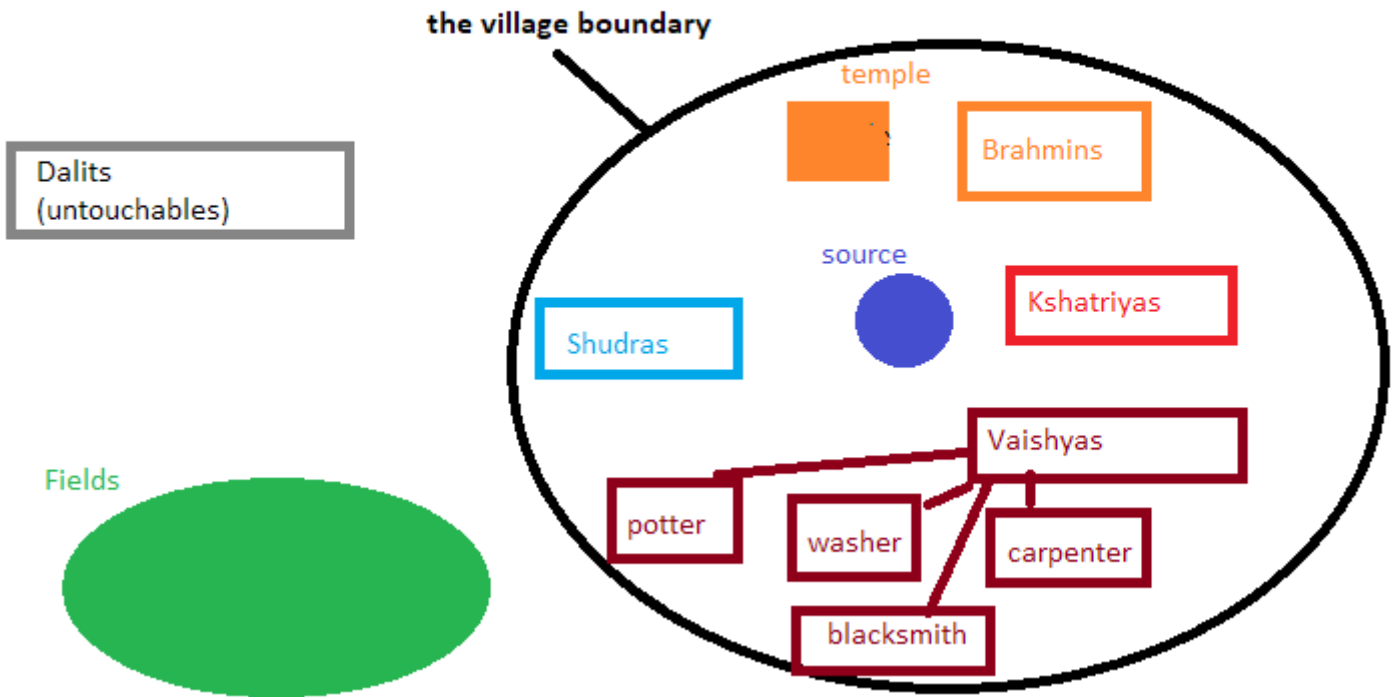
3. What is striking about the narrator's family ?

She says that they were college lecturers (14), which means that they were **teachers in universities** so they should be part of the **Brahmins (the upper caste)**. However, as they were born in a family of **Dalits (=untouchables)**, they remained untouchables and so at the **bottom of the caste system**. This system is hereditary, so you cannot climb up the **social ladder**. (=gravir l'échelle sociale)

4. List all the places in villages and towns where the « untouchables » are not allowed.  
They are not allowed in villages (I22), in temples ( I25), near sources (I25 I26)

5. Draw a sketch to explain how Indian villages are organised and ruled by the caste system.

### The caste system in an Indian village



6. If you leave your village to live in a city, do you escape this caste organisation ? (explain)

No, you can't escape the caste organisation for 2 reasons :

- first, because in Indian villages and towns, everyone knows everyone else (I11-12) , so everyone knows your caste (I23 – 24)
- secondly, because when you go to a place where nobody knows you, the first question they will ask you is « what caste are you ? » (I26-27) and you cannot refuse to answer...and of course, you can't lie because by tradition everyone has the right to know (I28-29)