

## Book Review

Title of the Book: Galla Arunakumari Sweeya Charitra (Autobiography)

Author: Galla Arunakumari

Sahiti Books, 2024, 1004 pages

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Among the autobiographies and biographies of women that I have encountered in the past year, one text stands apart for its scope, detail, and impact: *Srimathi Galla Aruna Kumari Sweeya Charitra* (Self-Story of Galla Aruna Kumari), written in Telugu. This autobiography is remarkable not only because of its sheer volume—935 pages, making it monumental in size—but also because of the epic weight of its narrative. The book is, quite literally, a weighty tome that challenges the physical comfort of readers who are used to reading while lying down. Yet, once the first few pages are turned, the reader realizes that the book is not only “huggable” in size but also irresistible in content.

For readers like me, who earlier had only a superficial, wikipedic knowledge of Galla Aruna Kumari, this book offers a revelation. It broadens and deepens one’s understanding of this humane politician, while leaving the reader with a sense of awe and admiration for a woman whose extraordinariness is so deeply grounded in ordinariness. Her journey—rooted in family values, tradition, and service—is at once personal and political, intimate and public, ordinary and extraordinary, thought-provoking and impactful.

The book is not confined to a linear account of personal experiences. It operates on multiple levels and lends itself to varied interpretations. On the one hand, it is a record of the author’s personal struggles and triumphs; on the other, it is also a narrative of the political history of a region. More significantly, it is a document of gendered struggles, shedding light on the specific challenges faced by women in the male-dominated political sphere. Aruna Kumari’s political journey is doubly remarkable because it is fraught with challenges marked by the combined pressures of patriarchy and caste.

What makes Galla Aruna Kumari's story compelling is not just her political successes but also her deeply humane approach. Her unique ability to mingle freely with people across caste and community lines, without the burden of social inhibitions, endeared her to the masses. She emerges in the autobiography not as a distant political figure but as a woman who listens, connects, and embraces all and sundry in her interactions. Episodes of her persistent intermingling with people of all walks of life—villagers, farmers, women, and youth—reveal a leader who refused to isolate herself within the walls of power. In fact, after reading these sections, many readers may find themselves becoming members of her “fan club”, drawn not merely to her achievements but to her warmth, accessibility, and persistence.

Indeed, to call her merely a “politician” seems a misnomer. The autobiography reveals her as a political leader—and there lies a crucial distinction. A politician typically maintains a transactional relationship with the public, appearing mainly during elections and relying on tactics to secure votes. A leader, by contrast, forges a transformational relationship, inspiring trust through integrity, consistent action, and ideals that outlive electoral cycles. Aruna Kumari's life illustrates the latter, showing the human within the leader, constantly surfacing in her political interactions.

The text also brings to light the dual burden borne by women like Galla Aruna Kumari: the demand to prove themselves professionally while also shouldering familial expectations. Her story reflects the resilience needed to balance the intimate spheres of home and the public demands of politics. It is this constant negotiation between personal and public that gives the autobiography its layered richness.

Above all, Galla Aruna Kumari's autobiography is not merely the story of one woman's rise in politics; it is also the chronicle of a region's transformation, a community's evolution, and a woman's courage to carve a space for herself in spaces where women are often silenced.

Even though she is the daughter of the illustrious Paturi Rajagopala Naidu, a strong leader, freedom fighter, and influential parliamentarian, Aruna's political career was never one of easy inheritance. Instead, it was marked by constant negotiation, struggle, and the need to establish her identity amidst her own and others' expectations and resistance.

One recurring theme of the narrative is ingratitude. Aruna Kumari details instances of ingratitude shown by politicians who have benefitted immensely through her father or her in their political rise. What makes the autobiography an invaluable document on the political history of a region is the insider stories she reveals which are not hitherto known to the public. For instance, Aruna reveals how her father as a sitting MP went to Indira Gandhi's house in the mid night, how she responded to his visit and how he was instrumental in making Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh even after N. Janardhana Reddy's name had already been finalised by the high command in Delhi.

It is clearly shown how, after the death of Indira Gandhi, the same Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy was not on her father's side when he was denied ticket for the Chittoor Parliamentary constituency.

Similarly, she narrates two instances when she felt let down by N. Chandrababu Naidu and N. Kiran Kumar Reddy, two of the former Chief Ministers of the combined Andhra Pradesh. The political protege of her father, not even paying a visit to him when he was hospitalised in Chennai during his critical final stages, even though he had gone to see the Governor of Andhra Pradesh, Ranga Rajan who was taking treatment in the next ward of the same hospital, is mentioned in a matter-of-fact tone. But the pain of it all seems to still linger when she says:

*If he had come to see my father, he would have got a good name.  
But he had lost that opportunity. It is hard to acquire wealth, win  
friendship, love or trust. But it takes only a second to lose it all.  
It felt he had lost all that with my father. (p.735) (author's translation)*

What is interesting here is, from Aruna's own account, her father emerges as a stoic who does not seem to have been affected by the ingratitude of all his political beneficiaries.

But, this very ungratefulness on the part of others, seems to have propelled Aruna to fight back and prove her own power of resilience and strength as a people's leader.

These insider stories of trust and betrayal are one of the reasons why one should read this book. As Maya Angelou famously says:

*... people will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget how you made them feel*

Aruna's autobiography is not only an account of what she has done to people but it is also a recounting of how people made her feel in different contexts. The book abounds in such instances, be it the constant pats and praises she got from the Chief Ministers Chenna Reddy and Y.S.Raja Sekhara Reddy or the betrayals she had to endure from others.

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In conclusion, the autobiography unravels a woman whose ordinariness forms the foundation of her greatness. Only by reading this book can one grasp the extraordinariness of this seemingly ordinary woman-leader.

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