

Editorial Comment

Culture has always played an important role in the ideological struggle for socio cultural hegemony. It has powerful possibilities of multiple creative expressions and inspirational voices, with implications for the resolution of the crises of self and collectivities.

Antonio Gramsci understood that culture is anything but neutral when he spoke of class hegemony. Much of what is thought to be our common culture is the selective transmission of class (caste) dominated values to hegemonise and mentally enslave the subordinate class/caste. Thus, engagement in anti-caste struggle and struggle for a Dalit selfhood has to be understood in the context of counter culture to challenge the hegemonic culture - the Brahminical Social Order. The challenge to the hegemony of the upper caste is also a task to create and sustain a counter culture through the politics of resistance.

The Dalit cultural movement in the country performed two historical functions. One, it created its own poetry, folksongs, literature, music and musical instruments in order to satisfy the cultural needs and aspirations of the Dalit masses. Two, it created a radical context for the emancipatory politics led by Dr. Ambedkar and later on by several committed Dalit leaders.

Unfortunately, during the last two decades, the Dalit cultural movement has faded itself into insignificance. This decline of Dalit cultural movement is dialectically contingent upon the overall decline of Dalit political movement and both together were contributory factors responsible for the cooption of motivated Dalit political and cultural activists by several pacifist structures including the State. The net result of this cooption was that it diverted these otherwise true agents of history from transformative politics to the politics of manipulation and creating illusions about their emancipation within the status quo.

Today, however, Dalit cultural movements are trying to rediscover its cultural resources as well as creating an alternative cultural subjectivity through new modes of cultural expressions which promises to redefine the agenda of contemporary cultural discourse. The two seminars which VAK-DIC organized – one in South India, Kerala, on the theme “Interrogating Dalit Culture and Politics” and the other in Delhi on “Dalit Literature and Politics” — are modest attempts to underscore the importance of Dalit cultural and its potential for Dalit emancipation.

Apart from these two important seminars, the Bulletin also carries reports on Dalit atrocities by the “upper castes” in different parts of the country. One positive development, though, is the effort by Dalit women making their mark by launching their very own radio programming initiative in Machnoor (Medak district) in Andhra Pradesh trying to propagate the Dalit cultural idioms and expression through women’s voice. A report on this is contained in this Bulletin.

The final section consists of reports on the situation of Dalits in South Asia and two reportages, one, on the crime of untouchability that continues to be practiced in various parts of the country and the other by the Geneva-based International Committee in the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) which debunks the official claim that caste discrimination no longer exists in the country today.



**Report of the National Conference:
“DALIT Culture and Politics in South India”
Vagamon Kerala, December 2006**

Cultural identity with dignity is integral to human existence for the social world gets represented and is being understood in the form of a multi-dimensional space where social agents and groups are either defined or identified by their relative positions in this space. Perception of the social space one occupies in this social world (or as Geffman calls the sense of one's place) is revealed through social praxis, central to culture, since social life is a practical and an ongoing accomplishment. Social reproduction is not a mechanical process of socio-cultural transmission, as such it should be studied in relation to the active construction of social life of its participants and also with regard to reproduction of social relations. Organised in terms of the conventions which determine the international order, it is embedded in culture. So exploration of cultural praxis along with social praxis becomes necessary.

Moreover, the phenomenon of culture has proved to be the greatest tool, more importantly, in the ideological struggle for social transformation. Transformative Culture has within it various elements such as transformative education, politics, society, medicine, as the highest virtue. It is a movement of powerful possibilities, of multiple expressions and inspirational voices in many parts of the world, with implications for the resolution of the crises in self and community.

The very notion of Dalit culture has been undergoing radical rethinking since the early 1970s. Within Dalit movement and politics, where culture was in effect the key symbol on and off the field, the concept has come under challenge precisely because of democratic social transformation and a new process of conscientisation of the subordinated social groups with relation to power and history. Dalit Culture also reminds the degree to which 'culture' is grounded in unequal relations and is differentially related to people and social groups.

Dalit culture and identity has come under increasing strain from both centrifugal and centripetal forces. Identity, defined as the interplay of characteristics, provides individuality and uniqueness, coming from a combination of traits, to a person or group. Dalit identity is a collective

one, inclusive of numerous castes. As a cultural identity, it provides the social context within which meaningful choices can be made. Courses of action have meaning because they presuppose a set of shared background, values, practices, and understandings. Cultural contexts, understood as webs of shared, ongoing, dynamic interactions and narratives, grant particular choices and life projects significance and normative content, making it possible the exercise of autonomy and moral agency. The normative legitimacy of Dalit culture and identity as a homogeneous one is based on the principle and practice of untouchability. Hence, study of culture as a context where autonomy and moral agency are exercised for empowerment and destruction of a social structure based on untouchability is important. As such, it becomes crucial to understand:

- (i) How far culture has contributed in enlarging struggles against the caste system in the process of pursuing collective interests of Dalits?
- (ii) The nature and scope of Dalit cultural rights as ethno-cultural group rights, and the role that ethno-cultural identity plays in their normative justification.
- (iii) To what extent has the interaction with a multiplicity of cultures in a globalized era and their subsequent blending, has led to the blurring and breaking down of the boundaries that separate and define cultures?
- (iv) Hinduisation of Dalit cultural activities.
- (v) Revitalisation of the emancipatory potential of Dalit culture.

Antonio Gramsci understood that culture is anything but neutral when he spoke of class hegemony. Much of what is thought to be our common culture is the selective transmission of class (caste) dominated values. Thus, engagement in anti-caste struggle through a reconstruction of Dalit culture has to be understood in the context of the politics to challenge the hegemonic culture - the Brahminical Social Order. The challenge to hegemony is also a task to create and sustain a

counter culture through the politics of resistance.

It was in this context that the Dalit Intellectual Collective (DIC) decided that there is a need to interrogate and challenge the oppressive and discriminative cultures in the struggle for human emancipation. Moreover, the urgency of this agenda, interrogating various facets of Dalit praxis and theory, was necessitated by the political flux—nationally and regionally - in India. Writers, novelists, scholars, human rights activists and students converged for a three-day conference at Vagamon, Kerala in December 2006 organized by DIC and supported by Vikas Adhyayan Kendra to explore the theme “Interrogating Dalit Culture and Politics in South India”. It was a follow up of the earlier conference held in June 2005. Some of the notable participants were:

Gopal Guru, D. L. Seth, Valerian Rodrigues, Anand Teltumbde, Rajeev Bhargava, novelists Imayam, Perumal Murugan, Bama, Malathi Maithri, Sugirtharani, folk-arts performer and teacher K. A. Gunasekaran, Judith Heyer from Oxford University.

Ms. Bama, presenting a paper on Politics of Everyday Protest, discussed aspects such as the perception of Dalit culture by Dalits, reconstructing Dalit culture, everyday protest and rationality. Responding to criticism about her language and style, perceived to be offensive, and her audience, she said “when people can write in brahminical language why can’t I write stories in Dalit language”. Chairing the session, Prof. D.L Seth pointed out that “academic language in India has always been the language of the dominant”.

Keshav Kumar of Pondicherry University, in his paper Song of protest, analysed the powerful impact of Dalit cultural movement in Andhra Pradesh and dealt about the importance of ballads in the history of radical political movements, left, as well as Dalit songs, presenting a different worldview contrary to the hegemonic one, assume significance in the context of revitalising Dalit culture. His presentation gave a clear idea of the significance of songs sung by Gaddar and other cultural activists during protests, in mobilising people to political action. The presentation provoked a discussion on locating internationally renowned music director and composer, Ilayaraja. While Prof. Gunasekaran regretted that Ilayaraja does not identify himself as a Dalit, Dr Lakshmanan contended that the musician had transcended the boundaries of caste.

Malathi Maithri’s presentation, “How to kill our father?” was provocative and evocative as the thrust of her argument was on the patriarchal dominance present in Dalit families and how Dalit women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. According to her in every family it is the father who leads it with the mother being the mediator with all the members but treated as a slave by one and all. Men practice untouchability at home by ill-treating women and ultimately women are used as tools for perpetuation of patriarchy. Bama’s novels and short stories like Elakaram, Otrai, Karuku, Sangathi and Vanmam were extensively quoted by her to substantiate her argument. Every narrative elucidates Dalits oppression through oppression and discrimination of women. In the discussion on Maithri’s presentation, Mr. Ilangovan and M C Rajan pointed out that deconstructing the dominant worldview was necessary to construct a Dalit Feminist worldview. Dalit feminists were also urged to work on defining the contours of Dalit feminism.

Conversion as an option and a potential tool in the struggle for equality was discussed after the presentation on Dalit movement in coastal Andhra Pradesh by Sowjanya.T, a research scholar. In her view, Dalit women continue to enjoy more equality when compared to women of the dominating castes and it was more visible among Christian converts to Christianity. In the context of Tamil Nadu many discussants indicated that Dalits conversion to Christianity was neither for equality nor for economic reasons but because of faith. Christianity has not been emancipatory as untouchability prevails and Church has a role in creating a distinct cultural identity among Dalit Christians.

Prof. Valerian Rodrigues in his paper Ambedkarite Dalit movement in Karnataka explained how the Vir Saivism movement gobbled up the space for a vibrant Dalit movement even before it could take birth. The notional egalitarianism of Vir Saivism and the mutts getting entrenched prevented the independent political mobilisation of Dalits, he argued.

On Dalit culture as a counter culture, Dr. Gunasekaran, set the discussion rolling on the relationship between Hindutva and consumer culture by explaining the adoption of Hindu marriage practices and giving up of widow remarriage.

Imayam, author of the famous Tamil novel “Koveru Kazhuthaigal” as well as “Sedal,”

discussed Dalit Literature in Tamil Environment. Calling for treating creative writing as a social act, he, however, drew attention to the danger of market-driven narratives being masqueraded as Dalit literature. Beware of the market, he warned and urged creative writers to resist the temptation of falling a prey to crass commercialisation.

When Dalit literature emerged in the 1990s there were so many questions about the new genre. Then publishers were not forthcoming but now the situation has witnessed a drastic change. The role of market in popularising a particular genre of literature cannot be denied, but writing for the market was not a healthy sign. Underlining the need for Dalit creative writers to present Dalit life in its entirety with its rich aesthetics, Iyayam said mere expression of anger and colloquial style of writing was not enough for a work to be considered as literary. They should bring out Dalit aesthetics and worldview. "I have not only the recipe but know to cook pork, can you with the same taste?" was his terse response to the oft-repeated question as to whether Dalits alone could produce Dalit literature. Lived experience was part of creative writing, it was pointed out. During the discussion on the presentation, a consensus emerged that non-Dalits, with commitment and identifying with the Dalits have also produced authentic works, enriching the new genre.

Noted poet Ms. Sugirtharani, started her presentation with one of her poems in which a girl from a family engaged with skinning cows and oxen, who faced discrimination right from school days, begins to assert her identity. Weaving the issues of feminism as a lived life experience, she stimulated a lively debate on feminism and contemporary Dalit politics. Thus, she questioned some of existing notion, particularly, of Thalai Karpu, Edia Karpu and Kadai Karpu (meaning first, second and third order of woman's Chastity) that are advocated in Tamil literature. Referring to the recent protests against film actor Kushbu's remarks over chastity, she regretted that Dalit women were mobilised with broomsticks to engage in the state-wide demonstrations. She subjected to scrutiny, the responses of some political leaders, including Dalit leaders. The furore over another film actor, Jayamala, entering sanctum of the Sabarimala temple, she pointed out was yet another instance of restrictions upon women in the religious sphere. In the discussion, there were serious debates around her points. Dr. Lakshmanan made important observation that Hindus ascribed Karpu-chastity

for women and Kaamam- sexuality for men. While he referred Amdebkar's remark on caste system, it survived of many thousand years by the practice of endogamy. The session was chaired by Dr Gabriela Dietrich.

Novelist and critic Perumal Murugan's paper "Kongu Nattara Padaipil Dalit Sitharippu (Portrayal of Dalits in narratives of the Kongu Region) was a critique of Dalit's portrayal in short stories by non-Dalit writers, including C Rajagopalachari (Rajaji). Kongu region is the western part of Tamil Nadu, comprising Coimbatore and Erode districts among others. He dwelt at length about the dynamics in the relationship between dominant Kongu Velalars and the Arundhathiyars, the cobbler community. The session was chaired by Dr Bavanandhi.

Discussing the culture of Dalit bureaucracy, Anand Teltumde explained in detail how people employed in the urban areas attempt to hide their community and identity. The interplay of caste and class was elucidated. Further, he also touched upon the issue of school drop-outs and Dalit students in educational institutions. He had strongly criticized Dalit bureaucracy of their insensitive towards existing realities, particular reference made to recent Khairlanji Massacre (in Maharashtra), i.e. from village Police to top level CBI officer who were involved in investigation of Dalits. One need not have biased notion of their caste as an agency of state, and they should have larger responsibility to stand for justice. The Middle class attitude among the Dalit bureaucracy is become major impediment for the progress. In contrary, the same middle class front runner for utilizing certain benefits of caste.

A narrative on societal violence was the topic in which Ms Ranjani, a research scholar, presented a paper. She took up for discussion, 'Solagar Thotti,' a novel on the atrocities perpetrated by the Special Task Force engaged in nabbing brigand Veerappan. They basically argued that read and understanding history and culture through novel. To this point recent Tamil novels have radical potential to delve upon. Her paper was based on a field study at the village, Solagar Thotti, battered by the STF. Other papers presented were: Maya, from Kerala addressed on Cultural configuration of Dalits and the Challenges before women. Coloured Past: Retrieving Dalit History (Azhagarasan, Madras University), Transgenders (Ms Geetha, research Scholar) and Dalti and Land Struggles (Jerome, research Scholar). The session was chaired by Prof. Valerian Rodrigues.

Earlier, during the formal inauguration Samuel Asir Raj, Lakshmanan and M. C. Rajan, constituting the organising committee, introduced the theme of the conference, contextualising it in the current political and academic environment.

Prof. Gopal Guru gave a birds-eye view of DIC since its inception. Stating that it was not a rigid forum, he said it was flexible as well as constructive, receiving contributions from those engaged with it.

At the valedictory session, Ajit Muricken of VAK, also part of the organising team, invited suggestions about the future agenda for DIC. A separate Tamil Nadu Charter of DIC, with old JNU-

ites taking the lead, was suggested to have a much deeper and frequent intellectual engagement. Bringing out a directory of Dalit Writers, Novelists, Poets, Activists, etc, popularising Dalit writings and facilitating dialogue among Dalit writers of different languages, sensitising Dalit teachers were among the suggestions that came up.

The three-day programme also provided opportunities for academicians and activists to interact with creative writers, deeply engaged with the Dalit situation. Besides the structured discussions, the participants, drawn from all over the southern states, were involved in debates and dialogues.



Report on the seminar “Dalit Literature and Politics” January 21-22, 2007, Delhi

Dalit intellectual collective (DIC) in its endeavor to promote and understand Dalit politics in northern India organized a conference on the 20th and 21st in the month of January, 2007.

The aim of this conference was to bring together persons from various walks of life, who are related to Dalit literature and Dalit politics and engage in a deliberation on the status of Dalit literature in northern India today. For this reason, only writers and scholars from northern India were invited. Dalit writers like Om Prakash Valmiki, Kanwal Bharathi and Amita Bharathi, Rajini Tilak along with others were invited to this conference titled “Dalit literature and politics”. Apart from these writers; academicians, who have shown keen concern with the status of Dalit literature and politics, were also invited. The conference was organized keeping specific issues that related to Dalit literature in mind. The issues were “the reflection of politics in Dalit literature”, “the status of women in Dalit literature”, the way “humiliation is reflected in Dalit literature” and lastly, the way questions of “caste and class coexist in Dalit literature”. The first two issues were, scheduled, as topics of discussion on the first day and the next two for the second day.

The seminar started on the 20th morning with an introduction by Prof. Gopal Guru about the activities and goals of Dalit Intellectual Collective

(DIC). One of the important points he stressed during his talk is that Dalit Intellectual Collective (DIC) finds the need to set the standards of debate relating to Dalit issues in India. For this purpose, certain protocols were maintained in organizing this conference. One of the important aims of the conference is to bring people together who are otherwise divided on issues, which is nothing but a reflection of Dalit predicament itself. Therefore, serious discussion and debates rather than rhetoric, which is a common phenomenon on can observe in Dalit conferences today, needs to be promoted.

Immediately after the introduction, Mr. Kanwal Bharathi was invited to give the key note address. Mr. Bharathi is one of the major figures among Dalit writers in northern India today. He has numerous books to his credit; most popular among them is '*Dalit vimarsh ki Bhumika*', Dalit poetry and '*Dalit dharm ki avdharna aur boudh dharm*'. In his key note address Mr. Bharathi gave us a broad picture about Uttar Pradesh politics and more specifically the place Dalit politics in UP politics. Mr. Bharathi gave a critical review of the Bahujan Samaj Party (B.S.P) and its supremo Mayawathi. He was critical of B.S.P's leadership in Dalit movement in today's UP. He further said that literature should guide politics. He then proceeded to give a short historical account of Dalit literature. He opines that 1970's poems by Dalits were more

radical in comparison to modern day Dalit poetry.

He urged modern Dalit writers to radicalize themselves by also picking up issues concerning class and gender along with caste.

The key note address provided and provoked a critical deliberation on the issue of literature and politics, and Dalit politics in general. The first secession titled 'perspectives on politics', which was chaired by Prof. Gopal Guru, picked up the issues that were introduced by Mr. Kanwal Bharathi. Serious interventions were made by many from the audience.

The second secession titled "Women in Dalit literature" began immediately after lunch with Prof. Chaman Lal, head of the department of Hindi centre, Jawaharlal Nehru University, chairing the session. Mrs. Shanti Yadav, a well known Dalit activist and writer on Dalit women's issues and Dr. Amita Bharati, who is a regular contributor to important Hindi magazine called '*kathadesh*' on the issues concerning Dalit women were the main speakers. Mrs. Shanti Yadav is famous for her poem "Bap ki topi", and she has written many poems in her long career as a Dalit women activist. After a brief introduction by Prof. Chaman Lal, Mrs. Yadav spoke at length about her work and her experience with Dalit women. Later, she picked up the issue of representation of Dalit women in Dalit literature, which is written mostly by men. She commented that the idiom used by most Dalit writers is masculine and anti-women. She referred to prominent Dalit male writers who show and depict Dalit women negatively by succumbing to the dominant, upper caste, masculine idiom. To demonstrate this she quoted certain readers and read from their writings. Later, she moved on to discuss the place of Dalit women in the larger Dalit movement. She believed that Dalit women can make a major contribution to Dalit movement; and they should, while voicing their differences with their male counterparts, join with Dalit men in the larger struggle against caste exploitation. Later, in the question answer session, when asked about her opinion on the question, "how does solidarity between Dalit women and other women work?" She responded that Dalit women while fighting alongside their male counterparts against caste injustice they should simultaneously join with the larger women's movement in their struggle against gender injustice.

The next speaker was Dr. Amita Bharathi. She presented a much more rigorous paper "Dalit

literature and politics-case of women" on the status of Dalit women in Dalit literature. She criticized the dominant Dalit literature for ignoring the peculiar predicament of Dalit women. She cited several writers who have not just ignored but also pictured Dalit women in a black light. More importantly, she said literature produced by Dalit women themselves have been grievously ignored. She argued for a much more autonomous role for Dalit women in their fight for their rights. She argued that patriarchy as practiced by the dominant castes also seeps in to Dalit groups. Therefore, a general attack on patriarchy by Dalit women, along with other caste women, is required. She said that Dalit women need to have a principled relation to both Dalit men and women from other caste backgrounds in their struggle. She criticized the dominant upper caste feminists for ignoring the plight of Dalit women. Coming to the question, whether non-Dalit can write some thing called Dalit literature, Amita Bharathi's reply was in the negative. She argued that only literature produced by Dalits can be named Dalit literature because it comes form their specific experience as Dalits. This experience is not available to non-Dalits. However, she also said that non-Dalits can also write about the conditions and life struggle of Dalits, and this would be a great contribution to both Dalit and literature in general. The only but important point is that it cannot be referred to Dalit literature. The term Dalit literature must be reserved for literature written by Dalit themselves. Responding to this point, the chairperson of the session, Prof. Chaman Lal argued that if literature for children can be produced by adults and is acceptably called Children's literature so why not the literature produced by non-Dalits on Dalits be also referred to as Dalit literature.

The second day, i.e. on 21st the first secession titled 'humiliation in Dalit literature and second secession titled 'Caste and class question in Dalit literature' were merged together. The secession was chaired by Prof. Valerian Rodrigues and Dr. Vivek Kumar, an assistant-Prof in sociology in J.N.U and Mr. Dasad, a prominent Dalit writer from the northern belt. Mr. Dasad began his talk with a lengthy and elaborate description on the Dalit situation and the way it is portrayed in literature. Showing a great deal of concern over the stagnation that Dalit literature is facing in terms of ideas, he argued that there is a need to move ahead or beyond the existing state of affairs. Dalit literature is caught up in a conundrum where the sense of victim hood is prevalent over other positive

aspects of Dalit life in literature; thereby, making scuttling the emancipatory aspects of literature. Dr. Vivek Kumar, next, picked up the important issues of humiliation and class in Dalit politics and literature. He began by arguing that Dalits constitute a distinct element in Indian social life and, therefore, it is violence on them to be combined with other categories like Women, Tribals and 'the poor'. He further argued that the concept of 'class' as propagated by certain Indian Marxists also cannot be directly applied to Dalit and Indian context in general, ignoring caste issues.

He next moved on to the issue of humiliation as it is practiced on Dalits in Indian society. He referred to common day talk and sayings that have inbuilt assumptions of Dalit inferiority and this ensuing into humiliation-both conscious and unconscious. In this context, he referred to texts like *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Thiriskrit* by Suraj Paul Chauhan and *Meri Safar aur Meri Manzil* by B.R. Jatav. In the process, he cited verses from Ram charitra Manas, considered a sacred text by the Hindus, which shows contempt for the shudra and other lower castes. He argued that autobiographical writings by Dalit have brought out

clearly the issue of humiliation; and their translation into English there is a loss of the full import and meaning involved in their writings. For example, the title *Joothan* cannot be translated into English without depriving it of sociological meaning. He also commented that earlier generation of Dalit literature was freer in depicting humiliation due of lack of any institutional constraints on the writers, which on the contrary is the case with modern day Dalit literature. But, he further added, modern day Dalit writers are more conscious and critical and this is a positive trend.

Finally, Prof. Valerian Rodrigues concluded the session and the conference, by asking certain important questions like: How is the body depicted in northern Dalit literature? Do the woes and humiliation of urban middle class Dalits get reflected in Dalit literature?

To this Dr. Vivek Kumar responded by saying that there has been an improvement in the way the body is depicted in modern day Dalit literature in northern India. The problems of urban middle class Dalits have not received due attention as it deserves.



[News from Across the Country]

Apart from the above two Reports there have been other reports filed from other parts of the country. The National Crime Reports Bureau reports that Dalits face atrocities every 20 minutes ranging from untouchability to criminal offences e.g. murder, rape etc. including land grab, burning of their houses. The basic provisions of the PCR Act of 1955 or SCs/STs (Prevention of Atrocities) of 1989 failed to be implemented. This information was provided at the first National Consultation of the National Commission of SCs in Delhi on Tuesday, February 6th, 2007.

Maharashtra

- ⊕ In Sangli district tension prevailed in the Bhivargi village where Dalits were refused entry into the village temple and access to public water sources, flour mill and Gram Panchayat office. Members of the upper caste were responsible for this discriminatory decision. This decision arose when Dalits protested against the presence of the idol of Goddess Yallamma

in their colony as they were against any form of idol worship. When the upper caste did not respond by taking any action the Dalits shifted the idol themselves, to another place. This resulted in the clash between the two communities. The next day the upper caste gave written assurance that there would be no harassment of the Dalits and they would lift the ban against the Dalits.

Source: Times of India, 12 January 2007

⊕ **Khairlanji accused charge sheeted**

On March 2, 2007 the court at Bhandara, Nagpur framed charges against 11 Khairlanji accused and remanded them till March 16 when the next hearing will be held. The court has already freed 36 out of the total 47 persons arrested for the murders of the four members of Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange's family at Khairlanji village in the district on September 29.

Source: Indian Express, 2 March 2007

Orissa

In the Kendragada district of Bhubaneswar, Dalits were allowed to enter and worship at the Kendragada Jagannath temple but were disallowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum. This ruling was applicable also to the upper caste. But the Dalit Mukti Morcha refused to accept the administration arguments that both communities agreed to abide by this ruling. They maintain that the authorities have posed this decision only on the Dalits.

Source: Hindustan Times, 31 January 2007

Bihar

On March 16, 2 persons were killed and 6 injured by police firing on people demonstrating on the irregularities in preparing BPL in the Matihani block in Bihar's Begusarai district. The list is to streamline the PDS scheme for the poorest of the poor to plug leakage which is estimated to be 50% in the state. Under the scheme every BPL family is provided coupons to get subsidized grains Kerosene from the ration shop. Part of the coupon is to be kept by the ration shop owner – this will be the basis for his allotment by the government in the following month. The irregularities are of three types:

- i. some people have been totally left out;
- ii. poor families have been awarded more than 13 points in the BPL survey and
- iii. some genuine BPL families have been denied coupons for Kerosene
- iv. the names of Dalit landless have been struck off the road. At the same time names of the retired army men are included in the BPL list

Source: Indian Express, 19 March 2007

Gujarat

A study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) of Mumbai on scavenging in Gujarat came up with the following findings:

- i. there are 12000 people engaged in this degraded occupation
- ii. 90% of these people have not been provided with health and safety equipments like gloves, mask etc. despite been employed in the Municipalities and they use their hands to remove human waste.

- iii. a total of 2,456 households with 12,506 individuals in Gujarat are involved in this occupation. Of this 4,333 (2,755 males, 1,578 females) persons are directly involved in the practice the rest being children, women, old, unemployed and others. Region wise, Saurashtra leads with 928 households, followed by central Gujarat (569), north Gujarat (529) and south Gujarat (430). The study notes that most common methods of manual scavenging is sweeping night soil on the street (dry latrines) followed by cleaning of water borne toilets. A third most common practice is the removal of human bodies and carcasses of dead animals.

The TISS study was carried out only in those places with a population of 10,000 plus to that extent the TISS study even admits that the final figures could be an under estimation.

Source: Indian Express, 23 January 07

Andhra Pradesh

A milestone by Dalit women – to broadcast their own radio programmes by K. Venkateswarlu.

Machnoor (Medak district): A quartet of Dalit women, sing "jagadam pata", a song on a fight between a local landlord and a Dalit tenant, which unfolded in their village of Machnoor. In the adjoining room of the domed studio, 'General' Narsamma moves the knob on a mixer, occasionally helped by Algotu Narsamma.

These Dalit women are all set to broadcast their hour-long programme from the country's first full-fledged Community Radio Station set up here by a non-governmental organisation, Deccan Development Society (DDS). The Union Cabinet cleared the proposal to licence them on November 16. There are at least three such community radios set up but all of them depend on AIR for broadcasting.

But for the licence, everything was in place with UNESCO providing part of the funds.

The studio building was made with locally available low cost material, two 16 and 4 channel mixers and stereo recorders, two 100-watt FM transmitters with a coverage area of 30 km radius reaching out to 100 villages, were already set up.

"Licence for the community radio was denied all these years citing security reasons. Now that

the policy got the Cabinet nod we are immensely happy.

It will herald democratisation of India's airwaves. People's radio has become a reality", said P. V. Satheesh, Director of DDS. "It bridges the gap as mainstream media has no space for them", observed Vinod Pavarala, Dean of Communication, University of Hyderabad.

Making radio programmes has been a child's play for these tape-recorder wielding Dalit women, as they have canned 500 hours of them so far. "It's our radio and we will broadcast programmes made by us for our benefit. We will talk about seeds, crop diversity, organic farming, health, hygiene, women's problems and sending children to school, virtually everything that touches the community," said 'General' Narsamma brimming with confidence.

There is expectation that the radio tailored to community needs would not only lend voice to the voiceless marginalised community but revive interest in the dying oral folk traditions like "Bichapola patalu."

Source: The Hindu

Rajasthan

The Truth about Suliya by Sowmya Kerbart Sivakumar

Suliya embodies a historic instance of Dalit resistance to dominant caste atrocity in Rajasthan.

For some of us gathered at Suliya, a faraway village in Bhilwara district of Rajasthan, on December 12, 2006 for the *mandir pravesh* (temple entry) by hundreds of Dalits into the ancient Mata Chawanda temple situated at its fringes, this was an "event" that we would witness, support and commend, as spectators to a great act of courage. The true heroes of Suliya were not the leaders from various horizons who adorned the manch (stage) that day, whom the media so stereotypically focused on and broadcasted. As the son of Hajari Balai, the aged Dalit bhopa (priest) of the temple who was roughed up in the temple premises on the day of the Navratra said, "our real struggle begins today, after you have all gone."

A landmark

What makes Suliya a historic landmark in the fight for Dalits' dignity goes beyond just the act of the *mandir pravesh*. It was the rare and spontaneous coming together of the Dalit

community in a strong outburst against the dominant Gurjars of the area, who had beat up innocent Dalits on the Navratras on October 1, 2006 and ordained a ban from entering the 1000-year-old temple where both communities had peacefully offered their prayers and had their respective bhopas performing their rituals for centuries. While the struggle was widely supported by movements and organisations that identified with the cause, nothing can take away the fact that all this would have been in vain had the Dalits of this region not closed rank, stood up and spoken against the injustice meted out to them.

Consequent to a complex and evolving equation relating to land, political power and the growing empowerment of the Dalits in Suliya in the recent years, the feelings of untouchability and discrimination harboured by the dominant caste group provided a handy "license" to the Gurjars in opposition to manhandle the elderly Dalit priest and attack and assault 10-12 Dalit villagers, including women who were gathered at the temple. They also decreed soon thereafter, that neither the Dalit priest nor those of the community would be allowed entry into the temple. On the very same day the son of Hajari Balai gave a complaint in writing to the neighbouring police thana in Kareda, but of course, no FIR was lodged. When even five days later the FIR was not written, some of them, along with a local Dalit leader, Girdharilal Meghwal, went to meet the SP and Collector and the latter ordered that the FIR be filed without further delay. A teacher residing in Suliya also got in touch with Bhanwar Megwanshi, a fearless Dalit writer-activist from this region, who put constant pressure on the administration till the FIR was lodged, besides presenting a fact-finding report on the situation in Suliya to the Collector on October 24 and steering the struggle since then.

Vindicated

Today, nearly two months after the *mandir pravesh*, a visit to Suliya makes it clear that no one dare oppose Hajari bhopa or the Balai community's entry into the temple, a vindication of the possible outcomes of an empowered Dalit resistance.

The Suliya episode is also historic for more reasons than this one. For the first time perhaps in Rajasthan, there was a conscious attempt at unifying the various layers among the Dalits as an admission to the fact that schisms between them would only finish them. Among the Dalit speakers

on the day of the temple entry whose names didn't make it to the reports in the English media were Manaji Bhil, from the local tribal community in Suliya, Pyarelal Koiwal, a Khatik from Ambedkar Vichar Manch Bhilwara, Ganga Parmar from Chittorgarh, Babulal Bairwa, who fought a valiant struggle for Dalits to obtain access to the village pond in Chakwara (Phagi block, Jaipur district) and Jarga from Khelwara. They represented various caste identities from among the Dalits but shared in common the pain of their oppression, thereby deriving infinite strength that transmitted across the people congregated that day. The happenings at Suliya thus marked the birth of the "Dalit Adivasi Adhikar Abhiyan" to which "Ghumanthu" (or nomadic castes or tribes) was subsequently added.

This should permanently silence antagonists who were of the opinion that such programmes "could only lead to further rifts in society", as remarked by a few observers of the *mandir pravesh*. Ironically, this was the same view publicly held in an interview to a leading Hindi daily by none other than Kalulal Gurjar, the Panchayati Raj Minister of the present BJP government, in reaction to the suggestion that Dalits should compulsorily, by rotation, be put in charge of providing water or cooking food in government programmes such as drought works and midday meals. It was ironical because the minister, also the area MLA from the Gurjar community, himself attempted to organise a *mandir pravesh* with the Dalits in Suliya on November 26.

Challenging the Ruling Clique

This brings us to the third reason why Suliya emerges as an exemplar of Dalit resistance that will not easily be forgotten. The *mandir pravesh* on December 12, symbolised a bold taunt to the political heavyweight Kalulal Gurjar and all that he represented, whose own temple entry attempts were a dismal failure, with the Dalits of Suliya completely boycotting the show. None of them had received any invitation till November 24, but they still acceded to going with the minister provided he gave in writing that they would never have any restrictions in entering the temple in the future. "On the 25th night at 10 p.m., the ADM/Collector spoke to the Minister over the phone and he refused to give this in writing. He said that his words were enough, but the people did not think so.

Overnight, all the Dalits simply left the village and Kalulal was greeted with small black flags

adorning locked doors when he arrived the next day," says Bhanwar. This resolute rejection of being party to political manoeuvres comes across as not only as being doubly courageous, given that the Dalits challenged not just caste power but caste backed by political power, but also as extremely intelligent. On December 12, they came on their own.

Suliya is already finding its echoes all over the district. Braver struggles are now being played out on the strength of Suliya in nearby villages, on far more serious issues of atrocities, where the Dalits embody a tiny minority compared to the dominant castes and are also far weaker in the economic sense. Suliya might not be a miracle that has managed to wipe out untouchability instantaneously in every aspect of day-to-day living, but it has undoubtedly drawn the contours of a refreshingly new wave in Dalits' assertion of rights in this feudalistic State.

Against tradition

Paradoxically, the temple in Suliya prides of a history that is far from divisive. The temple was built by people from four communities cutting across the caste hierarchy — a Shindal Rajput, a Kapasia Bhil, a Ghelotia Balai and a Nekadi Gurjar, who originated from Jetaran in the Marwar region some thousand years ago. While there remains a difference of opinion as to who came to be the bhopa first, the temple had both a Balai and a Gurjar bhopa dating far back, and goat sacrifices used to be offered here although the Gurjars don't eat meat. In such a situation, the immediate question coming to one's mind is: what went wrong suddenly, that ripped this age-old tolerance for each other's customs? Two factors appear to have triggered this tension. Firstly, the 28-bhiga land that earlier stood in the name of the Gurjar bhopa since 1951 was transferred to the temple in 1990 following a change in the law in this respect. This, sources say, got the Gurjars worked up. But what heightened their insecurity was the shift in political allegiance of the Balai community in the 2005 sarpanch elections. Although outnumbered by the Gurjars, the Balais still comprise a sizeable chunk of households in Suliya (40 versus 70 of Gurjars). Traditionally supporters of the candidate who had links with the BJP, their votes shifted to the candidate with Congress connections (also a Gurjar, but of the tolerant variety) this time around, bringing down the earlier sarpanch. This was perceived as a deep blow to their power.

Then rose the ugly face of deep-rooted untouchability. At a meeting on October 8, when the SDM came to talk with both communities, the Gurjars stated in as many words that they would not permit the Dalits in anymore because they caused pollution to their prasad (offerings). This reportedly angered the SDM greatly, although he

himself was from the Gurjar community. It would, in fact, be unfair not to acknowledge that the local administration of the district, especially the Collector, has stood firmly on the side of the Dalits, playing a crucial role in diffusing the tension to make the temple entry a peaceful affair.

Source: The Hindu



[South Asia Scene]

1. Bangladesh - Dalit Rights, Dhaka

A consultative meeting was organised by Bangladesh Dalit's Human Rights (BDHR) in cooperation with the International Dalit Solidarity Network on 18 October 2006 at Dhaka, Bangladesh. The consultation brought together approximately 60 persons from civil society in Bangladesh including Dalit leaders, Dalit organisations, and representatives from international NGOs, researchers and journalists. The meeting was the first of its kind to bring together so many stakeholders concerned with Dalit's issues in Bangladesh with representation from different regions such as Dhaka, Kushtia, Satkhira, Narayanganj, Narsingdi and Syedpur.

The consultative meeting documented that although there may be a general perception that discrimination against Dalits does not exist in Bangladesh, discriminatory practises exist to a wide extent both in Hindu and Muslim communities. Various forms of discrimination against Dalits were identified through previous research studies, case studies, plenary and group discussions. The participants also identified barriers and possible solutions to the problems encountered by Dalits in Bangladesh.

Among the recommendations were the urgent need to produce data and statistics about the situation to document atrocities against Dalits; and the need to create awareness about this form of discrimination among political decision-makers at

national and local level, among NGOs and among Dalits themselves as a first step to protect, promote and implement the rights of Dalits. The Consultation was conducted with a view to share information and to explore initiatives related to the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh. The main objectives of the consultative meeting were to address the following points:

- ⊕ The situation of Dalits in Bangladesh
- ⊕ Provide information on caste-based discrimination for the UN study on discrimination based on work and descent (caste-based discrimination) under the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights
- ⊕ Explore possibilities for national and international level advocacy for Dalit human rights;
- ⊕ Identification of further measures for the promotion and protection of the rights of Bangladeshi Dalits and their inclusion in development

After the broader consultative meeting, there was a brief, informal session involving BDHR members, Dalit leaders and individuals, NGOs representatives working with Dalits and IDSN discussing possible ways forward. Ideas about how to link the work of Dalit organisations in Bangladesh with international level organisations were discussed with IDSN, and how Dalit individuals and organisations in Bangladesh could link up for more concerted efforts.



2. Nepal: Neglect of concerns of Nepalese Dalit women

As in India, the womens' movement and Dalit movement in Nepal in general also have failed in addressing the issue of Nepales Dalit women. This is the observation by the Indian representatives of the Dalit women's movement in India viz., by Dr. Ruth Manorama of the National

Federation of Dalit Women of India and Jyothiraj of Rural Education for Development Society-Karnataka. Dr. Manorama further stressed the need for "...networking of the South Asian countries to build solidarity to address the ssue of Dalit community in general and Dalit women inparticular...".

Source: Unbroken People, No. 5, Karnataka, 2006

A Shameless Claim: “India is Free of Caste Discrimination”

Government of India continues to defy commonsense by refusing to accept caste based discrimination as defined in the International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). The Indian delegation to substantiate this position also made a statement that Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vyshyas, Shudras and Dalits no more exists in India. The independent experts reviewing India's 15 to 19 periodic reports to the CERD Committee in Geneva refused to accept this and tried to persuade the delegates to accept the mistake in their position. India's report was being reviewed by the UN treaty body, the CERD Committee, in Geneva on 23 February. The Indian contingent is led by the Indian Ambassador to Geneva along with a team of experts including the Solicitor General of India and Professor Deepankar Gupta and other senior government officials. The CERD Committee will continue its review on 26 February.

In the opening statement before the Committee by the government, the Ambassador tried to pitch a note of achievements the country has made in allegedly eliminating descent based discrimination in the country. The Ambassador also emphasized that discrimination based on caste in India does not come under the mandate of the CERD. Following the same line of argument, the Solicitor General of India, in a vain attempt, drew the attention of the Committee to the constitutional provisions that prevent racial and caste based discrimination but emphasized that caste based discrimination is outside the scope of review. The supreme lawyer of the country, having exhausted all reasonable resources of legal intellect, but unable to find a tenable excuse to defend his government's stand, had to depend upon the information provided in the internet website Wikipedia to define race in his futile attempt to define racial discrimination.

In a continuing tone to defy the accepted legal premises of defining the term discrimination based on descent Professor Deepankar Gupta tried to explain to the independent experts of the CERD Committee that caste based discrimination does not exist in a large scale in India. Professor Gupta tried to convince the experts through his scholastic knowledge that in India liberty and equality is guaranteed by law. According to him any rich Indian could defy the tenets of caste hierarchy in India and this he opined as the proof of the absence of caste based discrimination in India. Finding difficult to substantiate his position any further he drew the example of the kings and maharajas in India defying the caste hierarchy when they wanted to marry, outside from the caste structure. He further stated before the Committee that according to his knowledge Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vyshyas, Shudras and the Dalits no more exists in India, but a homogenous and casteless society is that what India has today.

The CERD Committee's Country Rapporteur Mr. Linos-Alexander Sicilianos however responded to these arguments by asking the Indian delegation to help the Committee by providing reasonable and sensible explanations to the questions put up by the Committee in response to the state party report. The complete text of the additional questions raised by the experts is available at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/LOI-india.pdf> Mr. Sicilianos while drawing the attention of the Indian delegation to its previous and well settled position that caste based discrimination is within the mandate of the CERD also requested the Indian delegation to report to the Committee on specific issues such as (1) extra judicial punishments enforced upon minorities in India, (2) manual scavenging, (3) poor medical facilities available for the Dalits and the tribal communities, (4) double discrimination of Dalit women by forced prostitution, (5) internal displacements of Dalits, (6) looting and other atrocities committed by law enforcement

As if corroborating the CERD position the Voice of America (VOA), in Geneva, broadcast its own assessment on this issue. It reported on the

continuing prevalence of the crime of untouchability. (see box on next page)

agencies like the police (7) the mechanisms to foresee proper implementation of law (8) impunity and custodial torture, (9) discrimination practiced during the tsunami relief and (10) the gap between what that has been guaranteed in the constitution and what that is been practiced. The Rapporteur also drew the attention of the delegation to the 2004 report of the National Human Rights Commission where the Commission has raised concerns about the atrocities committed against the members of the scheduled caste and the scheduled tribe.

The Rapporteur also drew the attention of the delegation to the statement made by the Prime Minister of India on 27 February 2006 during the Dalit and Minority Conference where the Prime Minister himself admitted that the only parallel to untouchability was apartheid practiced in South Africa. The Rapporteur also expressed his opinion that the stand taken by the Government of India is untenable, and that, why the Committee should not consider a recommendation to initiate an early warning and urgent action procedure against India on cases initiated under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 in the north-east and those charge-sheeted under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. The Rapporteur also expressed his eagerness to know about the status of refugees, particularly those from Burma and Kashmir.

Followed by the concerns raised by the Country Rapporteur, subject experts of the Committee raised questions concerning several issues. The experts requested the Indian delegation to enlighten the Committee regarding the principles by which a particular community is termed as a scheduled caste or a scheduled tribe. The experts further requested the delegation to explain, what are the legal measures in place to prevent caste based discrimination in India? Of particular significance was the concern expressed by the expert from South Africa Ms. Patricia Nozipho January-Bardill regarding the Government of India's official position of defiance regarding the practice of caste based discrimination by denying its existence and asked the Government officials to persuade the government to seek the assistance from expert bodies like the CERD to eliminate caste based discrimination from the country. The expert from Brazil Mr. Jose Augusto Lindgren Alves pointed out to the government delegation that even though India worked hard during the Durban World Conference against Racism, the country is unfortunately more known for its antagonizing position on caste based discrimination.

Prior to the opening session by the government there was an NGO briefing for the subject experts which was represented by representatives of several NGOS from India and other countries. The government delegation is expected to reply to the questions and concerns raised by the experts of the Committee on 26 February. The Asian Human Rights Commission is closely monitoring the session and its sister concern the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) is attending the session. The ALRC has also submitted a report to the CERD which is available at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/cerds70-ngos.htm> along with the reports submitted by other organisations to the CERD.

Source: IANS, 26 March 2007

Discrimination & Untouchability

By Lisa Schlein, Voice of America – Geneva

The plight of untouchables in India is being considered by U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is meeting this month in Geneva. Two non-governmental organizations - Human Rights Watch and the International Dalit Solidarity Network - held a news conference Monday to bring greater attention to the abuse that they say members of the so-called "untouchable" - or Dalits - still face. Lisa Schlein reports for VOA in Geneva.

Representatives of Human Rights Watch and the International Dalit Solidarity Network said India is failing to uphold laws against caste discrimination as they relate to the rights of members of the untouchable caste, who are also known as Dalits.

According to the officials, the country's 165 million Dalits continue to face segregation in housing, schools, and access to public services. They are also, the officials say, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused by police and upper-caste community members who enjoy the state's protection.

The human rights officials, whose advice was sought by the U.N. committee, said the discrimination is taking place despite the fact that the caste system is abolished in the Indian Constitution.

Smita Narula is a professor of Law at New York University and co-author of a report called Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination against India's "Untouchables." She says the Dalits are the most vulnerable and exploited people in India.

"We are talking about over 167 million people in the country. The majority of whom live in segregation and experience violence, murder, rape and atrocities to the scale of 110,000 registered cases a year according to 2005 statistics," she said. "A majority of those cases end in acquittals if they ever get to trial. The solution is to end impunity and for the state to stop colluding and acting in this capacity and to end hidden apartheid in India. It is not a new solution. It is an end to oppression and discrimination and violence."

Dr. Ruth Manorama is president of the National Federation of Dalit Women in India. She told the committee about the prejudice the Dalits face.

"Formerly we have been called untouchables. If somebody touches, they get polluted...They cannot fetch water from the common wells from the common task," she said. "If there is a restaurant in the rural villages, they cannot ordinarily go and have a cup of tea in the same cup others drink. They will have a separate class system. If they have to go and worship in the temples, if they want to go to the temples, they are not allowed. And, anything menial, anything devalued, anything non payment, anything bonded laborers - most of them are from the Dalit communities that has been assigned to Dalits."

In December, Manmohan Singh became the first sitting Indian Prime Minister to openly acknowledge the parallel between the practice of "untouchability" and the crime of apartheid. Singh described "untouchability" as a "blot on humanity" adding that "even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and state support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country."

After it is finished hearing witnesses, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is expected to issue its conclusions and recommendations in March.



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