

Editorial

This is the first issue of the Dalit Bulletin, the new endeavour of Vikas Adhyayan Kendra aimed at providing a handy digest of its activities related to Dalits as well as significant developments around their issues to the broad spectrum of activists and students.

Way back in 1997 VAK attempted to bring together the well known intellectuals to deliberate on the issues afflicting the Dalits. Over the years this humble attempt has led to the formation of 'Dalit Intellectual Collective' (DIC). The DIC has had so far several sittings and discussed the issues of contemporary significance. Unfortunately, in absence of a regular organ these rich deliberations could not be properly disseminated to a targeted readership. Although its documentation was variously carried in many publications like EPW, the need for a regular organ to dedicatedly cater to the dalit activists and intellectuals lingered on until we thought of starting this bulletin this year.

The current bulletin mainly contains the report on the Dalits Intellectuals Collective Meeting that took place at Chennai 25-27 February 2005. This three days meeting was focused on the theme 'Contextualizing Dalit Movement in South India: Selfhood, Culture and Economy' and was attended by many well known dalit intellectuals, activists, representatives from certain NGOs, and students. The report in this bulleting just meant to provide a glimpse of the deliberations. The collection of papers presented there shall be published in a book form shortly.

The article on the proposed Employment Guarantee Act expresses concern for dalits and the adivasis, who form the bulk of the rural unemployed and who live in sub human conditions. It tries to analyse the criticism launched against the proposed Employment Guarantee Act. The opponent of the Act has argued that the benefits will not reach the poor, but will disappear in the fake muster rolls. The unemployment of the rural poor is extremely acute in the light of liberalisation of the economy.

VAK had organised a study of the rehabilitation of people affected by the killer Tsunami that his the coast of Tamil Nadu. It was specially in the context of the reports coming from that area about the discrimination being suffered by Dalits. A team of researchers visited the entire area stretching from the Chennai to Nagapatinam and talked to several people. The striking and sad part of the rehabilitation efforts was that the state was not to be seen anywhere; it was al reduced to the NGO show. The state did provide certain assistance in terms of money but rather than becoming a help, it created strife among people. The bureaucratic perception that only certain communities were hit by the Tsunami and Dalits were not affected was casteist enough as well as discriminatory. Only if the state had known what all vocations its people are in for survival, it would have appreciated the sufferings of Dalits!

Lastly, the bulletin provides an account of the manipulation by the upper castes to prevent dalits from becoming village panchayat presidents in Tamil Nadu.

While we hope, the readers will appreciate this new endeavour of ours we do expect many suggestions about its form and criticism of its content.

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The Dalits Intellectual Collective Meeting,
Chennai, 25 - 27 February 2005

Dalit issues and concerns has been an important focus of VAK's activities. In an attempt to further deepen VAK's outlook on Dalit concerns it regularly held seminars, symposia etc. as well as bringing out relevant publications time to time, highlighting Dalit struggles and movements. In 1997 in its attempt to broaden its perspective on Dalits it brought together a group of scholars engaged in the study of Dalit situation and struggles. The purpose was to have a dialogue, exchanges views, discuss specific areas of theoretical and practical concern and attempt to evolve a framework of Dalit theory. The Collective basically is a dialogue and solidarity forum whose objective is to challenge prevailing hegemonic discourses and to evolve shared understandings of the dalit universe.

The Dalit Intellectual's Collective held its sixth regional seminar this year in Chennai, in collaboration with Prof. Thangaraj of Ambedkar Centre for Economic Studies, at the University of Madras. The Chennai meeting was held to emphasise the need for recovering dalit knowledge system and culture and bring academics and the activists together. The Theme of the sixth meeting was 'Contextualizing Dalit Movement in South India: Selfhood, Culture and Economy' with special emphasis on the movements in Tamil Nadu. The three day meeting was inaugurated by the Vice Chancellor of the Madras University, Dr. S. P. Thyagarajan attended by dalit intellectuals, representatives from the NGOs, and students.

Prof Nanchariah in his key note address stated that in rural areas land ownership determines leadership and predominantly under the control of the upper caste in rural areas e.g. Reddies, Kammas and other upper castes control most of the agricultural land. 85% of the dalits on these lands are agricultural labourers. Tracing the history of the dalit struggle for the control of the agricultural land in Andhra Pradesh, he argued that the Adi Andhra movement fought for 'self-respect' and social equality but did not concentrate on agitating for the land control. It was the communist movement which led an anti zamindari struggle and addressed the question of economic equality like minimum wages for the agricultural labourers and labour welfare. Protection and enlargement of the control over land are crucial issues for the dalits and it is estimated that all efforts towards

redistribution of land including Bhoodan movement accounted for less than 10% of the cultivated land.

The denial of selfhood to dalits in the prevailing social relations was discussed by Prof. Gopal Guru who argued that it is not enough merely to emphasise on a formal set of equal rights without emphasising issues of dignity and self respect. He articulated that there is a need to develop deliberative capacity and communication. Prof. Valerian Rodrigues critiqued the formation and the sustenance of the Dalit movement in Karnataka upon the paternalistic tendencies of the state rather than the self-determination of the dalits. He sighted Gopal Swami Aiyangar and also Kudmal Rargarao who started schools for dalit communities did not want the radical questioning of the social structure a role which the Indian State eventually took over eventually. In the Hyderabad Karnatak region Dalits did not go in a major way to support anti-Nizam struggle. Shyam Sundar who was a minister in the Nizam's government felt that the Congress regime and even the radical communist movement may not give much space to emancipate them selves. He suggested that there is a need to build connection between the working class movement and the Dalit movement today as the earliest trade unions were formed in Kolar gold fields was led by Buddhist organization inspired by two early dalit Buddhist ideologues, Ayothidos Pandithar and T Narasu.

Prof. Chalam made a critical evaluation of the agitations in Andhra Pradesh and questioned the widely held notions on the question of identity. He refrains from using the term dalit as there is no social cohesion among the 59 identified schedule castes. He also opposes the term social movement for the dalit protest movements as these movements took place only in the southern coastal districts. The social movements of Telangana was absorbed by the left and radical left struggles and in Rayalseema it was dominated by factionalism and the scheduled castes are the active players in this game. He stated that the Dalit agitations are viewed as autonomous without any active participation or relation with other contemporary struggles. In a way it is an alienation of dalits from the mainstream.

Dr Ajay Gudavarthy argued that the contours and changes in the dalit movement can be made sense by the impact created by the three major massacres against dalits, in Karamchedu in 1985, Chundur in 1991 and Vempentta in 1998. Around these

gruesome events, the dalit movement shaped and re-shaped its agenda, political discourse and strategy of information. In course of its struggles against caste atrocities, it perceived the naxalite movement as both an ally and at times representative of the same caste hierarchy that society at large replicated. The issue of solidarity between these movements therefore becomes extremely crucial not only in shaping these movements but also in determining the nature of social transformation in times to come. Ironically, in a transitory phase glorifying and eulogising the 'proliferation' and 'fragmentation' of identities and struggles, there seem to be radically new possibilities to forge solidarity. At the strategic level, 'internal-external' dialectics make it possible for the movements to rework the bifurcated strategies. The PWG not only organised separate anti-caste mass organisation but also fought for legal and socio-economic benefits such as implementing reservations in the private sector, yet carried ideological propaganda against privatisation itself.

Dr. Anand Teltumbde emphasised that it is imperative for both the left and the Dalit movement to converge for the purpose of working out the unity of the oppressed and a radical agenda for both. For the purpose the need to occupy public space has to be given adequate consideration. Because the communist movement in corollary takes a long term view of the solution whereas the dalit movement is anxious to find immediate relief for dalits from caste oppression. Tracing the history of both movements he pointed out that they diverged from one another on account of their limited understanding of the Indian reality. The communist movement chose not to notice the plight of the native proletariats, the dalits and ran after organising a pure proletariat where there was none. Caste is still not recognised as the key issue in articulating successful class struggle. The dalit movements envisaged the destruction of caste system but failed to appreciate the economic independence from feudal society was equally important. Dr. Teltumbde concluded that until dalits come to shoulder revolution, the communist project will remain a distinct dream.

Ambuselvan narrated the history of the dalit struggle beginning with Bodhi Riots of 1889 led by Schedule Caste Liberation Movement to the present Dalit Panthers Party. However, these movements failed to resist the atrocities as they were firstly, fragmented among themselves on the lines of sub-caste and political ideologies. As a

result the dalit unity encompassing the whole of Tamil Nadu is still a distinct possibility. The second important reason is very negative outlook towards women leadership and women's participation in politics. Thirdly, the dalit movement is yet to establish relationship with the Marxist, Periarist, adivasi and revolutionary movements as well as with the agricultural labourers, construction workers and other people's movements.

Dr. A. Krishnamoorthy discussed the resistance movements in North Arcot and Vellore districts of Tamil Nadu, which had C. Ayothidos Pandithar's Buddhist movement as a source of asserting dalit selfhood. The issue of dignity and self-hood are centrally related to the question of culture. Dalit intellectuals claim to resources such as language, religion, symbols and traditions was asserted. Speaking on culture

P. Keshava Kumar asserted that culture as a lived social experience can be an useful tool in understanding society. The 'culture' in India got feudal character as every 'cultural' form was decided by feudal lords and pundits who denied space for the culture of the lower castes. The dalit movements are rediscovering Dalit art and culture. The dalit literature came with specific purpose of liberating dalits from exploitation. He contextualised the dalit culture by analysing a number of Telgu dalit literary works particularly Antarani Vasantham (untouchable spring) and the performances of Gadar-the revolutionary singer who sustained the movement by reducing the gap between two parallel cultural traditions-oral and written.

Dr. Manohar Yadav explained that Dalit Sangharsha Samiti posed a serious threat to the hegemonic order in Karnataka. In case of an event of an atrocity or injustice committed on Dalits, either by higher castes or state machinery itself, thousands of people thronged in protest against the culprits. Dalit literature grew as an inherent part of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. In face this literary movement formed the fulcrum around which the entire movement began to emerge that gave birth to many literary figures. The writers had developed rarest style of using a language whose rhetoric effect could successfully break peoples silence and at once instilled in them strength, courage and confidence. Many literary works won incontestable admiration and applaud from the readers. The inner essence of these literary works contained organized experience of the writers representing pain, hunger, humiliation and fall of the Dalit masses.

Dr. Somashekar analysed that the Dalit Movement in Karnataka that created a new spirit in the minds of the exploited people. It broadened its base by supporting the Backward Classes and Minorities in their cause for justice. The Dalit Movement always upheld the dignity of women in a patriarchy and served as a weapon of social change by vigorously addressing, indignities and atrocities heaped on Dalits. By supporting different political parties the movement got divided. However majority pulse is in favour of capturing political power. Few leaders wanted to keep Dalit Movement free from political movement. Some wanted that within the movement they have to have political movement. They argued that they could fight for social, economic and Cultural Revolution side by side.

Dr. Probash spoke about the changes brought about the colonial modernity in Kerala which liberated both land and labour from the control of the feudal lords. The Christian missionaries extended the educational facilities which empowered the dalits to a certain extent. The dalit movements like Ayyankali tried to situate the dalit community firmly within the Hinduism and wreck its inhuman core from within and provided an organisational base to the movement. Poikayil Yohannan and Pampady John Joseph flirted with Christianity but rejected it as the caste based discrimination continued hampering the liberation of the dalits. All the three attempted at the construction of a dalit identity but failed as they continued to advocate the interests of their respective sub-castes. They also failed to evolve a critique of the existing structure of the economy so as to salvage the dalits from the margins of the political economy.

Dr. Cherian emphasised the need for convergence of caste, class to understand the perspective. Kerala underwent an intense phase of structural transition during colonial period. Micro level resistance questioned the hegemony like the longer social movement. However it could not throw up leaders of a higher stature as these movements were localized. The abolition of slavery and the subsequent conversion of these dalits into Christianity did provide them with the opportunity to move out of the caste structure however they did not find a very fair treatment by the missionaries as the latter were more interested in converting upper castes. The dalits had Christian names but often suffixed by the caste name. The important aspect of the Dalit entry into public life was the demand for land ownership. Dalits

participation in the National movement was marginal in spite of Gandhi's visit and the Vaikonam satyagraha and the temple entry movement. Communist movement trade union movement throughout Kerala brought the submerged groups into the Agricultural workers union mobilized political consciousness devoid of caste politics. Land reforms, access to education and job reservation. As a result he concluded that the Dalits are better off in Kerala than their counter parts elsewhere.

J. Mohan evaluated the dalit movement in Pondicherry, where the dalits converted to Christianity to escape caste oppression where as the upper castes did so for economic and political benefits from the French. In the Renonciation movement of Ponnuthambi Pillai the dalits renounced caste which liberated them from the personal laws and placed them under the French civil law along with the Europeans. This placed the former dalits above the caste Hindus and Christians but below the Europeans. This was not tolerated by the caste Christians as the renoncants began to demand the demolition of the wall that separated them from these former dalits in the Church during the services. The Europeans too resented the renoncants wearing the European dress. They joined together to and the renoncants' list was dissolved. Thus the liberated equal citizens became once again dalits.

Prof. Dayanandan analysed the persecution faced by the Dalits since the dawn of the history both in Hinduism and Christianity. A large number of dalits opted for Christianity as the Missionaries were the first to give education and health care. Hinduism is accused of providing spiritual justification for caste system, what justification can Christianity give? It is unreasonable to expect all dalits to give up their spirituality and rituals and a belief in divinity given their long suffering under oppression. This is perhaps one reason why Ambedkar's ideal Buddhism without priests, images worship, rituals and belief in divine spirits has not taken root in Tamil country. The dalits need a religion just as Ambedkar could provide his own version of Buddhism for Indians, dalits must rewrite their own version of Gospel based on the life experiences of suffering and hope.

Khakha analysed that among the adivasis such energetic articulate groups does not exist. Dalits are a lot more perceptive in understanding the social realities and therefore in a position to theorise. The Adivasis on the other hand have been

good in organizing the movements. Since 200 years, agitations have been taking place. When it comes to providing intellectual justification in many of the movements the adivasis, have to depend upon non adivasis, to articulate and even address the gatherings. The adivasis, of the south India are the most vulnerable; the Dalits should also address their concerns.

Mr. Karuppan a retired IAS Dalit officer spoke on the land struggle in Tamil Nadu and Dr. A. Krishnamoorthy evaluated the land struggle in the North Arcot and Vellore districts. Dr. Mary John emphasised that the question of Land is imperative to dalit selfhood. Prof Gabrialla Dietrich spoke on the women issues related to Dalit movement. She asserted that the Land question is very fundamental; the Communist party led the struggle against feudalism but did not extend to the land struggle. Land should be given to Dalit especially women. She also stressed that the threat of globalisation has not been fully comprehended by the dalit youth. Ms. Cynthia Stephen stressed that the Dalit disunity becomes a problem of larger political mobilization. Let all the sub castes unite under a single umbrella. We don't want middle class leadership who ask Dalits to come and share their experiences. She wondered as to why women were absent. She was of the opinion that the Dalit movement was more successful in Kerala because the importance to given to the issues concerning women.

To discuss the relationship between the dalit intellectuals and Dalit political activists, a Public meeting was held. It was presided over by Prof. Gopal Guru who argued that dalit intellectuals should not be innocent of politics but distance themselves only from day to day, petty politics. He emphasised that the DIC is a body of the people which believes that the dalit intellectuals are not those who sit in the universities and think about dalit issues. DIC initiates Public sitting to develop public reason on the contrary we believe that the reason belongs to the public with the intellectuals sitting in the university recover the reason for the public we have discussion. There is need to debate, communicate the issues without giving due importance to passion. There is little need for emotion and self pity. DIC is universal. We are trying to occupy the spirit of public space, intellectual space with our ability our reason. On the contrary it really touches the alternative reasons of re-orienting, redesigning the society on the basis of egalitarianism. He also stressed on the need to reorient dalit imagination in such a way

that every particular intervention bears the stamp of their universal concerns. Mr. Thirumavalan stressed on retaining regional and linguistic identity in furthering the dalit movement. The other speakers expressed the view that it is imperative to build Dalit resource base in order to effectively assert Dalit identity and extend guidance to Dalit struggles.

Dalits and Tsunami

The killer Tsunami that hit the coast of Tamil Nadu affected dalits in terms of loss of life, home and means of livelihood. The dalits were employed as wage labourers by fishermen for catching fish in the sea; paddle up in catamarans at certain parts of rivers (Backwaters for instance). They were also engaged in selling sea fish, cleaning and processing of fish brought by the fishermen from the sea. Dalits men were engaged in shifting fish from the seashore to the fish processing units. Both men and women made a living by catching shell fish, crabs, oyster, prawns and small fish from backwaters which fetched them almost Rs. 50.00 a day. In some places dalits were involved mining salt from salt pans. In many places standing crops of groundnuts, paddy and onion grown by dalits were also damaged due to the intrusion of seawater. The land cultivated by dalits which was closer to the sea has become not only saline but environmentally degraded due to the devastation wrought by tsunami. In many places drinking water has become saline due to the intrusion of seawater and women have to go as far as 2 KMs to fetch drinking water.

The Dalits Intellectuals Collective/VAK initiated a study to evaluate the impact of the Tsunami on dalits and whether there was any discrimination practiced in distributing relief measures. Some of the findings of this study are noteworthy:

The dalit municipality workers were brought from the neighbouring districts for removing the decomposed corpses without protection like gloves, shoes and sterilized cloth to cover their mouth for protection. The supervisors who did not do any manual work wore them all and when the lunch was served for all the relief workers the supervisors used spoons, but the municipality workers had to use bare hands which few minutes ago had retrieved decomposed bodies and debris. This shows callousness of the state officials towards its employees who happened to be dalits.

In many places like Raja Colony, (Pudhupattinam) dalits reported that fishermen violently attacked them and could not tolerate the dalits who were staying in the same camp as the fishermen. The dalits were not allowed to use toilets in the relief camps by the fisher folk. Subsequently dalits were removed from these camps and were made to stay in separate camps. Separate sheds was constructed for dalits in a few places, they also did not get any relief materials from the government and NGOs. Old clothes, which were refused by the by fishermen, were given to the dalits. Fishermen did not allow the drinking water to reach the dalits camps. Rehabilitation work was not carried out in affected areas inhabited by the dalits. Temporary houses were constructed for fishermen, while the same was not done for the dalits. Though the lively hood of the dalits was completely destroyed the dalits have not received any compensation from the state government, because the fishermen cornered the entire relief materials as and when they reached the village by lorry. It was a conflict prompted by the desire to capture the resources given out in the form of relief measure. Effort should be made to restore their livelihood system and to bring the dalits who were involved in fishing as members of the fishermen cooperative society.

In some places dalits were accommodated in the temples, Churches, Anganwadis without food, water, milk (for children), cloth, lights mats, and fan. Fishermen on the other hand were housed in the schools, private marriage halls and community halls with access to everything above mentioned. In some places, the death of dalits and loss of assets was not registered by government officials. The officers told them to 'go and bring the dead body and the dead animals then you can claim the compensation'. In many places, the relief amount given to the dalits was less than that of the fishermen i.e. Rs. 4000.00 was given to the fisher folk and Rs. 2000.00 was given to the dalits. There were conflicts between fishermen and dalits over distribution of assistance. In some places fishermen prevented officials from distributing the relief material to the dalits, though the dalits also engaged in fishing activities.

Agricultural workers have lost employment opportunities and crops raised by the farmers were damaged by the tsunami. dalits also have lost their livelihood system and assets and they are in need of support for food grains to fight against the poverty and hunger. In many places people were panic even at the time of our visit about the possibility of another tsunami. DIC researchers

found that caste discrimination was practiced even in the face of huge calamity like Tsunami. In many places the government officials have not even visited the dalits who were affected by the tsunami.

Employment Guarantee Act - A Major Concern for Dalits and Adivasis

The dalit and the adivasis form the bulk of the rural unemployed who live in sub human conditions and there is an urgent need to address these concerns. Generation of employment in rural areas has been one of the main demands of the dalits. Rural poverty leads to the migration of dalits in large numbers out of the villages into towns and cities in search of sustenance. This not only involves physical displacement but also leads to the cultural and emotional dislocation and resultant rootlessness. Employment In agricultural sector has come down from 64 to 54% during the period 1979-2004 while in the manufacturing sector it went up from 24 to 27 % and in the service sector from 37 to 51%. There is an urgent need to cater to the daily increasing population of unemployed in the agricultural sector and the draft of the Employment Guarantee Act recently tabled in Parliament is a step further in this direction. The draft of the Employment Guarantee Act limits the employment to one member from each family living below the poverty line as identified by the gram panchayat for a maximum period of 100 days in each year. Initially only in the poorest 150 districts in the country will be covered by the scheme. A proper evaluation of this act is essential as ninety five percent of the target group consist of dalits and adivasis.

The proposed Employment Guarantee Act has provoked extensive debate on the feasibility of such a scheme. Some have argued that the best means to tackle poverty is to achieve and sustain higher growth rates. They argue that poverty has come down from 40% to 26% in the post reform period also supports this thinking. They point out that where Economic reform is visible employment growth is highest as seen in the cases of Gurgaon 26.41% Hyderabad 7.75%, Bangalore 3.72% on the contrary, where reforms have not taken roots employment generation has been minimum like Jemshedpur – 2.85. Hence they argue that the long term solution is reform not employment guarantee measures. They argue that a guarantee of employment will not accomplish much, and that the money spent on it will be wasted as 100 days of

employment per person @ Rs. 100 per day would cost Rs. 10,000 per person and for 4 crore household add up to 40,000 crores or 1.3% of GDP. A second criticism against enacting the proposed EGA is that the infrastructure generated will not be productive. 'Digging holes and filling them', is the common impression of public works programmes.

A final major criticism launched against the Employment Guarantee Act is that it will not reach the poor, but will disappear in fake muster rolls and ghost workers. This argument, however, is not as self-evident as its proponents suggest. Certainly corruption is present in all anti-poverty programmes in the country, and indeed in most public programmes. One has only to look at the Public Distribution System for the food, or the fodder scam in Bihar. The question is whether operations under the proposed EGA are likely to be more corrupt than other public schemes. The critics alternatively suggest that India has 63 million hectares of waste land of which 33 million hectares has been earmarked for trees, rest can be distributed among the 4 crore household.

So far the discourse on the Employment Guarantee Act concerns itself with economic aspects while its social implications have been ignored. The Act is right step in the empowerment of dalits, adivasis and artisan communities. The proposed Employment Guarantee Act deserves support from all quarters. The rural poor who would be benefited by the EGA/S have nothing, no land, no house, no food, no school, no drinking water, 44% of our population live on less than 1\$ a day. Farmer turned politicians paying less than the minimum wage to landless labourers working on thousand acres of farms mock any hope of genuine land reform, receive fertilizer subsidies totalling Rs. 11,800 crores. Many overlapping employment-generation programmes have been in operation over a considerable period of time with varying degrees of effectiveness. The proposed Employment Guarantee Act which promises 100 days a year of regular employment on the basis of a minimum wage for all states of Rs. 60 per day work will raise incomes by Rs 6000 a year for poor households, raising two thirds of India's impoverished population above the poverty line. Open employment in rural areas is largely concentrated among casual labourers; their share in the working population has been increasing steadily over the period from around 27 per cent to 36 per cent in the case of men; and from 35 per cent to 40 per cent in the case of women. The

effectiveness of the EGS depends not just on the scale of outlay on that programme, but on what activities are taken up, how they will mesh with similar activities under other programmes for rural improvement, and what steps will be taken to improve implementation. Another important dimension is the suggestion to introduce photo identity cards for the beneficiaries. This will limit the assured employment to the head of the family who happens to be a male member, in the absence of whom the female members will not be able to work. So instead of photo identity cards there should be regular identity cards complete with the names of all adult members of a family so that any one will be able to work and the family survives.

Our apprehension is that only rough estimation has been taken into consideration. No proper survey has been conducted to estimate the number of families to cover under the scheme. The official poverty data is out of date and unreliable. The plan is initially to be introduced is only the poorest 150 of 593 districts. No time limit has been set for extending it throughout the country, no reference to implementation of minimum wages. Concerns about the provisions limiting initial coverage to poorest districts and expanding it in a phased manner will not benefit the poor agricultural labourers in forward districts who don't receive minimum wages and whose families suffer from malnutrition. Finally, under the scheme the beneficiaries of the scheme are to be picked by the panchayats which are dominated by the upper caste landlords who have successfully used the same institution to oppress the dalits and adivasis. So a mechanism to monitor the implementation of the scheme as well as the public accounting is essential for its success.

Denial of Democratic Rights to the Dalits

Manipulation by caste Hindus (Thevars) to take back even the little that Dalits get in the form of reservation knows no bounds. In 1996, the Tamil Nadu Government announced the Papapatti, Keeripatti, Nattarmangalam, Melavalvu and Kottakachiyenthal panchayats as reserved constituencies within the rotating system envisaged under both the 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Constitution (1992) and the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Rules (1995). The measure was immediately protested by the caste Hindus of these areas. They threatened to boycott elections until the panchayat is de-reserved and ostracized

any Dalit who participated in elections or submitted a nomination. During 1996 to 2001, no local by-elections were held as a Dalit candidate dared to step forward for the post of Panchayat President or a ward member (both reserved). Meanwhile, encouraged by official complacency, caste Hindus intensified daily discriminatory practices like access to well-water.

However, it was Murugesan who challenged the caste Hindus and not only filed his nomination in Melavalavu village but got elected and then was finally butchered to death along with 6 others when he was beheaded for his act of defying them and getting elected to the local body. Out of fear for their lives and livelihoods, members of the dalits forfeited their democratic rights in the remaining 4 villages answering these threats with silent compliance. Nine by-elections passed by with no change in the situation and the government failed to take action against the brazen opposition to a process sanctified by law. In 2002 a Dalit from Dalit Panthers party came forward to contest the elections. The upper castes nominated their own candidate and elected him who resigned immediately as suggested by the upper castes. Again in April 2005, the Thevars shunned the candidates from Dalit Panthers party who had contested the elections and forbade him from entering the village. The DP candidate K.Narasingham died from bleeding, the cause of which has not yet been found out by the police. Finally in the so called election a dalit was hand picked, got elected, and then made to resign within five minutes. The villagers warned the shopkeepers not to sell any item to the Dalit Panthers candidate who secured 29 votes. If the shop keepers violated the diktat they will have to pay Rs.1000 as fine. The boycott would continue until the names of all the 29 voters are made public. In 2002 too the victorious Dalit candidate had to resign. Such social boycotts violate the norms of civil society and are a disgrace to Indian democracy.

The Puthiya Tamizhakam, a Dalit party in Tamil Nadu, has taken up the issue and has appealed to the Governor to direct the Madurai district collector not to accept the resignation of the Keeripatti panchayat president, who did so immediately after he assumed office recently. The party claimed that Azagumalai the elected Panchayat president 'was forced to resign immediately after being sworn in'. The party spokesman urged the Governor to call for a detailed report from the government on 'caste atrocities,' and said that it had not been possible to

conduct local body elections for the past nine years in four village panchayats—Papapatti, Keeripatti and Nattarmangalam in Madurai and Kottakachiyanthal of Virudungar districts.'The State can easily announce these villages as disturbed areas and invoke 1989 SC/ST Atrocities act. Unfortunately State machinery is in connivance with the perpetrators of such atrocities. As a result, Dalits have continued to suffer discrimination and not able to enjoy their democratic rights, he alleged.

A public hearing was organised by the Dalit Panthers, People's Watch and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights on June 14. The Dalits from these villages testified at the public hearing before former Supreme Court Judge K. Ramaswami, former Madras High Court Judge M.S. Janarthanam, former chairperson of National Commission for Women Mohini Giri, former Vice Chancellor of Gandhigram Rural Institute, Prof. Gopal Guru, Prof. George Mathew, Prof. G. Palanithurai and Prof. M.Thangaraj. The Judges and the experts felt that 'the Dalit Panchayats were a doomed lot as they were caught in the vortex of social prejudices, lack of education, illiteracy and handed down social beliefs.' They were also of the opinion that non participation of political parties and non dalits in the elections process brought shame to social revolutionaries such as Periar and Narayan Guru. The dalits who testified before the public hearing were afraid to express their views freely as they feared a backlash from the upper castes so the judges gave separate audience to them.

News-Analysis

There has been in recent years a view gaining ground in certain upper caste circles that the laws meant to protect the SCs are being misused. Dalits who try to register a FIR on an offence are faced often with stone wall response of the lobby of upper caste officials, village elders and the police. Cases are rarely registered. Few of them find a mention in local and national press. Even when a case is registered on account of external pressure the names of the accused persons are avoided, the description of the crime diluted and very often the case is closed for lack of evidence. Let us take a look at the atrocities committed against dalits in the last six months-

About 35 volunteers of the Centre for Dalit Human Rights who were participating in the 'National Dalit

Swadhikar Rally' while passing through the town wanted to have 'darshan' of the deity were not allowed to enter the Shrinathji temple in Nathawara in Rajasthan on January 2 by upper caste Hindus, CDHR convener P. L. Mirmoth reported the matter to the press.

A dalit youth by name Satnam of Lohian town near Jalandher in Punjab was detained by the police in a theft case on January 5 and was later released on the same evening. Again, the police picked up Satnam from his residence next morning and tortured him at the police station. He was severely beaten up after he refused to accept his involvement in a theft case and was later released from the custody in the evening. The family members of the victim rushed Satnam to the hospital, where he was declared brought dead. Hundreds of irate residents of the town attacked the police station to register their protest against custodial death. The police, including the SHO, fled from the spot. Two police personnel were beaten up by the mob.

Chitradurga in Karnataka witnessed on January 12th, protest by hundreds of arrack vendors and activists of Janapara Sanghatanegala Okkuta demanding stern action against the arrack contractors for their alleged atrocities. Contractors harassed innocent people living in Dalit colonies and Lambani tandas (hamlets) in the name of controlling the flow of illicit liquor. The protesters stated that the atrocities culminated in the murder of one Krishna Naik. The protesters demanded that the deceased family should be paid a compensation of Rs. 5 lakhs and his wife should be given a government job. All the victims injured in attacks allegedly organised by arrack contractors should be provided with a compensation of Rs. 2 lakhs each. They demanded that all the arrack shops in the Dalit colonies should be closed and the arrack contractors should not be allowed to enter the colonies and tandas. The Excise Department should keep a watch over the movements of arrack contractors to prevent atrocities against Dalits. The Government should withdraw all criminal cases, which were filed against the poor in connection with the Excise Act, the protesters said. They demanded that the Government take up a comprehensive programme for the development of tandas in the district.

Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu witnessed on February 8th, a demonstration by 100 volunteers of Adi Tamizhar Viduthalai Munnani protesting against an increase in atrocities on Dalits in the district.

The protesters, including 30 women, holding placards near the Red Cross building, alleged that atrocities on backward classes were on the increase in Coimbatore district. They also demanded that the administration provide adequate compensation to those affected in the attack in Kalapatti on the outskirts of the city some months ago.

In Madhya Pradesh a survey conducted in February revealed that 95 per cent of the manual scavengers are women and girls. Traditionally, women have been forced to follow this highly humiliating occupation. State governments often deny the existence of manual scavengers. Activists claim that although the resources including government funds exist for rehabilitation of scavengers, what is lacking is the political will to do so. The Indian government has spent Rs 6 crores in 'liberating' and 'rehabilitating' the manual scavengers since the mid-1990s. According to a survey, almost 94 per cent of village latrines in MP are dry. The MP government announced in 2003 that it would connect all dry latrines to a drainage system. But no concrete step has been taken so far.

The state has also been witnessing an alarming increase in the incidents of forcefully stripping and parading Dalit women naked. In March Rehli a village in Sagar district witnessed an incident in which some influential persons of the locality brutally beat up a dalit woman and forcibly paraded her naked. Activist Dalit groups should not just condemn such shameful incidents but through public agitations should force the authorities to punish the guilty.

Gaya in Bihar 2500 years back witnessed Gautama Buddha accepting Kheer-rice pudding from an untouchable woman Sujata as he attained enlightenment. Today the same district witnessed some villagers preventing the children including dalit children from eating kheer prepared by two dalit women as a part of the centrally-sponsored midday meals scheme for primary school children. The villagers then dug the earth near the school and dumped the kheer in it. Governor Buta Singh expressed dismay over the incident and has promised stern action against the culprits.

Upper caste men gang raped the wife of a dalit police constable in Mungare district of Bihar. In an unrelated incident a Dalit woman in a Bihar village was allegedly tortured, tonsured and paraded naked by upper caste men for refusing to work as a domestic maid because she made more

money as a field labourer. Nirmal Devi of Damauli Paswan Tola, a Dalit settlement in Purnea district, has complained to police that the men dragged her out of home on the evening of April 28 and beat her mercilessly. They then kept her locked in a room through the night and tortured her. This was followed the next morning by the men blackening her face and parading her naked in the village. She told police that she had requested them to free her and not humiliate her pleas fell on deaf ears. According to police officials, Nirmal Devi had refused to work in the house of the powerful upper caste men as she was earning more money by working as a labourer in the field. Her decision not to do so irked them and they alleged that she was having an illicit relationship with a migrant labourer.

The state of Bihar witnessed another form of discrimination in the form of denying cooperation and entitlement to a constitutionally elected dalit Panchayat head. Bodhgaya Nagar Panchayat's dalit chairperson Deomanti Devi is being deprived of allowance and other entitlements privy to a civic body head. Her travel expenses to the state capital have not been reimbursed by the authorities. She

has also complained that nobody listens to her the Panchayat meetings as well as the elected members of the Panchayat ignore her. Her demand for respectable treatment and legal entitlement is yet to be respected.

The Madras High Court's directive that the administration should ensure complete dalit participation was violated when they were prevented from participating in the Kandadevi car festival in Sivaganaga district in Tamil Nadu. Dalits living in about 200 villages around Kandadevi along with caste Hindus participated in the car festival till 1979 when four dalits were murdered. Since then the dalits stayed away from the festival. In 1997 when a dalit youth participated he was assaulted by the caste Hindus. Puthiya Tamizhagam, a dalit party, went to court to assert the Dalit's rights. The District administration considered it a law and order problem imposed section 144 mobilized large police force, made preventive arrests of all dalit leaders. It also confined dalit women who had started walking towards the temple were rounded off and confined them in a large hall. They were let off only in the evening after the festival was over.



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