

## **The Dalit Intellectual Collective (DIC) conference, held at Hyderabad (August 10-12, 2006)**

The conference was organised by Dalit Intellectual Collective and the Department of Cultural Studies, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages(CIEFL), Hyderabad.

The DIC is essentially a dialogue and solidarity forum whose objective is to challenge prevailing hegemonic discourses and to evolve shared understandings of the Dalit universe. This activity, we believe, has emancipatory potentialities for society since it will expose the shadows in the hegemonic discourse in doing so will suggest different possibilities. DIC is seen as an enabling forum for younger Dalit scholars to present their work and reflection.

More specifically DIC:

- interrogates the nature of the public sphere in India,
- formulates new modes of Dalit engagement,
- proposes an alternative action agenda,
- critically appreciates Dalit knowledge systems and practices, and
- develops an internal critique of Dalit consciousness.

As a forum DIC have acquired a national character drawing on intellectuals and activists from all over the country. It meets once a year where presentations are invited on a theme chosen for the year. These themes allow for both general reflections and for reporting of more focussed case studies.

The conference took the challenge to theorise the new conceptions of democracy proposed by the oppressed castes and other oppressed communities in India on the backdrop of the arguments on caste which took centre stage in the national public domain since the Mandal debate of the 90s. Hence, the idea was to conceptualise and theorise the emerging relationship between democracy and caste in India through paper presentations, discussions and debates. The significance of the conference is even more striking since it was held at a time when there is a new definition and a new language of democracy coming from the Dalits with a rage against and a critique of mainstream democracy. The three day national seminar chose the theme of "Democracy and Caste" to debate some of the theoretical issues emerging in the context of Dalit and other oppressed caste struggles in different spheres of life and it also created an opportunity to connect the domains of literature, culture and politics.

The conference felt that the electoral domain is one of the major realms of democracy and it was paid sufficient attention and hence, a major concern is to address the question, 'Is there a new way of thinking about democracy and caste'?

The conference contested the idea of India's 'successful democracy' and the two universes of domination since independence - one, the dominance of democracy, and this belongs to the Dalit; the other, the dominance of modernity, which belongs to the upper castes, or pyramidal Brahminism. There are the contending perspectives of high-profile democracy (electoral aspects) and more low-intensity democracy ('civil society', Non-Government Organisations etc.). Liberal discourses are resilient, but they are also continuously under threat, being challenged. There is a dent in liberalism's modernist confidence, because it is confined to a privileged few. The question – "how democratic is the intellectual imagination of democracy?" – was posed. The discourse of democracy has been hijacked by upper caste scholarship which robs its Dalit - Bahujan character; a 'corporate democracy', a neo-conservative ideal that requires, minimally, insulation from popular pressure. What does this mean for justice? It undermines the popular basis of policy, and secondly, it assumes that the elite are concerned about the common people (which, one can see, are not true- members of commissions always walk in with their sociological selves- that goes against justice).

Thus, policy becomes insulated from the norms of the universal, like justice, equality etc. Commissions cannot address questions of self-respect, dignity. They may discuss symptoms of social discrimination but not the structure. He described Brahmanism as the realm of the 'ideal' and the untouchable as in the realm of the 'real'. However, Brahmanism, for its existence and sustenance, requires the Untouchable. Brahmins are now left with conceptual resources, not physical boundaries and modernity is one of the ways to maintain the boundaries. He also added that the sequencing of modernity before democracy is Brahminical and it has been used by upper caste nationalists, like Tilak and even Vitthal Ramji Shinde to draw the line between the 'ideal' and the 'real'. This sequencing produces the Dumontian logic according to which the Dalit is not yet fit to contest elections and thus, we have to put democracy before modernity as the Indian democracy as it exists today is a fake democracy- 'democracy by leakage'- and cannot hope to annihilate caste but the egalitarian content of popular democracy has proven to be strong.

One of the reasons for Dalit complacency could be the dependence on subsidies. Dalits then ask for subsidised democracy. It has moral implications and fails to generate in a person a sustained sense of dignity and leads to a reproduction of dominance.

The conference witnessed intense debates between Dalit thinkers, academicians, students, activists on the course of Dalit political challenge to the mainstream hegemony and also raised questions on the space of Dalit thoughts and idea leading to Dalit emancipation and also the question of annihilation of caste within the framework of Indian democracy.

The conference facilitated the process of exchanges and interactions among various sections of the participants including academicians, students, activists, researchers and people passionately involved in the Dalit cause.

Prominent speakers in this conference included Prof. Gopal Guru, Dr. Partha Chatterjee, Dr. Rajeev Bhargava, Kanha Illaiah, Prof. Valerian Rodrigues, Prof. G.S. Nanchariah and others.

In order to facilitate an interaction with the public and the press a public meeting was organised at the Press Club, Basheerbag on the 11th of August addressed by Prof. Gopal Guru, K. Satyanarayana and Sivakami. The meeting was chaired by Prof. Susie Tharu of CIEFL. Around 150 participants were present in this meeting.