

“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 one 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 Mayawati. 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 Bharathi, 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 something 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 from 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 victimhood 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.