

Perspectives on Counter Hegemonic Cultures, Kerala, July 2007

The self-hood and self respect of a people is closely linked to their distinctive cultural identity. It shapes the nature of the relationship amongst human beings and between human beings and the natural world. It does not exist independent of life practices, of relationship with resources, of social organisation, of basic freedoms.

The Dalit cultural identities and practices have come under increasing attack in the past few decades. Their cultural space is increasingly squeezed out. The inherent civilizing mission and utter disregard for Dalit world views have pushed Dalits into a state of cultural marginalization and identity crises. This is at a time when they are subject to renewed assaults by forces of economic globalism destroying their life styles and cultural specificities under the banners of assimilation and mainstreaming. Cultural annihilation of a people is the first step towards their annihilation as a distinct people. Thus the question of cultural production is a part and parcel of general life activities, designed to hold existence together and impart meaning to it. The three-day seminar conducted at Vagamon by DIC on 'Perspectives on Counter Hegemonic Cultures' raised the questions of cultural representation, social space and re-figuring social identities spanning through Malayalam literature and in the specific context of Kerala society.

The three-day seminar on 'Perspectives on Counter Hegemonic Cultures' organized under the forum of Dalit Intellectual Collective was supported by Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai.

The main objective of the seminar was to bring together the dalit writers and poets in Kerala to deliberate on Dalit cultural agenda. The seminar focused on four major areas which are as follows:

1. Dalit Politics and Culture: the issues of representation
2. Dalits and Media: Experiences sharing of editors and writers from alternative journals and Magazines
3. Representation of Dalit identity in a Literary and cultural space
4. Unveil the Contemporary phases of Dalit literature in Kerala

The seminar opened with an interactive session with Prof. Gopal Guru, Department of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi on 5th July evening on the topic 'Reformation and Dalit Politics'. The formal opening of the seminar was on 6th July at 10.30 AM with the experience sharing of Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandez, Editor, ORA

Monthly and a Key-note address by Prof. Gopal Guru. The seminar concluded with an open discussion on the relevance of Dalit intellectual's gathering on 7th July.

Some of the notable participants were the academicians like Gopal Guru, K.K.Kochu, A.K. Ramakrishnan, Sanal Mohan, C. Lakshman, Ajit Muricken, VAK, Mumbai, poets and novelists S. Joseph, M.B. Manoj, M.R. Renukumar, P.J. Binoy, Dalit activist and feminist Rekha Raj and folk artist Binu Pallipadu, Umesh, theologians Rev. Sunny George, Rev. Y.T. Vinaya Raj, and Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandez. A group of student activists from Dalit Students Movement (DSM) also participated in this seminar.

On 6th July 2007, the seminar started with the sharing of experiences of Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandez. He had begun his social involvement as a Latin Catholic Priest in the 1970s and has been working for the Dalit Cause since 1982. His first encounter with the caste discrimination was at a teashop near Naranganam (a village near Pathanamthitta) parish, opened his eyes to the nature of caste which discrimination existing at the grassroots level. He recalled that at Naranganam teashop a young Dalit Christian boy was seated at the corner of a bench and was having his tea. The other end of the same bench was occupied by a high caste Christian. He was furious that a Dalit boy had dared to sit along with him on the same bench. The man decided to punish the boy. He beat and kicked out the boy from the teashop. Nobody dared to react to this. This incident challenged Fr. Aloysius.

He asked himself how to understand this brutal incident in the light of the teaching of Christ. Caste thus came to a central notion of his theological preaching. He found a number of instances of caste discrimination within the Christian parishes in Kerala. He affirmed his solidarity with Dalit Christians which in turn invited punishment transfers from parishes to parishes by the church authorities. Fr. Aloysius published his autobiography *Karutha Kurbana* (Black Mass) in 2006. Presently Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandez heading the Janajagruthy is bringing out a monthly Journal ORA (Organ for Radical Action) which carries out the Dalit issues in Kerala. This journal has 25 years of reputation. His narration highlighted the alienation of the Dalit communities from public spaces. The hegemony operates through such spaces as tea-shops, markets, church etc. occupied by the high caste men, which demand a continuing struggle from the part of Dalits.

Prof. Gopal Guru delivered the keynote address to contextualize the thematic concerns by locating Kerala literature in the larger domain of creative knowledge and juxtaposing normative theory. He raised very

pertinent questions in his talk. Is Malayalam literature able to reflect Dalit experience? Does Dalit literature get public appreciation? If yes, what are its bases? Is it accepted as a part of general literature or is it identified as 'Dalit literature'? Is this appreciation received from Dalits alone or non-dalits too? Whether the non-dalits appreciation is genuine, patronizing or ghettoizing? Further he extended his argument whether literature can substitute normative theory? He argued that metaphor is important but not sufficient to capture the realities. Therefore creative novels or poems can provide or support theory building but creative poetry or novel can't become a theory.

Theory has its own intellectual strength to argue and theorized the lived experience or existing social realities. He further argued that the metaphor in novel or poetry actually creates a gap between it self and the symbol. That is reality and the image. It is imperative to engage with the existing reality for constructing a theory. Besides he cited two instances from the novel Indhulekha by O. Chandhumenon and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Tottiyude Makan. In the course of the ensuing discussion the participants observed that the lack of translations from Indian languages to English is a great limitation to the understanding of Dalit literature in a wider context. Gurus' attempt was to understand literature as a locus of counter hegemonic space and Dalit literary movements are understood as counter cultural movements.

Rev. Sunny George argued for a dialogical process engage with a discourse of various socio-political structures. A shift in the contemporary social sciences from modernity to post-modernity was the discursive realm of Rev. Sunny George. He stressed upon the elimination of antagonistic understanding of the self for a plural understanding. Human beings are the products of plural multi-layered situations. The 'other' is a plural entity as well as the self. The marking of Dalit identity, its symbols and politics required a paradigm of plurality instead of monolithic frames of modernity.

Ajit Muricken and Gopal Guru critically engaged with Sunny George and pointed out that modernity have played an important role in the emancipation of dalit. The liberal values like equality, freedom, justice and political rights and the modern idea of equality of all humans as citizens, to an extent undermined the institutionalized inequality of caste system, arrayed against birth based hierarchies.

The beneficiaries of these modern values were the oppressed caste/class, whose goal was to free themselves from injustices, discrimination, denial of rights, inequalities, class division and other oppressive social practices.

Dr. A. K. Ramakrishnan spoke about the concept of Hegemony. He pointed out that people generally consider hegemony in a negative sense. Ramakrishnan specified that hegemony is not a negative connotation in Gramscian sense. Antonio Gramsci argued that hegemony exists in a multiple levels of a society of which cultural hegemony stands significant. The negative connotation of hegemony emerges from the established state power and authority whereas cultural hegemony or counter hegemony is located in civil society. The cultural hegemony is to be understood as value, ideas, notions, culture and also power. Therefore, in Indian context Dalit society can also attain this cultural hegemony by attaining certain values, ideas and notions through the cultural artifact. He argued that Dalits in India have started attaining the counter hegemony. This counter hegemony of Dalits cannot stabilize and reproduce a new set of values, ideas and notions. This new set of idea challenges the existing one and the same could provide alternative culture. "Power" operates not only in the formal structures of the state but it operates in the social-cultural and economic sphere as well.

He noted that the contemporary Dalit culture and politics is significant and it has to be understood in that context. He locates that contemporary identity politics of Dalit and Feminists is important. However, how far this identity politics cater to the larger project of establishing counter hegemony. And he also analysed the emergent Dalit Politics and emphasized the need for a combination of ideological and political approach. Ramakrishnan observes that once community identity becomes a stronger one, it provides some space to negotiate with the other. Dalit movements and literature was understood as a counter hegemonic force by Ramakrishnan. They are the potential movements that have a capacity to transcend existing power relations.

Dr. C. Lakshmanans' paper was titled "Understanding the Societies through the Lens of Novels in Tamil Literature" He began his paper by describing the universe of social science knowledge broadly located in normative theory and creative writings. He agreed with Prof. Gopal Guru's argument that the normative theory can provide a critical understanding, but it is not substitute normative theory. In Tamilnadu, there is a long trajectory of Dalit literature in terms of both quality and quantity. The important novels explore the existing reality of the Tamil

society. The novelist employed a reflective imagination of peoples lived life. He listed reputed novelists like Kalyana Rao, Iyam, Bama, Perumal Murukan, Alakiya Periyavan, Ambai and many others novels. He noted how Tamil novels portray the issues of subordinated people and women. He also observed that a few novels are directly connected with societal violence like Keelvenmoney massacr in 1967 in Tanjoore. Further he narrated the story of a novel titled Theendathe Vasantham (Untouchable Breez) by Kalyana Rao. And he interpreted the novel how one can understand the history of sub coordinated people through a creative work. This novel portrays the history of South India's' four historical phases, feudal, colonial, post independence and post-modern phases.

Veerankutty presented a bird's eye view of contemporary Malayalam Poetry in the evening session of the interaction with Malayalam Poets. This session opened with the releasing of two poetry books titled, Kanuniellorakshravum (No letter is visible) by M.B.Manoj and Veshakkaya (poisonous fruit) by M.R. Renukumar, both published by D.C.Books Kottayam. Copies were released by Prof. Gopal Guru and were handed over to Dr. A.K. Ramakrishnan and S. Joseph respectively. Veerankutty observed that the writings of Dalit writers in Kerala now adorn the heights of mainstream literature and have obtained ample space and readership.

In such a context major publishing houses have focused on the publishing of Dalit writings. These are the parallel histories which contextualized dalit life experience in the context of globalisation, political marginalization and subjugation. 'Some marks are never soluble in any heavy rains...' is the epitome of such bitter experiences. It haunts a community from generation to generation which is the core of all these narrations. 'Some words can't bare the alphabet of any languages' also explicitly narrates the difficulty of the articulation of dalit experience. Veerankutty observed that the life imageries sprinkled in the poems of S. Joseph, M.B. Manoj and M.R. Renukumar powerfully narrate the history of the Dalit Community.

Budding Malayalam poets recited their poems. This led to a discussion on the poems and sharing of their experiences by these poets. S. Kannan, Sijumon, Biju Pallippadu, S. Joseph, Veerankutty, M.B. Manoj, M.R. Renukumar et. al. presented their poems. The young poets powerfully articulated the issues of caste in their poems. These writings are not reduced to be as partisan slogans because of its strength.

On 7th July 2007, the Morning session began with a talk by K. K.

Kochu, social activist and literary critic. 'Dalit literature and Dalit Politics' was the focus of his narration. Kochu observed that there was a close link between Malayalam literary movements and the Kerala Politics. He portrayed three phases of Malayalam literature that began with the religious reformation movements of Sreenarayana Guru, Poikayil Yohannan and Aiyankali. The social reform movements were greatly indebted to the religious literature produced by Kumaran Assan, Vallathole et.al. The formation of Congress party and their cultural base also sprouted from this religious literature. Poikayil Yohannan also produced his own literature. The period 1930s-1970s was second phase of Dalit literature.

This was also the age of communist movements and dalit movements. The writings of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Ponkunnam Varkey, Keshavadev et.al were the backbone of communist movement. T.K.C. Vaduthala, Paul Chirakkarodu also produced their writings from the part of Dalit community during the same period which idealized dalit community. Kochu condemned these writings as 'ahistorical'. The class analysis preponderate all socio-political understandings including Kallara Sukumarans' (Dalit activist and Writer) analysis. The Dalit writers failed to present their historical life experiences. C. Ayyapans' short stories Uchamayakathile Swapnangal and Njandukal were the turning points in the Malayalam Dalit writings. These writings heralded a new phase in Dalit writings, which was the third Phase of Dalit literature and Politics. The new poets including S. Joseph, M.B. Manoj and M. R. Renukumar narrate the life experiences of Dalits today. K.K. Kochu also observed that these writings led to the abandoning of class analysis and the perception of caste as the central notion.

Sanal Mohan, started his talk on "Cultural studies and Literature" in social science academic, particularly with reference to the cultural studies in Universities and formal academic institutions. He raised the question, how far the cultural studies are incorporated and to what extent the emerging cultural studies in different institutions are able to grapple with Dalit realities. He observed that these existing cultural studies mainly focused on aesthetic dimension of life than the diversity of culture. The aesthetic of the society is deeply rooted in dominant notions. The richness of the written literature made it uneasy to understand a different notion of culture. The dominant aesthetics exist in the everyday forms of culture. The Dalit movements are critically engaging with the everyday form of culture. It is very imperative to understand, what kinds of Dalit experiences are transformed as a resource to interact with the dominant notion of culture.

Some kinds of language usages, for instance "enakku" etc. were some folk connotations of Malayalam, used by modern writers including T.K.C. Vaduthala et.al. What kind of social function was done by this language is pertinent. Before Vaduthala, Poikail Appaachan used a modern Malayalam in his prose and poems. During that time such a language was used as a ritualistic language. In every day form of culture language itself performed a different function. Malayalam is not a ritualistic language but the PRDS movement transformed the language into a different kind. For instance, he asked, to what extent the use of the word Dalit gives a meaning in culture and politics and answered that if one uses the word Dalit, has to be understood in its implied meaning – i.e. the culture of resistance. Before the emergence of Dalit category, a number of categories were used to understand the Dalit life. Dalit is a major resistance category of hegemonic culture. Sanal Mohan observed that the Dalit cultural movements are formulating new subjectivities. He also noted while referring to Lekshmanans' pertinent questions - Does Dalit literature creates new aesthetics? Is Dalit literature different from the existing aesthetic notions? For Sanal, it is a central point to understand, how one creates or locates new aesthetic modes in Dalit culture as well as, how Dalit tries to intervene and create the larger creative domain.

In the concluding session Ajit Murickan of VAK provided a brief on the objectives of the formation of DIC. He pointed out that 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 will:

- ◆ Interrogate the nature of the public sphere in India,
- ◆ Formulate new modes of dalit engagement,
- ◆ Propose an alternative action agenda,
- ◆ Critically appreciate dalit knowledge systems and practices, and
- ◆ Develop 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 will meet once a year when presentations will be invited on a theme chosen for the year. These themes allow for both general reflections and for reporting of more focused case studies.

There were 40 participants associated from the various walks of life. They observed that such a get-together would promote the cultural engagement for an egalitarian society. The translation of Dalit writings from Malayalam to English was raised as a vital need and the demand for a Dalit writers Directory was stressed upon in the seminar's evaluation session.