

National Conference: "Dalit Culture and Politics in South India", 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 Iyayam, 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. Ilangoan 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, Imayam 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 Karpuchastity for women and Kaamam- sexuality for men. While he referred Amdekar'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 Daliti 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.