NO ALPHABET IN SIGHT

New Dalit Writing from South India

DOSSIER I: TAMIL AND MALAYALAM

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struggles was that issues related to dalits and land—illegally alienated land, right over common lands, landlessness—found resonance in many places across the country.

In her monograph on the Panchami land issue, S. Anandhi cites a dalit lawyer, S.J. Raja, who provides a fitting conclusion to this discussion. Raja argues that to apply for a government job, you need the stipulated educational qualification; you should demonstrate that you will be able to do the job. What is the qualification for owning land? He asks the current landowning castes: 'Can you prepare the fields? Can you irrigate them? Can you supervise the irrigation channels day and night? Can you thresh the sheaves of grain using bullocks on the threshing ground?' If merit or efficiency is to be the norm, he tells them, 'you cannot own even a handful of this nation's land'. (58)

Dalit Pasts and History

The many-faceted involvement of dalit activists and scholars in critiquing, debating and writing history points to the importance of the past in recent dalit thinking. To make a claim on history is also to lay stake in the story of the nation and to extend an argument about one's position in the national community. In the dalit story/stories, the modes in which mainstream history practises its relationship with the past emerge as biased and deficient. In the dalit narrative, other stories are recalled and told. Established stages or periods are challenged and reinterpreted; the narrative of progress questioned. Trailing behind the new protagonists are new worlds and new issues that displace the old heroes and the old dramas. More often than not, the heroes of yesteryear are the antagonists of the present. But that is not all. The limits of history's disciplinary format, the prejudices that underlie the objectivity of the historian and his sources come under scrutiny. Some dalit thinkers challenge the very form of the history idea, asking whether this modality, shaped in the interests of sovereign power, is suitable for a dalit (or a democratic) account of the past. As we shall discover, outside the disciplinary restrictions of the academy and in the hands of activists and creative writers, the past makes an appearance in a number of surprising modalities and idioms. In these modalities,

history evades the rule of a nation or of progress and answers to the call of other constituencies. Of particular import, and contributing to the probity of this discussion, are the horizontal disagreements between such activist historians.

The writings of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which began appearing in the early 1990s alongside translations of Ambedkar's works into regional languages, have both inspired and angered dalit historians in Kerala as well as Tamil Nadu. Several contributors to our collection make important distinctions as they stress the pitfalls and the pleasures and rewards of dalit history.

History's caste

Can the present form of history accommodate dalit lives and experiences? What are the figures and modes that implicate history in the strategies of caste power? Is it possible for historiography to rise to the challenge of dalit history? These are some of the questions raised by Raj Gauthaman and Ravikumar (founders of the Tamil journal *Nirapirikai*) and K.K. Kochu (whose initial work in the area of history appeared in the context of *SEEDIAN*). These writers call for a break, not only with earlier modes in which world history (and by extension, nationalist and Marxist history) is conceived and practised, but also with the aims and goals of that history. The distinction between subaltern pasts and minority histories that Dipesh Chakrabarty proposes echoes these concerns and helps connect the argument to one that is better known in the English-speaking world. Minority histories, he argues, are histories of excluded social groups in liberal democracies and carry the mark of these state forms. They are also a category that shows up the limits of history. He asks, 'Are there experiences of the past that cannot be captured by the methods of the discipline?' (Chakrabarty 2001: 107). He calls such pasts 'subaltern pasts', in the sense of pasts that are not subordinated by the epistemology of professional history, as well as pasts that are non-statist and heterogeneous and therefore resist historicization in the strict sense of that term.

Dalit pasts are subaltern pasts in the sense that they are structurally suppressed pasts—at variance with the logic of the mainstream; headed in other, egalitarian, directions.

Gauthaman's thesis, elaborated in his books on Tamil history and culture, is presented in the headnote that accompanies the excerpt from *Dalit Panpaadu* (Dalit Culture, 1993) translated here[36] and is discussed in more detail in a 1998 article by M.S.S. Pandian. In brief, the argument is that Tamil history works to 'shatter' the dalit experience. The Chera, Chola and Pandya dynasties, glorified by dravidian nationalism, endorsed the idea that approval by brahmins was the basis for the improvement of one's caste status [in later births]. These kings, and the culture that arose around them, were responsible for the subordination of a dalit culture emerging out of the ordinary life of cultivators, fisher folk, hunters, shepherds and artisans; they created deeply embedded psychological complexes and contradiction in dalits. Dalit culture, on the other hand, is egalitarian. It has the capability of bringing together the oppressed worldwide. In a subtle and astute critique of the film *Knock-Out*, which tells the story of an Olympic silver medallist who died impoverished and forgotten on the street, Ravikumar demonstrates how the filmic narrative systematically overlooks or demeans the dalit presence in its story even as it charges society for its hardhearted negligence of the historic boxer-hero.

K.K. Kochu's measured argument is a call for scholarly critique, as against political statement. In the essay translated here, he argues that a critical analysis of the dominant historiography is essential before dalit pasts can be meaningfully represented. Marxist historiography, for instance, sets up a framework and outlines the themes and procedures of Indian history. But, according to Kochu, 'Modern Marxist historiography does not deconstruct the hegemony of *communities* in the nationalist historiography' (emphasis added). So, when the well-known Marxist historian D.D. Kosambi studied the changes in the relations of production to understand the shift from a primitive tribal society to an agrarian society, he drew his 'evidence' from dominant sources such as relics, inscriptions, archaeological surveys and literary works, and arrived at the preposterous view that 'the brahmin was the leader of agrarian activity'. When writing

[36] In the discussion that follows, unless otherwise mentioned, the citations are taken from authors' contributions to this volume.

about the tribal people of Kerala, Marxist historian P.K. Balakrishnan also follows the general framework of Kosambi. In such history, Kochu observes, brahmins are the leaders of the process of change and development in society and dalits eternally nothing but slaves. In the thematic of eternal slavery, Kochu argues, dalits are denied both cultural discourse and history.

According to Kochu, such assumptions are operative even in the work of certain dalit scholars who argue that dalits had a golden past. Rejecting the idea that 'all dynasties and landlords [referred to in the early sources] are pulaya/paraya kings', he observes that neither the myth of dalits as eternal slaves nor that of them as eternal kings allows us to understand dalit pasts in their own diverse historical contexts. Consequently, a *critique* of history, its evidential apparatus and its assumption that the brahmin is the active agent in the social process does not take place in these initiatives. Also missing is any assessment of contemporary dalit negotiations of history.

Kerala: Re-reading the renaissance and colonial modernity

A number of thinkers challenge the reading of colonial rule as only exploitative or anti-national and the Indian/Kerala renaissance as ushering in modernity. V.V. Swamy cautions us against the tendency to read Kerala's renaissance (generally dated to the early decades of the twentieth century) simply as an instance or symptom of a larger all-India phenomenon and as a process that developed in a modular form and uniformly over the region. Such readings obscure initiatives and movements that emerged from subaltern-dalit sections. A number of other writers demonstrate that the Kerala renaissance institutionalized '*savarna* power' by representing the middle castes as the agents of history. Kochu argues that when the nationalist and the communist movements posited a modern community during the 1930s and 1940s, nairs, ezhavas, Syrian Christians and Muslims constituted the new modern Kerala. Dalits had no place in this political formation.

In the literary scholar Pradeepan Pampirikunnu's view, the renaissance was a process of integration of the lower castes into an elite and savarna nationalism, though this took place unevenly. In addition, movements of the subaltern sections of society were

all but expunged from liberal as well as Left nationalist histories. Important organizations such as the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) under the leadership of Ayyankali, Poikayil Appachan's PRDS, Pambadi John Joseph's Akhila Thiruvithamkoor Cheramar Sangha (ATCS) and K.P. Vallon's Kochi Pulaya Mahasabha were established in the early twentieth century, but find no place in mainstream accounts. A number of commentators observe that even a communist and nationalist leader like E.M.S. Namboothiripad did not seriously engage with the contribution of Ayyankali in his works on the modern history of Kerala. Ayyankali is seen by him merely as a leader of the poor (*sadhujana*)—not of his caste—and certainly not as a hero for Kerala as a whole.

Reflecting the arguments extended in the 1990s about the dalit involvement in Kerala's modernity, we carry, in this volume, selections from scholarly work on the SJPS, the PRDS and ATCS. Work on these hitherto obscured organizations and their leaders is an important task in itself. Such rewriting also involves a reassessment of colonial modernity as an enabling and yet also as a limiting discourse. It is argued that the British abolition of slavery in 1843 and the educational, medical and other services rendered by the Christian missionaries should be seen as a contribution to the social transformation of dalit society and of Kerala. Missionary initiatives and colonial legislation enabled agrarian slaves (who formed only a section of the dalits) to move into plantations and factories as labourers and also into the education sector. In missionary documents, slaves feature as human beings, with emotions and bodies that suffer. Sanal Mohan, in the essay reproduced here, demonstrates that Christianity offered them a new language of the body, of interiority, of subjectivity. The background of land ownership (3 per cent of the pulayar were landowners in 1875) and the social mobility acquired by some other sections of the dalits, who were part of agricultural and non-agricultural occupations, aided the subaltern renaissance that took place in Travancore and Kochi. These movements of resistance were facilitated by colonial modernity but went beyond its agendas. Kochu points out that dalits asserted themselves as agents in these processes and therefore the view that dalits are eternal slaves is erroneous.

Tamil Nadu: The critique of dravidian nationalism

In Tamil Nadu, a section of dalit critics re-examined the legacy of dravidian nationalism. (Parthasarathi) They did so in the context of the revival—in the post-Mandal period—of Periyar as the icon of non-brahminism. They set out three broad phases of the dravidian movement (the early phase of the non-brahmin, vellala intellectuals; the phase of E.V. Ramasamy Naickar, popularly known as Periyar, and his Self-Respect movement; and the contemporary phase of dravidian parties such as DMK, AIADMK and MDMK). When Periyar's Self-Respect movement was described as modern, rationalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-religious and subaltern, dalit critics contested the representation of Periyar as the only leader who worked for the emancipation of the lower castes and criticized Periyar for his derogatory speeches against dalit women and men, his suppression of dalit figures such as Iyothee Thass and his anti-minority perspective. Scholars of dravidian nationalism were quick to decry the dalit critique of Periyar as propaganda, which they said was designed only to defame the great leader and thinker.

However, the dalit critique is not, at root or primarily, only about Periyar or his contribution. It signals the arrival of dalits as intellectuals and leaders in the Tamil public domain where the dravidian movement and its ideology had hitherto silenced the dalit voice. As Raj Gauthaman observes, 'Wherever Periyarist or communist movements were strong, there was no dalit articulation.'[37] Ravikumar elaborates this point: 'Tamil Nadu had witnessed the dawn of modern dalit consciousness even before the arrival of Ambedkar. The dalits here had been politically mobilized by leaders such as Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860–1945, who attended the Round Table Conference with Ambedkar) and M.C. Rajah (1883–1947).'[38] In other words, the critical reading of the dravidian movement is designed also to reclaim the obscured dalit figures for the present and to question

[37] Interview with Raj Gauthaman, Pondicherry, 6 April 2004.

[38] Ravikumar makes this observation in an unpublished article, 'Questioning Periyar's Legacy' in 2003.

the dominance of dravidian nationalism in the cultural and political sphere in post-Independence India.

The Tamil selections in this dossier provide a sample of the dalit critique of Periyar that was articulated in the 1990s. In fact, in Tamil Nadu it was this debate that signalled the arrival of an autonomous dalit movement on the scene. It is important here to note that this critique is not shared by the arundathiyar intellectuals, by influential journalists such as Punitha Pandian of *Dalit Murasu*, or by writers such as Azhagiya Periyavan and Mathivannan.

Contemporary dalit movement

Dalit critiques in the 1990s opened up a number of avenues, such as the identification of obscured dalit leaders and thinkers and activists who now serve as symbols of the contemporary dalit movement. As we will find below, a purely academic evaluation of these efforts cannot capture the political issues that coalesce around the 'new' figures.

With the discovery and publication of a selection of his papers and copies of the journal that he edited, Iyothee Thass, a Tamil Buddhist, was repositioned as a dalit scholar and philosopher. Though he was well-known in his time and had engaged with leading figures including Periyar, his work had been marginalized. Thass had extended the thesis that the parayar were early Buddhists who had been displaced and subordinated by outsiders. This interpretation is similar to Dr Ambedkar's view of dalits originally being Buddhists. The implications are important. If this was so, Tamil dalits were the real inheritors of the anti-brahmin legacy, now claimed by the dravidian parties. Influential dalit scholars charged the dravidian movement with the suppression of Thass and of the dalit Buddhist identity. The criticism, in fact, strengthened the view that the dravidian identity of Periyar's Self-Respect movement was one of an alliance between non-brahmin upper castes and the backward castes. In this context, dalit critics argued that Thass opened up the possibility of a radical dalit identity. The followers of Periyar argued that the opposition between Periyar and Thass is false as both belong to a radical dravidian tradition. Wary of the

implications of this new parayar self-image as the original Tamils, arundathiyar leaders, on the other hand, criticized the ascription of the Buddhist identity to only the parayar.

Another figure that emerges is that of Ayyankali (1856–1942), a social revolutionary, who led many struggles for the entry of dalits into the public spaces and, most memorably, for education, invoking the support of colonial law and modern values. He mobilized dalits as sadhujana, thus providing a collective identity to all untouchable sub-castes: pulaya, paraya and kurava. Dalit scholars point out that he led the first strike of agricultural workers in Kerala (1907–08). He also initiated reforms within the community such as giving up traditional caste-ordained ornaments by women and asserting the right to dignified dress among his people, especially women. Chentharassery published the first book on Ayyankali in 1979, based on interviews, a rare obituary volume and the newspapers of the time. Ayyankali had been a nominated member of the pre-Independence Travancore Legislative Assembly.

The legacy of Poikayil Yohannan (1879–1939), who established the dalit Christian movement PRDS, has been brought in anew for evaluation and debate. We carry two pieces, by Sanal Mohan and V.V. Swamy, that deal with aspects of recent discussions around the PRDS and propose different interpretations of this important dalit spiritual organization. Under Yohannan's leadership, the PRDS became a community site where slave memory is relived as an act of resistance through ritual performances. In the PRDS context, slavery is reconfigured into a category that enables negotiation within society and the church, and can also make claims on the resources of the state. Dalits who have worked on this movement use missionary records and biographies, document rituals, conduct interviews, collect and analyse songs and other literature to reconstruct the history of PRDS and engage with the ideas of Yohannan. Despite their differences, they agree that through its criticism of the Christian church, PRDS was not criticizing Christianity itself. It was targeting the brahminical form of the religion.

The recovery of figures such as Iyothee Thass, Ayyankali and Poikayil Yohannan problematizes the mainstream version of the

modernity project. 'Nairization', savarna nationalism, or dravidian nationalism are the concepts dalit critics use to describe what was hitherto accepted as a renaissance. The obscuring of dalit figures and their movements can be attributed to the dominant colonial versus nationalist models of historiography in India. In such a framework, religious movements that originated within the institutional structures of colonial modernity and often directly opposed nationalist movements were labelled either as anti-national and pro-colonial or simply as non-political. This tendency was underscored by the influential Marxist paradigm which reads history as a narrative of production relations in the economy, and views questions of human dignity, self-esteem, religiosity, ancestry and lineage as 'social' and therefore, non-political. Even in frameworks that write about 'peasant *rebellions*' and 'tribal *revolts*', the socio-religious dalit movements pose problems of conceptualization.

We bring this section on dalit pasts to a close with a brief discussion of writers who access dalit pasts—personal and communal—through the archive of memory, experience and mythic forms. Scholars have pointed out that memoirs and autobiographies such as those of Gunasekaran or Bama are social histories that introduce a dalit voice and infiltrate the counter-current of dalit experience into the official record of the past. It is, however, through the myths—revisited in a manner that reinstates their awe-inspiring reality—that poets, storytellers and writers (C. Ayyappan, N.D. Rajkumar) draw on wronged spirits, demonic presences and spectres that stay alive in community memory (and often have shrines built for them).[39] These figures enable an exploration of the structure and history of psychic life at the raw edges of the 'civilized' world. Stories that circulate around these popular cultural figures are fragmentary and episodic; they contain an intensity of feeling—anger, rage, revenge—and these emotions, rather than the events, recounted in narrative are the key

[39] Rajkumar traces the practice of using insults, abuse, dirty words in a yearly ritual as arising from the use of such language (shit language) to frighten and drive away the upper castes. In parts of Kerala, shrines were constructed to propitiate those who were sacrificed to ensure the strength of a bund in the backwaters. See for instance the story of the shrine at Valliaykottungal at Moncompu, reported in Rammohan 2006: 27.

to their reality. Neither existing rationality nor existing morality can hold the truths they carry with them. Dalit pasts such as the ones in Rajkumar and Ayyappan question the very identity of the secular, modern and therefore, casteless, historian-person.

In Search of Prose: Notes for an Aesthetic

Creative literature, as well as what we can broadly term 'critique', has been of singular importance in the growth of the dalit movement after Ambedkar. In contrast to earlier periods where atrocity reporting, reform talk, polemical statements and policy proposals, largely done by non-dalits, and addressed primarily to non-dalits, occupied the forefront of writing related to the untouchable/Scheduled Caste question, the legendary Dalit Panthers of the late 1960s and early '70s were all writers, literary philosophers and theorists. Their contributions to poetry, autobiography, fiction and literary criticism not only shook the foundations of Marathi literature, it also opened up new dimensions in social and political thinking. The dossier now in your hand, of texts from a period of a quarter century or so beginning in the late 1980s, is a treasure trove of fiction, poetry, oral and written memoirs and oratory. It is important to note that the non-literary texts (history, investigative reporting, analysis) here also eschew older forms. They do not follow the protocols of social science writing but take their cue from literature's more direct and promiscuous involvement with life. Thus, while both law and state are thematic here, these texts focus on critique. They do not primarily endorse the law or appeal to government in the request for redress. What is more, when dalit intellectuals (writers and commentators alike) discuss the dalit question, they bring to the table an extraordinary range of new settings and new issues.

It is our contention that the achievements of these creative texts are of far-reaching political and theoretical significance. We must differentiate the proposal being made here from the familiar valorization of literature as presenting a more concrete and sensitive picture than what non-literary writing is able to offer. We are not saying that. Neither are we saying that literary texts are free to draw on forms and capture realities that elude academic writing

such as the social sciences. Our thesis, presented in a first rough cut, is that academic writing and indeed public thinking as a whole is underwritten by subliminal structuring that makes it possible to feel, think and say certain things, make certain connections, acknowledge and address certain authorities and not others. This is not a set of beliefs or an ideology. It comprises analyses, settings, figures, narrative elements and storylines, sensory values, feelings, categorical certainties about ethics and so on. It is this formidable subliminal apparatus that provides the existing form of power with an alphabet and a grammar that makes possible the writing of its story in every domain.

The mythos of reason

European history extends an apt example. The philosophers, writers and artists of the European Enlightenment, set up a critique to displace the church and god-centred forms and develop a secular epistemology. This critique involved the conceptualization of space and time in subjectively meaningful forms but also the *creation* of those forms, and by extension, the new subject. This required, on the one hand, a critique and rejection of tradition and, on the other, the imaginative elaboration and aesthetic consolidation of the new exercise of reason. The Romantics actually thought of the aesthetic revolution as one that would transform human experience and develop a new sensorium centred on the 'free' individual. It was largely through the labour of the artist-intellectuals of that period that this individual acquired a robust, confident sense of himself, and the new world its forms and dimensions. As the key role assigned to the aesthetic by Kant, Hegel and other philosophers also suggests, alongside the official formats of 'Reason', its mythos had to be put into place.

Baburao Bagul, a key figure in the burst of dalit writing and activism associated with the Dalit Panthers in the late 1950s and early '60s helps us appreciate the caste dimensions of such power in contemporary India. He writes:

> Power and rule remained in the hands of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. As a result, those who contributed to their rule were

> glorified as heroes and gods. The social structure was shaped in accordance with the desires of these ruling *varnas*. Consequently mythology and cultural consciousness remained attuned to their ideals and literature and was shaped according to their norms. (Dangle 1992: 275)

He continues:

> It is for this reason that values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, rationality, and more recent ideas of democracy and socialism have no mythical significance in the society and literature of the Hindus. They have no roots, no normative basis in Hinduism. (276)

What does this imply? Most importantly, this: A point of view from which to tell a minority story is not available, readymade—even for autobiography. The categories, schemes, logic and vocabulary required for the arguments (and all narratives are arguments of a kind) do not yet exist. All these have to be created, fashioned anew. Literature, or more accurately, the aesthetic, applies itself to this task. Critique, which is a new modality that takes the whole field of culture as its territory, makes its contribution by loosening the hold of established forms at this subterranean level.

T.M. Yesudasan's carefully formulated programme for dalit studies envisages it primarily as critique. Critique is a pulling away from the sacred groves of existing forms of knowledge, art and commonsense. It involves small, focused, but risky objections to government by those norms, under those conditions, by those people. It may focus on a specific incident (like Rekharaj's short analysis of caste as a factor in Rajni's suicide) or it may rake in a whole history and culture as Raj Gauthaman does when he locates a hidden dalit antagonist in Tamil ethical literature and pursues the implications of that discovery. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu similarly focuses on symptomatic detail to expose the caste form of Malayalam modernity. Ravikumar's essays are exemplary here. They travel across the length and breadth of Tamil culture to cut open and expose with surgical precision the 'venomous touch' of casteism. His and other essays (K.K. Kochu's, K.K. Baburaj's) also reflect on the various forms such critiques may take.

It is through literature, however, that the actual restaging occurs. These texts reorganize a field, arrange settings, grapple with lines of authority and address and investigate feelings, sensory perceptions and attitudes. As we shall find in the analyses that follow, they fashion the figures, objects and accounts that will make dalit life not just visible, but also meaningful, accountable to dalits and ethically compelling for everyone. The moves are disparate, uneven, difficult to pull into a single story. Yet the best works make the unknown felt; the silence evident.

In sum then, both literature and what we might broadly call critique take on this task—and these are the major modes of contemporary dalit writing. Their labour must invent an alphabet that will enable a dalit tongue to be spoken. They must design an acoustic in which that speech may be heard. The reader is the best judge of the scope and significance of this terrain and of the work undertaken in this literature. As a contribution to that process, we offer readings of a few exemplary texts.

Reason and madness

There would be no one who has not, in the privacy of their mind, reworked a humiliating experience to recover a sense of self-possession. C. Ayyappan's short story 'Branthu' (Madness) uses this genre stolen from everyday existence to challenge both official commonsense and the consensus that undergirds the general way of life in contemporary Kerala. The account proceeds in the (scientific) manner of an investigation. Each node in the other's version is reopened; its structure and assumptions are questioned and reinterpreted. In the process the discussion is shifted, step by step, into entirely new ground. Taken-for-granted practical and emotional formats are reversed to enable an argument about 'private' misery to touch innovatively on themes such as reason, ethics, welfare and the politics of sanity. The argument here is not the Foucauldian one about the insane, but its proportions have a similar civilizational scope.

The humiliating experience in this case is an encounter on the protagonist's doorstep with an old schoolmate, now panchayat member, and his sidekicks. As he opens the door, a torrent of

words hit him: they are taking his mad sister—waiting outside in a taxi, straining at her bonds—to the hospital and want him to accompany them. In a response that exceeds his own understanding at that moment, he says, looking at his sister: 'I see nothing,' and slams the door in their faces.

The story opens at this point. It is structured as a monologue in which the protagonist returns to the episode to take issue with it. The staged, fictional address is to the friend-official to whom he explains his act. The actual addressee, however, is a dalit reader—someone like the protagonist himself: middle class, educated, yet systematically ground-down, routinely undermined, by the everyday impasses that beset him in modern Kerala. Finally, it is this figure that emerges strengthened by the story. To address oneself thus to other dalits and not to the upper castes, or on their terms, is to break with the normative form of mainstream discourse and firm up (and affirm) the idea of a dalit reader whose requirements are different. This itself is a major artistic and political achievement. Even more significant is the new community that is being gathered through such an address.

The monologue form (Imayam also makes good use of it) is significant here. In 'Madness', the protagonist finds himself slamming the door shut on the righteous garrulousness of existing reason, its faith in governmental solutions and empty ethics, in order to create the space and time to reframe the issue. Dimensions that will not be accounted in the commonsense of 'normal' public or family life, panchayats, social service, responsibility, sympathy, humanity, mental hospitals, government quarters, but also unhappy dalit families, fair wives, mutinous daughters, unkempt mothers, the relentless violence of casual comment, despair, madness and sanity crisscross the page. Ill-formed, crude and difficult-to-speak-about details, must find entry here. Good, responsible citizens are moved by the plight of his sister. But, the protagonist asks in a biblical idiom that lifts his question into the ethico-political domain: 'Why does my helplessness not move your stony hearts?'

Traumatic lineages

Fathers, and by extension the knotted challenge of the return to a lineage, are central to Periyavan's powerful short story 'Stench', translated here, as well as Sivakami's self-reflective, revisionary afterword to her first novel, *The Grip of Change*.

Both accounts are centred on alienated young protagonists and the obstacles they are confronted with as they attempt to reconnect with their community. The secular-national consensus which founds Indian education and public life is for 'leaving caste behind'. It takes care of the upper-caste family by making place for its customs in the culture and tradition of Indian modernity. But it denigrates the culture of dalit families and provides no guidance on a dalit patrimony. Identity politics embraces community and sometimes traces glorious lineages, but its triumphalism often overlooks the hazard of identification that these authors investigate. It is worth noting that both stories also effect a break from the realist narrative.

The son's return in 'Stench' works simultaneously at three levels: it is physical, psychic and symbolic. This is an epic journey of re-education—a re-education in the meaning of stench. It is also a story that stands witness to the birth of a new dalit selfhood. Reluctantly, this young adult sets out to see his father at the tannery where he works. He is disturbed about not receiving his support-money in time; irritated that he has been forced to go and meet the father, to *ask* for what, thus far, had just 'arrived'; fearful of what he might encounter. The tannery is a huge, dark, terrifying, stench-ridden place in which he initially loses his bearings completely. As his father's half-naked figure comes into focus, blocked words push at his chest, his mind sinks. This powerfully conceptualized and meticulously crafted story of the journey through the depths of hell to find home in the embrace of a father is also a baptism of sorts. One must wade into the stench, bend to touch the depths of revulsion, in order to be reborn, reconnected with a father and a heritage.

The Grip of Change works in an altogether different mode. The story here is told from the point of view of Gowri, a young girl growing up in the family of Kathamuthu—a dalit leader and protagonist of the story. We learn later that this was the period when Ambedkar associations in villages were beginning to again raise the caste issue. Though Kathamuthu is loved and respected by his people, who turn to him in their need and regard him as an

effective representative, in Gowri's story he emerges as a womanizer, a polygamist, a patriarchal father and husband who practises a dishonest and manipulative politics. His counterfoil is her cousin: an upright trade union leader from a younger generation who provides the narrative with its resolution. The novel was acclaimed not only by the literary establishment, but also by some dalits. It was forthright, it was fresh; the narrative and dialogue singularly accomplished; the author's achievement unparalleled. All the same, her father was hurt, her relatives unhappy, as were some critics. The criticism was important enough to occasion the sequel, *Author's Notes*, which is an exploration of the hazards created for the dalit writer by taken-for-granted assumptions and subliminal perceptions that constitute what we might think of as an authorized Indian sensorium. This sensorium underlies all our realisms (psychological, literary, legal, social scientific) as well as the subjectivities they assume and produce.

Structured as a physical return to her village after many years, the narrative in *Author's Notes* moves between outer and inner worlds to reflect on: a) what the author evades or could not write about; b) how she frames an issue; c) when she leaps ahead of the evidence; and d) the inner compulsions that drove her writing. At one point in the sequel, after reporting on a nightmare, she writes: 'How was she to escape from her father? From all of them? She wanted to take flight, naked and free.' (Sivakami: 143)

Dalit writing has to pull against the address, the narrative flow, the problematic, the very unconscious of mainstream Indian (and upper-caste) culture; it has to face many terrible realities, wrestle with emotions, confront contradictions that lurk in every corner. The foundations of realism and an educated subjectivity can both be impediments when it comes to describing a dalit world and posing the dalit question. It is by no means enough to be born in an 'untouchable' family to be a dalit writer.[40]

[40] Ravikumar writes of the 'mental prisons built by Hinduism' and makes careful distinctions to warn against 'brahminical elements . . . which assume a dalit voice as casually as farting'. Ravikumar 2007: 141 and 144.

> Why did you have to mock the dalit leadership? . . : you were eager to project yourself as fair and just . . . Your subconscious is evident in the language of your writing—your choice of words, in the construction of your phrases. You carefully guard the image of the upper castes . . . Your subconscious addresses the rich with respect and the poor with disrespect. (Sivakami: 151–52)

'Nothing in the novel was untrue,' she concludes. 'But the novel itself was false.' (Sivakami: 150)

The challenge of dalit life

A deliberate effort to pull away from the clamorous staging of atrocity and the sociological idiom of caste that marks much pre-1990s writing about dalits may be discerned in a significant number of writers in both languages. Their stress is on the distinctive nature of literary work and on aesthetics. But this should not be read as a return to formalism. In literature, the writer's task is not to argue a doctrine or make a case; Imayam observes: 'Good literature takes a person to silence. Political writing has a goal, a target; literature does not. Literature's task is not to provide information, it should be to "create life".' His own effort as a writer has been invested in crafting forms that take measure of this task. 'What have dalit writers given to dalit life?' he asks, implying that such creative representation actually enables life in some way.

Cho. Dharman, who is the son of a professional *oyil kummi* artist-performer, traces a shift in his writing to conversations with a friend in his village, a jeweller and poet, who said: 'Your writing is about the village, but I have lived here for many years and I do not find your writing of much use to me.' Dharman confronts the fact that beyond Left movements, 'there is a whole panorama of life [which] cannot be reduced to the circus of the Party . . . The life which Left writers portray is a . . . a wooden doll without life.' He asks, irritated: 'Why are dalits always portrayed in stereotypical ways, as landless, easy to anger and so on? Dalits own land, they work, they tend cattle, they are playful, artistic, know how to get along, have a good moral life.'

Dharman's much-acclaimed *Kukai* is an evocative account of journeys through enchanted forests, mysterious bird summons and laws of fertility that bind human beings with nature in uncanny ways. Such stories may be familiar in the idiom of dalit lore, but in literature it is a first of its kind. The philosophical aura of the narrative, its concerns, the magical turn of the story, all point away strongly from the routines of realism. There is no mention here of the word 'dalit'. Dharman takes special care never to describe himself as a dalit writer. He is a writer. What he creates is literature, not dalit literature. The relationship with a dalit sphere is oblique; it is not obvious; it needs to be thought through.[41]

Imayam is critical of the post-1990s moment in dalit politics which has produced a space for writers to 'do an all-India sort of stuff'. Such an optic, he says, does not serve literature well. His own settings are resolutely local; he uses a Tamil variant which is unfamiliar to educated readers and which rarely finds its way into print. He has brought into Tamil fiction, settings, figures, relationships, experiences and intensities that have never before crossed its pages. Space, not time, is this writer's element: openly structured plots fight shy of narrative resolutions. There is a restrained and unsentimental tenderness in the close-ups that honour the common places of village life with serious attention. To honour in this way is not necessarily to endorse. It is to endow life with a human scale. Such framing debars an all-India perspective, yet, paradoxically, it also attempts to lay claim, in a local idiom, to the sphere of the universal.

Imayam's interest is not so much in the abundance of dalit life 'over and above' a caste identity. As he focuses on dalit life the way it is lived among and between dalits themselves, what emerges is a world that lies outside the confines of what conventionally shows up as identity. This is a world that remains invisible in the structure of the earlier discourse. Take 'Manbaaram', for instance. Here we find an epic account of a long day in the life of a small farmer, who expertly oversees the sowing of his land while he and his wife also

[41] The specific nature of the relationship between the initiatives we have gathered together under this subheading and D.R. Nagaraj's thinking requires serious study. (Nagaraj 2010)

work alongside those hired to help. They start before dawn, work together to ensure that everything is perfectly timed for the sowing to be completed by dusk. We find intimate knowledge of the land and its tending, an attachment that comes from having worked the soil. In this village story, if there is an adversary, it is the untimely rain, not the upper-caste landlord. Landowner and labourer relate on a level field: he explains to them, shares his anxieties, cajoles, chides, consults, suppresses his irritation. For the all-India reader, raised on the landlord's roving eye and twirling moustache, this is a new and unfamiliar idiom of leadership.

In dalit literature, a story like this, focused on the drama and the tensions of agriculture, is itself a break. While all rural dalits work the land, and many in southern Tamil Nadu also traditionally own land, the focus on caste occupations, atrocity and discrimination rarely brings this side of the daily rhythm of life into literature.

Love

The only fictional account of unaffected, joyous attraction between a young man and a woman that we find in this book appears in the bustling context of 'Video Mariamman' (by Imayam). No small part of the aesthetic achievement of this story is the creation of a literary space for this rare happening. Sukirtharani's extraordinary poems also frame the idea of 'life' and of human scale in a mode that enables a fresh articulation of love and desire. Hovering menacingly over a dalit woman's claim on life today is the tortured image in which she has hitherto appeared in public consciousness—as a victim of dominant-caste lust. In that setting, her body is only a place of violence. Can this very body re-notate itself to lay a claim on desire? And further, can it make a claim on pleasure, even on self-pleasuring? The awesome beauty of these poems is in the very courage with which they do so. It is a beauty achieved with poetic rigour: through a diction devoid of coyness; a self-assertion unmarred by anger; a joy in being that is altogether fresh in its magic. It is not that there is no anger at all here, as we see in 'Pariah God'. But it is anger that is not allowed to corrode the self; an anger than can see past the oppressor. Commenting on the new feminist

literature as a whole, Ravikumar once observed that a tiger, long silent on the wallpaper, had stirred and was now waiting at the head of the bed. (Ravikumar 2004: 11–20)

Ghosts, spirits and other other-worldly beings

Kukai, the powerful omen-carrying, nocturnal bird in Cho. Dharman's novel is only one of the many spirits, demon-gods and ghosts that inhabit dalit worlds and traverse some of the most powerful fiction and poetry in this volume. In rational, full-fledged modernities, concourse with such beings is confined to the sphere of religion, preferably a national religion—or to madness. They are associated with pre-modern beliefs and practices. They belong to the past or to the world of dreams.

Not so for a number of writers in this volume, notable among them N.D. Rajkumar, C. Ayyappan and Raghavan Atholi. In Ayyappan's case, it was his living grandmother who was a repository of 'the entire history of every single unnatural death in that locality and neighbouring localities'. Bodies that have not been put to rest with the rituals of propriety/property: such unrecognized and unrequited beings haunt and destabilize the living. Like dreams, they are another reality, the reality of night that waits at the threshold of the day. Ayyappan grew up, got educated and 'became a rationalist' (he observes wryly). Yet, these beings from his maternal world lurked, only waiting for him to find Amos Tutuola's *Palm Wine Drunkard* before they pushed their way back, or perhaps just slipped back, into the repertoire of his imagination and into his writing. They mock at the sacred spaces of his atheism. Like the protagonist in 'Madness', the ghost in 'Ghost Speech' embodies wrongs that cannot be recognized until the law of official reason is turned round and seen from its repressed underside. These virtual beings are representations of another reality whose powers are no less evident than what is generally considered as 'reality'. The implication, not to be missed, is that what is taken for granted as real in common sense is the result of a representation and, more specifically, an upper-caste form of representation that sets up its reality by obscuring the dalit experience. Sanal Mohan describes

the painful slave experiences that are dramatically rehearsed in the memory rituals of the dalit religious formation, PRDS. Those counter memories have a life—and a reality—of this kind. V.V. Swamy notes in the piece translated here: 'PRDS activities at the depths of society are revelatory and philosophically significant.' The spirits constitute a memory-store, an archive that enables a critique of existing reality. In them, another law and another reason are kept alive and may be called up.

While Ayyappan explores spectral beings and shadow spaces from where we catch a glimpse of the dark underside—the unconscious, one may say—of society and its laws and its rituals of honour and shame, N.D. Rajkumar's poetry introduces spirits who embody another kind of power. This colourful, self-educated poet lives in Nagercoil, far from all centres of modern literature, and writes in the dialect of that region, but is widely regarded today as among the most important contemporary Tamil poets. As the son of a *mantravadi*—a healer who prescribes medicines derived from plant and animal sources, casts spells, calls out demons, works magic—Rajkumar too was raised with a palpable sense of the strength of spirit-presences who can disturb ordinary, everyday lives. The spectral beings in Rajkumar's poems represent historical wrongs, but they do not wander unrecognized. They have shrines designed for them, sacrifices that acknowledge them. They have the confidence of powers that must be reckoned with.

Poetry in search of a prose

A 2004 article by S. Joseph is titled 'Poetry in Search of a Prose'. This inversion of the conventional hierarchy in which prose is thought of as the ground from which poetry arises and distances itself, serves as a summary statement on the scope and effort of the aesthetic—the poesis—that we encounter in this new literature. Its ambition is to put into place a prose—and nothing short of that—that will suffice Indian life.

V

Conclusion: No Alphabet in Sight

This dossier demonstrates how dalits as activists and intellectuals occupy public space and articulate questions of representation in national institutions, share in political power and equality in civil society as well as in the sphere of the imagination. The stereotypical view of dalits as primitive and traditional people with no cultural or intellectual resources and therefore as victims of social oppression and marginalization is seriously contested. Critiques are extended of progressive, secular nationalisms and of categories like class, non-brahmin, dravidian, harijan, Malayali, Tamilian and so on, asserting autonomy from these universalisms and their schemes of power. Dalit scholarship makes strategic interventions in the field of knowledge. Through these processes dalits mobilize themselves as a new caste group and assert their power in the social and political spheres. Complex and important stories that are yet to be told are those of the dalit engagement with and renewal of Indian feminism, and the dalit re-entry into electoral politics.

Dalit politics acquired a new visibility in the 1990s and dalits are now seen as an influential group that can challenge the dominant social groups and the state. A rich vein in this dossier is the record of the different forms of political activity (local forums and campaigns, pressure groups, little magazines, literature, art, critical writing, public interventions, dalit political parties, electoral politics and alliances) that enable dalits to assert their autonomy as skilled and knowledgeable people with proposals that affect the nation as a whole. As a consequence, dalits' right to resources, representation and power are increasingly acknowledged. In the new discourse, caste is reshaped into a social collectivity in which related castes engage in a horizontal political grouping. All these dimensions of the dalit question are extremely significant. But this dossier opens up a deeper story—that of the rise of dalits as a modern community.

Dalits are nameless and faceless people in dominant Indian culture. In this volume, dalit writers and critics recover and re-present all those nameless and faceless figures and their memories,

myths, histories, sensuous and intellectual resources to reinvent caste, politically, as a community. This re-created dalit life world and its knowledges form the basis on which dalits create a new identity, the constituents of which are human dignity, self-worth, pride and self-respect. What is this 'identity'? It is by no means simply a marker of cultural difference in a multicultural context, which essentially enables a minority to maintain its own distinctive identity as it adjusts to the mainstream (wherein it is provided a space within democracy for survival). What dalits have been doing from the 1990s is entirely different from this. They are critiquing and rearranging the field of dominant culture and the politics of the upper castes by unsettling the boundaries, frames, figures and ideologies. In other words, they are reformulating democracy.

The process is so rich that the very concept 'dalit' also becomes a field of contestation. Claims are made to an emancipatory identity for dalits as Tamil Buddhists, to the lineage of the adi-chera dynasty and to adi-dravida roots. Through these identities, the dominant cultural identity of Indian, dravidian or Malayali is critiqued. The field of Tamil nationalism and dravidian politics, for instance, is re-organized by the pallar and arundathiyar with their self-assigned identities as devendra kula vellalar and arundathiyar. Arundathiyar enter the new 'dalit' field with demands for equality, while, as devendra kula vellalar, the pallar assert their caste superiority over the parayar and arundathiyar.

No conceptual language exists to represent the dalit claim to identity outside of existing universal/secular formations. It has to be thought out and created. In a small way, *No Alphabet in Sight* captures the dalit experience of caste and the affirmation of dalit life and community. It offers documents that help us grasp this innovative theoretical moment.

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