

New Phase of Dalit-Bahujan Intellectual Activity

The Dalit Intellectuals' Collective has provided a forum for debates in which statements on issues of relevance to dalit life and culture are interrogated constructively by non-dalit scholars. It hopes to lead dalit culture from the realm of empiricism to that of theory, particularly a distinctive theory of knowledge.

GOPAL GURU, V GEETHA

Dalit-bahujan cultural life has been marked by growing intellectual activity in recent years. Interestingly, this activity seems to be taking place well outside the formal educational sites in which such endeavours usually flourish. Broadly speaking, it is being promoted variously by the state, by the Republican Party of India (RPI) headed by Prakash Ambedkar, by dalit-bahujan bureaucrats, with or without the support of dalit-bahujan political parties, and by dalit non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

All these institutionalised intellectual efforts other than those organised by NGOs have much in common. First, they treat the thoughts of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao (Babasaheb) Ambedkar, both considered infallible, as a given and indispensable framework. Secondly, they lack genuine interrogators, either from within the dalit-bahujan intellectual tradition or from outside it. Most of the scholars who participate in these efforts belong to dalit-bahujan castes. Thirdly, these endeavours seek to create an intellectual base for taking on the 'Hindutvawadi' forces whose project is to distort and destroy Ambedkar's thought. Besides, the dalit-bahujan scholars seek to establish their claims to intellectual representation away from the 'brahminised' socialists and the communists who are often accused of attempting to lead dalits away from Ambedkar thought. Fifthly, they take place in a context of the efforts of non-dalit intellectuals to hijack the dalit intellectual agenda or speak on behalf of the dalits only for furthering their own ends.¹ These dalit efforts are ultimately aimed at establishing a claim to intellectual representation as authentic and holding on to it.

The context in which this intellectual activity is taking place includes the fact

that today most of the dalit political leaders – and not only in Maharashtra – are driven by anti-intellectualism. For these leaders, academic or theoretical endeavours and the writings of Ambedkar have only symbolic value.

The agenda of these dalit-bahujan intellectual efforts includes an audit of the public institutions that practise exclusion of dalits and domination over them. These institutions include the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the University Grants Commission (UGC) and different universities and research institutions. The dalit-bahujan intellectual efforts seek to democratise intellectual life and change the terms of the academic discourse. Their mission involves the pursuit of the recognition which is denied by the adversaries of dalits who tend to control such institutions. The emergence of such dalit-bahujan intellectual activity should be understood particularly in the context of the denial of the authenticity of the claim to intellectual representation.

However, the dalit-bahujan intellectual claims are likely to remain problematic so long as they are treated as a battle to be fought with the force of ideological polemic rather than with that of rigorous debate. While ideology is important, it is not enough for developing an emancipatory social theory. That has to be achieved through a nuanced understanding of a complex social reality. The second problem with these intellectual efforts is that they are influenced by the politics of presence or symbolic recognition in political and civil society rather than by the world of political ideas. Thirdly, these dalit-bahujan scholars lack critical consciousness, primarily because many of them aim at self-discovery – which replaces any need for further inquiry. Fi-

nally, these intellectual efforts, by and large, suffer for want of interrogation or internal critique.

The lack of internal critique is justified by some dalit-bahujan scholars on the ground that it is not advisable to attack a dalit self which has not even emerged.² But this concession would tend to deprive dalit-bahujan scholars of their moral-intellectual claim to speak for all the poor toiling masses searching for universal representation.

Finally, all these dalit-bahujan efforts tend to be excessively preoccupied with critiquing of mainstream discourse. Perhaps one would have to go beyond criticising the external adversary and offer a theoretical-ideological alternative. The dalit intellectual activity should be responsive to internal attitudes to intellectual endeavour as well as to metropolitan intellectualism, which is insensitive to dalit issues, arrogant and intimidating.

A Different Forum

Such is the background against which Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK), Mumbai has attempted to bring dalit and non-dalit scholars together. These scholars have established the Dalit Intellectuals' Collective (DIC) with the support of VAK. The DIC stands for dalit intellectual activity with a difference. The scholars are divided into two basic categories – those who make statements (most of them dalits) and interrogators who are expected to be creative and constructive and not patronising.

The DIC does not seek only to audit the external adversaries of the dalits. It also wants to go in for an audit of the dalit intellectual tradition and culture, which create and sustain internal hierarchies. Secondly, it wants the dichotomy between

theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras done away with. It wants to enable the dalits and others to visualise the intellectual journey from the immediate to the abstract, from the familiar to the universal, from the empirical to the theoretical.

The DIC is exploring the feasibility of developing a 'dalit theory.' It has in mind a theory that would act as a moral counterweight to the language of politics which seeks to humiliate dalit-bahujan leaders. The endeavour is also to provide theoretical respectability to the dalit political culture, which is now lampooned by adversaries. The DIC has taken upon itself the task of taking serious thinking to the people by developing the public political reason.

But prior to its engagement with the public the DIC will formulate the categories and concepts which could make a dalit theory possible, and then test their veracity. It will examine the potential for generalisation, if any, in those categories. In other words, it has set for itself an agenda which includes documentation, clarification and interrogation, and theoretical arrival. The DIC wants to interrogate the post-modernist attempts in the area of inter-textuality which involve an inter-group dialogue taking place in conditions which make it infinitely inconclusive. In other words, to use a local and very powerful metaphor, it does not want to join the post-modernists in wrestling with oil applied all over the body but with no intention of producing results. It hopes to rein in those dalit intellectuals who are enjoying such wrestling.

Finally, as mentioned above, the DIC wants to promote an interactive relationship between scholars and the general public. In this context, its primary agenda is to seek a redefinition of the dalit self at the theoretical and political levels by developing public political reason. Developing such reason is an important part of the agenda for two reasons. Firstly, the cognitive map of the people at large, particularly the dalits, seems to be occupied by a common sense which is full of intersecting layers of consciousness and emotions. Secondly, public political reason is not available to dalits in the kind of civil society we have. In such a situation reason itself is likely to remain diverse and ghettoised and hence incapable of facilitating any meeting of minds.

Thus the DIC has a mission publicly to defend certain concepts and categories, including the dalit one, and discuss them

critically. In pursuit of this mission it organised a public meeting in Mangalore in April 1998. At the meeting dalit political concerns and issues were presented by Valerian Rodrigues, K N Panicker, Rajeev Bhargava and the present authors to a public which had witnessed communal riots at Suratkal (Mangalore) the previous month.

The redefinition of the dalit self is not being sought in any given theoretical framework. On the contrary, it is being sought in the context of the several theoretical-ideological positions (Marxist, liberal Marxist, cultural Marxist, communitarian, Ambedkar-bahujanwadi and subaltern) represented by DIC scholars. The intention is to arrive at some kind of overlapping of theoretical-ideological interests. The attempts at redefinition made at DIC meetings so far represent a kind of rigorous contestation of points of views which depart from each other on nuances but come together on the normative concerns that still empower the human agency.

Is 'Dalit' Valid?

In the context of the redefinition of the dalit category and the theoretical resources to be deployed for the redefinition, the category itself was taken up for discussion. Two sets of arguments have been put forward by scholars while discussing the category. For example, historian Romila Thapar said certain categories, including Arya and un-Arya, lose their significance, when examined in the light of the notion of 'out-of-date history. One could argue that the categories of shudra and adidhamma have similarly become part of out-of-date history. However, Thapar has maintained that there is a political necessity for holding on to the dalit category. She traces the roots of this category in Pali literature in which dalit means "the oppressed". She seems to have been suggesting that it is difficult to put 'dalit' and 'Buddhist' together as the latter category stands for conciliation and hence has little transformatory potential.

Rodrigues and M S S Pandian argued that the category of dalit did not lend itself to generalisation. The former wondered whether a culture-specific category like 'dalit' could be made to travel around the world. This category also suffered from discursive naivety in that it tries to rush towards universality without mediating with certain historical-cultural nuances. Endorsing this argument, Pandian and

Satyanarayana argued that any attempt to accord a pan-Indian status to this category would rob other identities based on region and culture of their authenticity. Pandian did not suggest, however, that the category of dalit be given up completely. In fact, he still suggests that a theoretical attempt be made to make the regional and pan-Indian categories commensurate with each other so that the dalit category is inclusivist rather than incorporating.

Kancha Illiah has been arguing for the extension of the dalit category so as to include categories like 'bahujan'. The problem with such a formulation is that it neglects the dialectical relationship between 'dalit' and 'bahujan' which has a bearing on the formation of the dalit category and its marriage with 'bahujan'.

Culture as a constituting element of the dalit category was invoked by some scholars like Satyanarayana,³ who said that it was important to look at the category as a construct achieved by recruiting the hidden culture and textual history of the dalits. Without such recruitment the category is likely to remain historically very weak. Thus, the resources for redefinition of the dalit self are purely dalit in character for Satyanarayana.

Caste and Class

This position was contested by Panicker.⁴ Panicker argued that this category could not be developed purely internally because the dalit self-perception included social exploitation which embraced not only caste and culture but class as well. He cited the example of Premchand's novel *Sadgati* which according to him demonstrated the phenomenon of caste becoming an ideological construct of class oppression.

Challenging the mainstream understanding of caste Thapar argued that during the pre-colonial era there was flexibility about caste mobility. Maintaining that cultural capital was defined and redefined throughout history, she indicated that narratives built up around caste appeared to be fashioned sloppily. If the essentiality of class was not seen in caste, how could one understand the process of social stratification? In support of this argument, Rodrigues argues that given the fact that identities and categories are reconstructed and rearticulated from time to time, the privileging of 'caste' over other categories lacks transformative power: the lived relations are not built up around caste alone.

Morton Class,⁵ Sharad Patil⁶ and Gail Omvedt⁷ do privilege the category of caste over other categories, at least at this point of time in the historical journey of 'caste'. Patil says the take-over of 'caste' by 'class' began with the introduction of the permanent land settlement policy of the colonial state.⁸

On the other hand, some dalit scholars have in recent years been arguing in defence of caste as the dominant reference point. They define 'dalit' purely in terms of caste anchorage. For example, Sanal Mohan argued during the DIC meeting held in Pune in March 1997 that in the Indian context caste was still the operative reality. He lamented the fact that in Indian historical writings there was a singular absence of caste. According to Mohan, social sciences in India have come to be centred primarily on the 'bhadralok'. The historical writings on caste have discounted narratives of caste oppression and exploitation. Hence there is a need to recover the historical memory of the dalits.

Mohan's observation on Indian history writing could be true, by and large. Even in the subaltern history series caste had to wait for its turn till the sixth volume included a very interesting essay by Partha Chatterjee. On the other hand, some historians in England and Japan have been at pains to give the category of caste proper treatment in their writings. Caste has not attracted many Marxist historians. The notable exceptions include Romila Thapar, R S Sharma, D D Kosambi and Irfan Habib.

The DIC meetings have also taken up the question of gender and, within it, dalit feminism as a distinct category. As competently argued by Sharmila Rege⁹ dalit feminism has to be treated differently (dalit women talk differently) from the standpoint of epistemology. The debate on this question is still on. Some scholars foresee the danger of the dalit women question becoming a fetish, getting trapped in post-modernist wrestling or being used as a counterpoint by those who want to benefit from the inconclusiveness of the issue.

Dalit Knowledges

Traditional knowledge systems of the dalits are also being tapped in the effort to redefine the dalit self. The DIC is seized of the agenda of first knowing the dalit knowledge systems and assessing their usefulness for an emancipatory project.

The search is on for a way of knowing that would recover dalit lives and agencies from the frozen past.

This knowing cannot be merely subaltern – an alternate gloss on life and thought, an ironic expression of revolt and anger. It requires an intimate and sensuous engagement with dalit lives, a patient and gentle heeding of stories that have never been told before and of the manner of their telling. The discussions on dalit intellectual traditions at the Mangalore DIC meeting suggested ways and means of reconstituting epistemologies and histories.

Anand Teltumble's paper dealt with information technology (IT). It was both a general critical valuation of the promises that ostensibly inhered in IT and an appraisal of these promises in terms of what they implied for dalits and others whose access to knowledge was policed and blocked. He observed that brahmins were granted a monopoly right over knowledge and that they implicitly devalued all other claims to knowing, especially the claims of those who were rooted in the production process. This led to the value of knowledge becoming inversely proportional to the social value and relevance of the information it contained.

The progress of western education caused a break in caste consciousness as education became linked to the reclaiming of one's human identity. But dalits had not been able to do this reclaiming. In fact, they had been actively prevented from participating and completing this process of self-recovery: education and the promise it held continued to function within an economic order that overworked and underpaid them.

More than ever before, Teltumble argued, dalits stood threatened with the rise of IT, which appears set to perpetuate existing inequalities. Information technology does not represent merely a moment in technological progress. It has to be seen as an aspect of a rapidly transforming capitalism, as a child of the free market.

Teltumble noted that IT had grown phenomenally on account of research prompted by big business in the 1960s and actively encouraged by the United States department of defence. The technical virtuosity of IT was thus a function of its military usefulness and its viability for market capitalism.

With the unchecked growth of IT, said Teltumble, the primary sector of production might be subsumed and edged out by

the virtual sector. He argued that this could bode great disaster for the dalits, since most of them were primary workers, and most closely linked to the production process.

Moreover, IT might well go to constitute a new knowledge elite – those who knew the complex working of the system. Then there was a problem of addiction. Computers were highly addictive. The user either lost himself or herself in a world of make-believe or retreated into a narcissism so profound that he or she lost touch with reality. In either case he or she became easy prey to unfounded propaganda. Teltumble warned that IT might well create an egoistic culture which had no sympathy for or patience with liberal, equalitarian values or community consciousness.

He was sceptical about the democratic, liberative aspect of IT: the unfettered circulation of information and the possibility of self-expression for those who had not been able to exercise that choice for generations. While granting that groups like the Mexican Zapatistas had used IT to revolutionary advantage. He added that the information highways offered one's adversaries the same advantage that it offered oneself. Besides, there was the question of affordability.

Teltumble's paper elicited a long discussion. Ram Bapat argued that there were demands that dalits be granted special rights of access to new technology and that these demands had to be understood in terms of how dalits viewed the configuration of the power of knowledge in India. The question was one of how one managed the transition to an information-centred present so that the dalits felt least at a loss.

Would this create a community of brahminised dalits? Or would it lead to the creation of an enabling human reserve that could intervene intellectually in the economy? Bapat observed that all such prognostications must keep in mind the fact that the mediating site for such transformation was the space of politics. Ultimately, it was a question of creating a political movement against the new economic reality even while attempting to master its terms.

Gajendran's paper proved to be an interesting foil to Anand's. Gajendran noted that upper-caste common sense saw dalits as uncultured and primitive people doing menial jobs and lacking a written antiquity. In the discourses of hindutva, dalits were accommodated within the terms of a 'condescending peripherality'. For those

who wished to refuse such a location, it was important that dalit knowledge be relocated as indigenous knowledge – in those ecological niches within which dalit cultures grew.

Gajendran said dalit knowledges were based on sense perception and interaction (experiencing the natural and social worlds in a sensuous way). These knowledges were not the product of an individual consciousness and were necessarily social. Such knowledges were typically non-dualistic. The observing self became a crucial aspect of what it observed and the thinking subject became what he thought. Thus, binary pairs such as individual and community, body and mind, private and public, private and social became irrelevant.

Dalit ways of knowing were also constitutively mystical, for at particular moments they surrendered the imperative to comprehend, being aware of the limits to human rationality. But this did not mean they abdicated responsibility.

Gajendran compared the relationship of such knowledges to western science. Did the existing scientific conventions of verifiability and validation illuminate these knowledges at all? Could one isolate the epistemological features of these modes of knowing from the larger cultural system of which they were a part?

Several points were raised at this juncture: Gajendran's descriptions were not peculiar to the world views and ideas of subsistence-oriented communities; dalit knowledges, far from developing in isolation, were a part of a larger social world of meaning which they contested, accepted or subverted, as the case may be. Did such descriptions as offered by Gajendran and all those who held similar views add up to a "knowledge system"? What test of verifiability and validation may we apply?

The term 'indigenous' seems unfounded, and there is an incipient romanticism in the use of the term – as if it is an extra-political compensation for the present. Where do women figure in the making and deployment of these knowledges? Non-binary cultures yet retain the distinction between the male and female principles, identifying women with all that is creative and pure and men with decay and destruction – points of view which are highly problematic.

Such views are problematic for another reason: the brahminical forces and even the global forces would feel very comfort-

able with them. These forces would very much like the dalits to follow their own traditional occupations with very specific knowledge systems, as this would prevent competition and leave the entire field of the new knowledge system open to the twice-born. Thus a culture-specific knowledge system would ghettoise the dalits further instead of liberating them. Nor would it serve to invoke uncertainty as an epistemological ethic, for this ethic existed in brahminical logic as well.

What would be useful, perhaps, would be to locate the different claims of epistemological superiority articulated by dalits at different historic moments. Such claims, for example, were made by Chokha Mela, a 13th-century Mahar saint,¹⁰ and the Mahar devotees of the Mahanubhav sect in Maharashtra.

Tantra

K S Chalam's paper on 'tantra' proved to be provocative. Chalam wondered if tantra could be viewed as the obverse of brahminical knowledge, since it was associated with an underground world, fertility, forbidden things. His paper, he noted, was based on Debiprasad Chattopadhyay's narrative of tantric and was but a first step towards articulating another sort of knowledge. Chalam suggested that tantra was distinctive because it sought the validation of its claims through sense experiences, through sensuality. Since it treated knowledge as based on experience, 'tantrik' knowledge resisted codification and failed to leave behind traditions of philosophical literacy.

Chalam noted that tantriks gave themselves up to a life of the senses, to the eating of meat, the consumption of alcohol and the fulfilment of unbridled sexual appetite. Nothing mortal was foreign to them, and it was said that the aghoris, a tantrik sect, even ate corpses.

Being familiar with the sensory world, the tantriks developed material sciences such as alchemy and ayurveda. In fact, these existed as protosciences, precursors to a more systematic form of knowing. The tantriks conceived of knowledge as action rather than as contemplation or meditation. Unfortunately for the shudra and dalit communities which practised tantra, their knowledges were appropriated and recast by the brahmins, much as today's multinationals are appropriating the knowledge of the tribal and other

custodians of local knowledge and/or resources.

Chalam's paper led to a discussion on major issues. How may we characterise the relationship of the protosciences the tantriks are said to have developed to science? Given the tantrik tendency to knowing through the senses how can their knowledges be compared with the knowledge sanctioned by modern science, which is a product of the self's disjunctive relationship with the world?

A second line of debate was opened up at the meeting. Bapat argued that as such readings of tantra as had been advanced by Chattopadhyay represented an idealistic rather than a materialistic account of the past, materialist reading could not be extrapolated from them from these idealist accounts. What was needed was a knowledge of chronology and history as well as a more complex understanding of the manner in which brahmin and shudra knowledge systems, if we might describe them thus, were articulated or disarticulated.

Bapat submitted that the brahminical traditions were not necessarily opposed to tantra. These traditions were willing to grant the validity of a knowledge that was based on sensual experience. In fact, they were appreciative of the theory of tantric practice. The point to be noted was that the brahmins did not devalue other forms of knowing (Bapat countering Teltumble, who expressed the opposite view) but postulated that the real knowledge of the material world was given only to the brahmins.

V Geetha's paper and Rajeev Bhargav's shifted the discussion on dalit epistemologies to the terrain of contemporary history. Bhargav presented a thesis on what he termed 'alternative modernities'. He argued that the encounter with modernity of groups such as the dalits could not be explained within the terms of a global narrative about the fate of modernity. He proposed a cultural theory of modernity, which could allow us to see modernity as a multilinear and layered process of historical transformation.

In its travels – with colonialism, around the world – modernity acquired a complex existence. In its interaction with pre-modern traditions, it remained unsynthesised, unable to find a place in economic, political and scientific institutions. In a third instance it existed as creative adaptation whose meaning escaped the interpretative net of both modernity and the indi-

genous traditions. All these three forms might co-exist in the same society, making modernity a contradictory experience.

For dalits, modernity was liberating in that it forced a recognition of the self of all citizens. On the other hand, it did not sanction reciprocity. The question was also whether, while making adaptations, we valorised the alternative or the modern. If we leaned towards the former, we were left with a culturally descriptive variant of a dominant modernity. If we leaned towards the latter, we must ask ourselves how the power of normative thought might be retained without erasing cultural specificity and agency.

Geetha's paper appeared to be in conversation with Rajeev's formulations. Geetha suggested that the 'creative and productive' reworking of modernity in the thought of E V Ramasamy ('Periyar'), the founder of the Tamil self-respect movement, was interesting for the relationship it posited between labour and knowledge. Arguing that knowledge was central to Periyar's struggles against caste, she noted that Periyar considered the crucial contradiction between mental and manual labour.

Born to labour, manual labourers could not claim the right to knowing, and being denied that right they could not comprehend or escape their condition of being labourers. Their productive power thus remained captive to a social order which alienated them from the fruits of their labour and the knowledge which this labour helped bring into existence.

Despite his understanding of the link between labour and knowledge, Periyar did not seek to locate in history this knowledge that was denied the caste labourers: what were its forms, modalities, what culture of artisanship existed here? On the contrary, he cut a broad swathe through these intricate knowledges and located liberation for the worker in scientific progress. This oversight on his part left local knowledge traditions at the mercy of history.

Periyar wanted the shudras and the adidravidas to unite in a sustained struggle against the caste camp, bound together by the ideologies of self-respect and 'samadharma' rather than by their shared history of captive and degraded labour. Geetha's paper raised a very significant question: Did knowledge have to be necessarily aligned to labour? Was this not an importation from the Marxist theory of value?


This led to a debate on the importance of recovering the meaning and worth of

labour in a society that devalued all manual labour.

Conclusion

Dalit intellectual activity in contemporary India represents a very interesting scenario in which an urgent need is felt to make theoretical sense of the dalit reality. These intellectual efforts indicate that dalit theory might acquire a critical mass in the future. It is clear from the above discussion that the dalit-bahujan scholars do not seem to be interested in the post-modernists' offer of a sophisticated but disappointing intellectual exercise. The scholars have not lost their confidence in the dalit as agency, a concept that the post-modernist challenge tends to unsettle.

The DIC's significance lies in the fact that unlike other dalit-bahujan intellectual forums, which out of insecurity and guilt go for intertextuality, it wants a serious engagement with the question of dalit agency: How did dalits act in the past? What was the philosophical basis for their action. Why is it important to construct a dalit epistemology? Is it important only to

reverse the maxim 'theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras'? At the moment the DIC is in an evolving mode of reading history and theory whose co-ordinates have yet to be enunciated. 

Notes

- 1 For example, Vichar Vedh (a search for thought), which is being held in Maharashtra since 1992.
- 2 This problem is expected to be solved within the community itself. Any public discussion on the internal dissension is likely to be exploited by the adversary.
- 3 These were interventions made in the Pune DIC of March 1997.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Morton, Class, *Caste*, Orient Longman, Delhi.
- 6 Sharad Patil, 'Caste and Class in Maharashtra', *EPW*, special number, 1979.
- 7 Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India*. The question has also been discussed by Partha Chatterjee in his article on caste and subaltern consciousness in seventh volume of the subaltern history series.
- 8 Patil, op cit.
- 9 Rege, Sharmila, Seminar, Delhi, November 1998.
- 10 A brahmin used to take down the 'abhangas' recited by Chokha Mela.

APPOINTMENTS

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Director.