

PROBLEMATIZING DALIT HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to address the questions related to the writing of Dalit history in its broad academic context. While it is impossible to write histories of Dalit communities in isolation from other social groups as they interacted at several points of the social node, it is significant to attempt a history of such social groups as it would bring under focus several problems that the 'historians craft' has to face. Therefore the central question of this paper is the challenges that Dalit history offers to academic history writing. It is argued here that the perspective of Dalit history makes possible exploration of new objects of analysis, which much of the nation state centric history fails to articulate. It is in this context that I address various genres of history writing in India.

Keywords: Dalits, history, Pulayas, Parayas, untouchability, caste slavery, experience, Christianity, salvation

In this paper my major concern is to discuss the problems in the writing of history of Dalits although the term Dalits is not used in the source materials pertaining to their history or sociology even now. Some of these questions occurred to me when I took up the project of writing a thesis entitled *'Imagining Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala'*. However, I find that the problems that I had to encounter were common across south India or for that matter we find parallels in the history of the subordinated people in other parts of the world. An important aspect of my study was to analyze the discourses of equality as it developed in Kerala from mid 19th century as initiated by the missionaries and carried forward by the social movements of the lower castes in the 20th century. The lower caste religious congregations and social movements put forward the agenda of social development that was informed by notions of equality. We have a rich literature dealing with the work of various missionary organizations and their interaction with the lower castes and the resultant transformation of such social groups across south India. (Oddie, 1977; Kooiman, 1989; Frykenberg, 1980; Gladstone, 1984). Similarly there are large number of works that deal with particular studies on communities and their transformation. (Oomman, 1997; Daniel, 2000; Deliege, 1997; Mosse,

1994) There are works that deal with long-term changes in the lower caste communities in the mode of the life histories of the individuals that unfold in the rich ethnographic context. (Racine&Racine, 1998) It is through the unfolding of the intense biographical elements that we get a sense of the transformation of the community as well as the individual lives. Such studies show a definite bearing on the lower caste life-world as well as the problem of identity and agency of the people.

I shall discuss here questions related to the writing of Dalit history in this broad academic context. While it is impossible to write histories of Dalit communities in isolation from other social groups as they interact at several points of the social node it is significant to attempt a history of such social groups as it would bring under focus several problems that the historians craft has to face. It will amount to stating the obvious that the lower castes have certain amount of circularity in their social life whereby they come under the influence of other social groups and worldviews. These questions have been taken up by a host of scholars who worked on various parts of South India. In economic history the lower castes were studied more as part of the agrarian structure providing their socially necessary labour power for the production devoid of any particular rights to property and resources other than that was essential for their survival that guaranteed the physical reproduction of their labour power. They were at the receiving end of various regimes of labour control that could be generalized as slavery. I am using here the word slavery aware fully well of the discussions and debates it had generated on the labour control regimes in various parts of India. (Prakash, 1997) One prominent question here is to rethink the pre-colonial forms of slavery and labour control regime that existed in various parts of south India and the transformations that such systems underwent under colonialism. In the last few decades scholars have tried to understand the significance of slavery as a labour control regime in agricultural production in different parts of south India. The debates largely centered on the importance of slave labour in the pre-colonial/pre-capitalist production and its eventual abolition as marking the coming of capitalist production based on free wage labor. Another group of scholars were concerned with the causative factors behind the abolition of slavery such as humanitarian concern of the abolitionists including missionaries, and their efforts to speed up the march towards freedom and humanism and transform the slave castes eventually full members of humanity. There has been a rich historiographical debate on the problem of slavery in south India that bring together interesting material for a critical understanding of the experiential dimension of slavery. (Saradmoni, 1980; Kusaman, 1973; Yusudas, 1975; Vijaya, Jayasree, Kumar, 1965; Hegele, 1967; Ravi Raman,

2002; Kurup, 1984; Kooiman, 1989; Manickam, 1977; Baak, 1999) It may not be out of place here to suggest, following the debates that I have referred to, the three different views related to the abolition of slavery that hinges on the humanitarian ideology of missionary (Hegele, 1967; Saradmoni, 1980; Manickam, 1977; Kusuman, 1973; Jeffrey, 1976), free wage labour for capitalist economic production (Kurup, 1984; Kooiman, 1989; Baak, 1999) and finally the argument that the synergy between abolition and capitalist economic production was far fetched and that the plantations did not offer the much projected freedom to the plantation slaves (Ravi Raman, 2002). At the same time it is important to note that there is hardly any inevitable connection between capitalist development and free wage labour.

While these studies are important and the information they have generated on the lower castes were decisive, there was a substantial lack of the experiential dimension of slavery in such writings. It may not be an impossibility to write a different history of slavery that could be conceptualized through a reverse ethnographic practice reading the sources that were used in the histories of slavery that are in circulation. The significant point is to see in the narratives available in the sources, the emergence of the slaves with body, soul, names, feelings and emotions, relationships, past, present and future. Most studies on the problem of slavery and its abolition were restricted by the historiographical positions that we have referred to and as a result of that they could not engage with the *experiential aspects of slavery*.

It is in this context that we consider the experiential dimension of slavery to transcend the prevailing debates on the history or sociology of lower castes. The slave experience is important, as it would be difficult to understand the lower caste life world without a proper understanding of various forms of slavery. The lower caste experience of modernity can't be studied without seriously engaging with the experiential aspect of slavery. In fact there are source materials that speak of the experiential aspects of slavery that unfold through the narratives of slaves that privilege their experiences as human beings with emotions. In their narratives, the slaves provide testimonies of the oppression and sufferings as well as their resolve to understand their situation in relation to their structural position in the society. They recollect their experience drawing from the social their memory. This memory of slavery and its narrative should be considered as the material on the basis of which one could rethink some of the issues related to slavery. This is undertaken not merely to lament the past sufferings as they were dominated but on the other hand it is intended as a strategy that allows a critical revisit of the past. (Hartman: 2003) It is for this purpose that the experiential aspect of slavery is traced through the narrative construction of memory. The dependence on

slave memory can raise questions related to the construction of social memory itself.

In contemporary social theory and historiography there is a significant emphasis on the question of social memory. In the researches on the lower caste social groups social memory could be used as an extremely important source. Recollection of memory is a valuable method when it gives account of traumatic experiences of the past such as genocide/ethnic cleansing or the social sufferings that one particular social group might have experienced in the past. In the case of the lower castes it is the memory of *social suffering* and *oppression* that is prominent when they recollect their past. While memory is constitutive of history it is not history as such or some times it can have a surplus of meanings and allusions over and above history. Memory is not replicable by any other source. Memory is the material with which the historian has to work and it is referred to as secondary memory as it is recorded for a different purpose some time in future. Memory will always have meanings above the requirement of the historians and it is his/her decision to reflect on the past making use of memory that decides its use. The peculiar nature of memory and the continuous constructions of it in the course of its recollection makes it non replicable by other sources.

Following the arguments of Dominick La Capra it may be observed that memory—along with its lapses and tricks—poses questions to history in that it points to problems that are still alive or invested with emotions and value. He further observes that ideally, history critically tests memory and prepares for a more extensive attempt *to work through a past that has not passed away*. At the same time it is necessary that historians working on the material of memory are able to understand “false memory syndrome” which according to La Capra is one of the more socially consequential forms that the tricks of memory may take¹. (La Capra: 1998) This caution is significant, as most often historians work with secondary memory. It is possible to create and sustain memories through discursive practices that privilege, for example, the experience of sufferings. I consider that the task of the historian is to work through a past that has not passed away. It is in this broad context that I think one could analyze slavery and its various manifestations in different parts of south India. It will be difficult to retrieve slave memory if we do not find active remembrance of slavery. But it does not preclude our search for secondary memory that could be used in the analysis of the lifeworld of lower castes following the arguments of the memory and history. I considered this problem as significant when I had to analyse the remembrance of slavery as practiced by certain social movements in contemporary Kerala².

There are some recent works that explore the experiences of slavery as represented in the Malayalam literary works to unpack strategies of textual representation as well as the social context of slavery. (Menon: 2004) The literary representation of slavery has been studied from a critical Dalit/feminist perspective that tries to focus on the social dimension of desire in the discussion on the text 'Duravastha' (Yesudasan: 1999; 2000)

In fact the above discussion on the experience of slavery leads to the question of religion of the lower castes. There is a definite reason why the discussion on slavery immediately switches over to a discussion on religion. The missionary intervention in mobilizing support for the abolition of slavery happens in the context of their interaction with the lower castes in various regions of south India who had been living in the status of slaves. Subsequently the missionaries realized how slavery was embedded in the power structures of the various regions and their relationship with the caste formation which was organically linked to Hindu religion. The realization dawned on them that only if the lower castes were able to sever themselves from the dominant Hindu religion that the lower castes would ever be able to become independent. Although the historiography of this particular aspect of south Indian history is really complex it is possible to pursue the question without going into the problem of the motives behind joining a new and different religion whether it is Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or any other religion. There are two fundamental questions that are related to the problem discussed here that is decisive in writing a history of Dalit communities. The first and foremost is the relationship that different Dalit communities had with Hindu religion as it was practiced in different regions. The contemporary debates on this question show the complexity of the phenomenon.

It may be argued that the castes such as Pulayas and Parayas (similar other castes in different parts of south India) that form majority of the lower caste Christians today in Kerala historically had weak links with the dominant Hindu religion although they were very much part of the hierarchical structure of production as slave labourers. It is equally important to see that such hierarchies were never out side the Hindu religion whether in its textual or practical aspects. One of the historians of Dalit movements in Kerala had observed that the lower castes such as Pulayas and Parayas never had any religion. (Chentharasseri: 1979) It does not mean that they did not have rituals and related worldviews. The religion of the lower castes remained as an elusive thing and much of the colonial ethnography would treat them as a residual category. The segmented nature of the caste society that allowed the lower castes to have their own "*inferior gods and rituals*" is the major factor to be considered here. The literature on this question shows that although the

lower castes were part of the villager society, they were definitely external to the ritual world of the dominant castes. In other words perhaps until categories such as religion were enumerated for purposes of governmentality there is no reason to believe that the lower castes were part of the exclusive world of the upper caste dominant religion even for definitional purposes. There are some fundamental questions that one has to encounter when these issues are posed in the context of writing Dalit histories. The religiosity of the lower castes needs to be considered as authentic in order to explore their lifeworld. This is essential for understanding the symbolic world that they had developed in different regions of south India historically. The reformist agenda of the 20th century turned out to be detrimental to many religious practices of the lower castes as they were interpreted to be inferior. But there is interesting data in the ethnographic writings as well as in the still living practices of the lower castes which could be used to study their symbolic world in a diachronic manner using the devices of the ethnographic history. I would like to include here black magic and other forms of rituals that had prevailed among various lower castes that would give us an entry in to their mentality. It is in this context that we consider the religiosity of the lower castes as authentic.

The second aspect of the problem is related to what is generally referred to as 'conversion'. The lower castes were hardly part of the Hindu religion although they were spaced within the larger agrarian society not necessarily by taking part in their symbolic world. But with the coming of the missionary Christianity (Catholic as well as Protestant in various parts of south India) they became components of the organized religion and began to share the new worldview. But at the same time they were open to negotiations as the contemporary analysis of popular Christianity in various part of South India shows. In other words some of the recent writings, following the Social Anthropology tradition suggests the liminality of such practices (Raj:2002). This, in my opinion is an area that needs to be studied.

There should be a historiographical critique of the debate that is completely overpowered by the 'motives' of 'conversion' as if motives are bad and if it is economic, worse!! The proposition that comes out of this historiography is that since lower castes 'conversions' were motivated by economic considerations, their religion was something less than proper religion!! In his book on conversion and social equality Kooiman (1989) made an interesting observation that the lower castes were more eager.... 'to better their *worldly conditions*, to *emancipate* themselves from their *social misery* to be *freed from the tyranny* of the higher castes' than much more privileged greater ideal of the salvation of the soul. One recent scholar

Olga Nieuwenhuys repeats this when she writes on the funerals and politics among south Indian Ezhavas. She is explicit when she says that. ‘...rather than by conviction of sin or a strong desire to be saved, Christian converts were inspired by a desire ...to better their worldly conditions....’ In his book on the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu Robert Deliege addresses the same question and goes to the absurd extent of saying that Paraiyars pray ‘to obtain some thing from the gods’. (as if all upper castes are praying to obtain some thing to be given to God!!!) Without venturing for further examples I would like to discuss the problems that are evident in such historical and sociological constructions. Let us begin with what Kooiman says. In his observations one could hear the echo of some of the missionaries who felt disgusted with their mass movement Christians. Or even before the mass movements we find similar observations made by missionaries from various parts of south India. Does it show any thing meaningful about the lives of the lower castes in Kerala or anywhere else in south India that is significant for us today? Consider the tropes used by Kooiman that will be seen repeated in other scholarly writings as well as some other sources that I have mentioned here. He refers to the desire of the lower castes to be liberated from their worldly *conditions*, to *emancipate* themselves from their *social misery* and to be freed *from the tyranny of the upper castes*.

If we reconsider it in the context of the Biblical knowledge, we should ask if it show some similarity with the situation that made Jehovah to send Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt?³ What are the meanings of concepts such as emancipation, social misery, and the desire to be free from tyranny in such contexts? (here the tyranny of upper castes). The archive of CMS, LMS and similar missionary organizations are very eloquent on this particular issue and there are a number of occasions when the Travancore lower caste slaves compared their situation with that of the Israelites under the Egyptian captivity when they refer to their conditions under the domination of Nairs and Syrian Christians and the liberation that they felt when the CMS missionaries worked among them. The so-called ‘worldly conditions’ were very much part of the spiritual conditions. More over there are narratives that speak of the experience of emancipation that the lower castes felt along with their reflections on their accumulated social misery and sufferings. It may be reiterated here that the conditions to which Kooiman refers to were dehumanizing the lower caste slaves. The contemporary researches on slavery actually show in a very engaging manner the dehumanizing effects of it. What the conventional historiography failed to understand here was the multiple meanings of the concept of emancipation as well as the nature of the social sufferings of the lower castes under the tyranny of the upper castes. In other

words there needs a deeper understanding of the experiential aspect of slavery. The next related question is to see if it is really bad to desire food or other worldly goods. In fact if we reconsider the narratives in the subsequent studies on the lower caste Christians, we would see that in many mass movement areas of south India their economic conditions have not improved in any substantial manner and large majority of them continued under various forms of servitude that exercised extra economic coercion. I would have agreed with the above scholars if the rest of the communities in south India or for that matter Kerala were renouncing their food and other requirements and indulging in self-mortification for the sake of the salvation of their souls!! We are yet to get empirical data on that.

Nieuwenhuys did field research in a south Kerala village to write the paper “Mourning Amma: funerals as politics among south Indian Ezhavas” (Nieuwenhuys:2004) But the instrumental rationality that influenced her perception of lower caste religiosity prevented her from undertaking further research on this questions and she gives her opinion as a substitute for research. It is in this context that I would like to consider the concepts of sin, repentance and salvation. I would argue that these concepts and the worldviews that derive from them were extremely significant for the lower castes. I do not think that the choice was between theses concepts and the so-called material comforts that food and clothes offered. Now let us see what is the nature of the information available on the question of sin, repentance and the desire to be saved which these scholars argue were not the concern of the lower castes. If we follow the journals of missionaries who worked among the lower castes we would come across substantial information on the way the lower caste people understood the notion of sin. Contrary to the arguments of Kooiman and a host other scholars, these sources show how deeply the notion of sin had gone into the minds of the lower caste people that were powerful enough to ‘discipline’ them. More over in the contemporary social science there is an explicit recognition of the significance of the notion of sin among the indigenous people who joined the missions across the world (Robbins: 2004). In fact one of the main themes of the missionary speeches was the necessity of escaping from the sin and the impending punishment in the hell that was waiting for the sinners. Similarly those who joined the mission congregations were made to understand the differences between various theological classifications of sins, such as original, mortal sin, minor sin to mention a few.

I would argue on the basis of the sources both ethnographic and archival that those who listened to these sermons and catechism began to evaluate their lives and actions in a new light. The numerous occasions of people confessing to the missionaries as well as their decisions to keep away

from situations leading to sin including drinking, should be considered in a new light. People were instructed of rightful conduct such as righteous words and deeds and ordered life that is guaranteed by the attendance in the Church service and catechism. Missionary letters and other documents speak of the effectiveness of their gaze in reforming the people. The non-attendance of Sabbath and work on Sabbath day was considered as big sins. The people were instructed to keep away from situations that could be construed as invitation to further sins. Observance of prayer time was extremely important and missionaries observe how the lower caste Christians who would have spend their time in various other activities including quarrels at night were serious in their evening prayers and reading of scriptures. One of the missionaries in Travancore observed that *'among this people not only drunkenness, adultery, thieving and other vices, formerly very common were almost banished but also evil spirits were obliged to run away from the place, there being scarcely any instance of demonical propitiation, real or imaginary'*. Rev. Koshi Koshi, another missionary gives the observation of a Syrian Christian informant that *in the stillness of the night he could daily hear in his home, the united voices of men, women and children from their different huts, praying and praising God in the most fervent manner.*

The upper castes of the neighborhood takes note of the changes in the habits of their lower caste slave/semi—slave workers who they thought previously were an unruly stock but have changed dramatically owing to the teachings of the missionaries. What does it mean? My argument is that it refers to a possible change in the attitudes of the people and their conduct that underwent a process of disciplining. There is definitely a need for revisiting these issues if we have to write a critical history of the experiences of various Dalit communities that underwent this process. It is interesting to note that from another region of south India—Dornakal in Andhra Pradesh—we come across examples of lower caste, Mala and Madiga Christians reforming their practices following the missionary disciplining that was evident in the introduction of new marriage practices. (Susan Billington Harpe: 2002)

Another area of research that needs to be emphasized in understanding the lower caste mentality in the context of their interaction with missionary Christianity is to study the prayers that were in use and the language in which they became popular. I am not taking up the question of whether the Paraiyars' prayer to which Deliege refers to is just for the worldly goods as even the Lords Prayer would have a sentences that includes "give us this day our daily bread" which is followed by request of forgiveness of the sins committed. My point is a different one, to see the language in which these

prayers were available to lower castes that had the potential to create a different culture of language use. (Burke: 1987, Burke and Porter: 1986). The missionary communication and language had a decisive impact on lower caste people who followed them. It is in this context that one can think of the stories, sermons and speeches that must have been improvised to make effective communication possible. These oral performances had a decisive impact on the lower caste people as evidenced by the life histories of people who were very well versed in prayers and their performative rendering. It is necessary to consider the varieties of speech, the main codes and registers of the missionary linguistic practices. The notion of 'Code' here stands for a variety of given language while the 'register' is a variety spoken in a particular situation (Quoted in Burke: Ibid: 83)

Closely following this we need to reconsider the question of literacy and new tastes that have developed among the lower castes and its significance in writing about the cultural personality of such social groups. In fact we need to have more engaging researches on the questions such as the relationship between lower caste/Dalit literacy and institutions such as state, church, family etc.

Sociologists have done extensive work on the lower castes' religion in south India. There has been an active engagement with questions of 'idioms of subordination and styles of protest, in the writings of scholars such as David Mosse that try to look at lower caste interaction with Christianity as a significant social experience that should have been viewed as important in its own terms. He explains the lower caste experience of dominance and subordination by showing how they have manipulated the very institutions and symbols that define their subordination, to forge new social relations based on the principles of honour, respect and autonomy (Mosse: 1994) It deviates from the interpretations earlier scholars such as Moffat who speak of the reproduction of hierarchy among the lower castes as well as contemporary scholars like Deliege who suspects the authenticity of lower caste religiosity. (Moffat: 1979)

The foregoing discussion on the various aspects of the social experiences of different lower caste communities in south India would demand a close look at the question of religion in the context of modernity and emancipatory politics. It is necessary to accept the fact that lower castes as political agents or for that matter Dalits as a political category assumes significance only under conditions of modernity. The use of the term emancipatory politics can also appear a bit out place now. But there is room for emancipatory politics as long as one does not totalize the subjectivities. The most important point here is to see how the resources of the lower caste

communities have been reinterpreted to provide a critical understanding of their historical experiences. In some of the studies on Dalit cultural and social practices we find the explicit use of the Dalit worldview and symbols to re-imagine an emancipatory politics.

The religious traditions of Dalits such as Yellamma/Pochamma cult has been reinterpreted by Kancha Iiah as a resource for egalitarian mobilization and the need for reconstituting society on a different paradigm that is expressively egalitarian and the process of which he refers to Dalitisation. Similarly in the context of Tamil Nadu Clarke explores the symbolic world of the Paraiyars as a theological source to conceive of an emancipatory theology that he develops from the primeval symbol of drum which has a decisive role in their lived experience. Here the Drum is elevated to a symbolic realm where it communicates through a different language to the people and it assumes a different ontology. The identification with the Buddhist theological and religious practices by the Dalits in Tamil Nadu is the main concern of Aloysius. All these are major efforts at exploring the Dalit cultural resources in the context of the discussions on religion and agency of the oppressed people. (Clarke: 1999; Aloysius: 2000) This brief discussion actually raises questions related to the religious experiences of lower castes under conditions of modernity that was essential for critically engaging with the emancipatory praxis that they have developed.

Another source where we find the social imaginary of the lower caste/dalit communities expressed very strongly is in the literary world. My immediate reference is to the works of the colonial period although the contemporary literary expressions are equally important. I would include in the category of literary works folk songs, prayer songs etc of various lower castes Hindus and Christians of various denominations including those that have existed as liminal entities. (Sherinian: 2002; Trawick: 1988) This literary expression that has become famous today, as Dalit literature is an important site to understand the social imaginaries at work. There are studies on literary figures and their contributions to the social change among Dalit communities. The genre that they have introduced and the literary sensibility and taste that come out of such interventions have been studied and some studies are in progress now.

Another area that needs to be studied is the emergence new family form among different Dalit communities and the context of its emergence. It is possible to study it by following the late 19th and 20th century debates. In Kerala there were debates on such issues in the Sri Mulam Praja Sabha of Travancore that included questions of family, property and inheritance among

the lower castes in general. This discussion takes place in the larger background of social movements that have been demanding the recasting of the social structure. Family was considered as an important site by the lower caste movements in general that required active intervention to appear as modern.

NOTES

- ¹ Dominick La Capra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, Cornell University Press, London, 1998, pp.8-9
- ² I am here referring to the movement named Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha of untouchable castes such as Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas who are referred to many of the documents presented in this paper as Slave castes and in contemporary Indian (Kerala) society as Lower castes. The movement was started in Kerala in the first decade of 20th century. It was started by Poikayil Yohannan whose followers attributed divinity to him posthumously and is currently worshipped as God, referring him as Kumara Grudevan. I have traced the career of Yohannan and his transformation in my thesis.
- ³ The limitations of the comparison are obvious.

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