



REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

Session: Dalit Social Movements: Questions of Theory and Knowledge Production

Session Convener(s): Sanal Mohan, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala; K Satyanarayana, The English and Foreign Languages University, Tarnaka, Hyderabad

Chair: Sanal Mohan, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

Comments: -

I) *Colonialism, Social Movements and the Creation of Documents: Exploring the Archive of Dalit and Other Lower Caste Groups in Kerala, South West India*

Sanal Mohan, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

II) *Celebrating the Rebellious Past: Marxist and Nationalist Construction of Adivasi Movements*
Bhangya Bhukya, The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad

III) *Conceptualising Dalit Politics: Caste, Identity and Dalit Movements in South India*
K Satyanarayana, The English and Foreign Languages University, Tarnaka, Hyderabad

IV) *Reconsidering the Notion of Colonial Archive: Perspectives from Dalit History in North India*
Ramnarayan Rawat, University of Delaware, Newark

ABSTRACTS

Session description

The last two decades have witnessed a burgeoning of academic writings on Dalit Social movements nationally and globally. There have been writings by both Western and Indian scholars following different paradigms. However there is a new generation of scholars who has been asking new questions which are different from the nationalist and leftist traditions in social sciences. Such writings drew their sustenance from different social locations; locations of the struggles and everyday life of Dalits in India. They could move away from the dominant paradigms that dictated the studies on Dalit movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Particular mention must be made of new intellectual and theoretical discourses articulated by Dalit intelligentsia in the 1990s. We shall identify some of the outstanding issues that such studies bring to our immediate attention. Without going into the details of the movements and studies, we shall problematise some of the outstanding theoretical and methodological issues. What are the theoretical issues that such movements and studies have opened up? Did such movements and studies ever offer a critique of the western conceptualisations of social movements? Did Dalit discourses problematise the Indian social science knowledge paradigms?

Do they offer any possibility of rethinking social sciences in the Indian context? What are the possibilities of comparison that Dalit movements offer vis-a-vis other movements against race and other forms of oppressions the world over? Similarly it is also important to ask questions of sources and methods of writing on Dalit social moments as the researchers will have to move across conventional disciplinary boundaries as well as the archive. She shall deal with memory, social as well as individual just as she encounters the archive and also literary and cultural discourses. Here again it demands a non conventional approach and new concepts. All this will lead us to a deeper engagement with unconventional and often non written sources that might play a crucial role in the creation of knowledge on Dalit social movements. The proposed panel shall provide a platform for scholars researching of Dalit Social Movements to come together and discuss such theoretical and practical issues in their specialized domain.

Papers

I) *Colonialism, Social Movements and the Creation of Documents: Exploring the Archive of Dalit and Other Lower Caste Groups in Kerala, South West India*

Sanal Mohan, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

I wish to analyse here the nature of the archives of social movements among the Dalit and lower caste groups in Kerala, India. The archival materials under consideration belong to the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Some of the materials referred to here were generated by the Christian missionaries who worked among Dalits and other lower castes. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, with the beginning of the social movement of Dalits they began to create documents that recorded their social experiences of oppression and expectation for a better future. The missionary documents include records of local congregations, and reports of missionaries kept in the local Churches in Kerala. The documents of the Dalit movements included diverse materials that are non official and produced in the context of the religious and social movements.

The social movements of Dalits were also religious in character. As a result of it we find them seriously engaging with religious and theological issues especially in the context of their interaction with Protestant missionary Christianity. This led to the creation of Bible study notes, pamphlets on biblical themes, following the methods of the missionaries that specifically addressed Dalits. In addition to this, the activities of the social movements included giving representations to the government listing their grievances and praying for their resolution. Such

documents are treated as a particular genre evolving a specific language and style of articulation. In addition to the written documents, we also come across photographs that are extremely valuable in understanding the social conditions of Dalits and other lower castes in the early twentieth century. The most significant event in the late nineteenth century Kerala was Dalit's contact with writing. This had enabled them to articulate their conditions in a powerful manner by early twentieth century through writing. Our engagements with the manuscripts and printed materials of this period show the intensity with which they could become part of a public sphere or the manner in which they could evolve a particularly subaltern public. The paper shall address these questions by analysing the archival materials of Dalit religious and social movements which are not part of the official government archives.

II) *Celebrating the Rebellious Past: Marxist and Nationalist Construction of Adivasi Movements*

Bhangya Bhukya, The English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad

Adivasi communities were engaged in probably more revolts and insurgencies against the colonial and postcolonial state than any other community of Indian society. This led the colonial state to identify the adivasis as a more problematic and violent community. The insurgent consciousness of the adivasis that aimed to turn colonial rural India upside down also found a biological foundation in colonial ethnology.

The project of nation making after the decolonisation has redefined the adivasi insurgencies as anti-colonial movements and related them with the larger national movements in order to make the adivasis part of the nation state. Such constructions of the adivasi movements not only devastated the long established spirit of the adivasis autonomy but also subordinated them in the new nation. Although some of the adivasi movements were anti-colonial in nature but many of them were rooted in the spirit of political and cultural autonomy targeting both colonial state and dominant non-adivasis. On the other hand most orthodox Marxist scholars celebrate anti-colonial *adivasi* revolts as a stage towards the creation of a new class-consciousness. Though they designate such struggles as sporadic, spontaneous, unorganised and pre-political, they welcome these revolts as they provide an opening for the education of the *adivasis* in class consciousness by Marxist party workers, allowing the tribal areas to become bases for radical politics and movements. Marxist scholarship has however failed to provide an adequate understanding of *adivasi* movements, as it fails to distinguish the autonomy of *adivasi* insurgencies from a monolithic and hegemonic nationalist movement.

Thus an insurgent identity was attributed to the adivasi community that involved subalternity and primitivism. Particularly *adivasi* intellectual history which is source of insurgent consciousness has not been seen as a form of resistance and contesting power. This paper proposes to examine how the nationalist and Marxist scholarship articulated adivasi movements and how these articulations have effects on the adivasi social. Attempts will be also made to examine how the adivasi community cultural values and bonds are crucial in creating insurgent consciousness.

III) *Conceptualising Dalit Politics: Caste, Identity and Dalit Movements in South India*

K Satyanarayana, The English and Foreign Languages University, Tarnaka, Hyderabad

Dalit critics criticized and rejected the commonly held idea that caste is a remnant of a pre-modern, hierarchical, purity-pollution formation specific to Hindu religion. While questioning the sociological and anthropological studies of caste, they relocated and reconfigured caste as contemporary form of power. In this new formulation, caste structures social relations and state action and it works in updated forms in modern contexts and institutions. Caste was renovated to include the idea of a group as 'a social collective' or 'a community.' This 'community' articulates its

political identity as an umbrella dalit identity or sometimes as a specific caste identity to negotiate its relation and status with other groups and demands a rightful share in the nation. This presentation maps the dalit reconfiguration of caste and their attempts to shape a new concept of caste in the 1990 based on a reading of creative, critical and theoretical writings of dalits.

IV) *Reconsidering the Notion of Colonial Archive: Perspectives from Dalit History in North India*

Ramnarayan Rawat, University of Delaware, Newark

Drawing from my work on Dalit society and history in North India, in this paper I will examine the dominant assumptions relating to the notion of colonial archive. An overwhelming focus on the census and its related modalities of representation of Indian society, the tribe and caste surveys, has reduced the diversity of colonial archives to a single imperial monolith. I will elaborate on this assumption in my paper. I will also demonstrate that writing Dalit history became possible by paying attention to local level archival material that not only contested dominant understanding of Dalit but also offered possibilities of writing an alternative history of untouchability. For instance, the district settlement reports of the 1880s-1890s, the 1910s-1920s, and the 1940s provide a wealth of detailed information about Chamars, their occupational patterns, and their relationships with agriculture and cultivation. This detailed information helps us question the dominant assumption, spelled out in census and ethnographic data, about Chamars as leather workers. It is in the provincial archives that we will discover voices of dissent lodged by the officials writing police reports and inquiries. I will propose, drawing from my study, that we must distinguish the production of colonial knowledge based on the imperial projects like the census from “the production of local knowledge” by local administrative officers within particular districts as two analogous processes. Only by recognizing the strength and diversity of district and provincial repositories, in comparison with the imperial archives located in the metropolitan centers of Delhi and London, can we begin to recognize the complexity of the data produced by the district officers. Sources of local knowledge like settlement reports, tenancy inquiries, and monographs on particular districts contain accounts and narratives that are not concerned with meeting the objectives of census classification.