Chapter 2

Theories of Discourse

The focus on language can make us conscious of the endless ambiguities involved in communication and remind us that most meanings are not reducible to any binary scheme, even though they may be shaped in part by structures of power. The problem is that, once inside the labyrinth of intertextuality, the historian often seems unable to hear the human voices outside. And that is our part of task as well, to listen to those voices (however dissonant and confused) and try to reconstruct the human experience of history.

T. J. Jackson Lears

Jackson Lears’ observation is an attempt to underline/centralise Gramsci in the context of focalizing the voices silenced in/by history. According to him Gramsci’s greatest strength is his openness to the variety and contrariety of experience. Despite his rationalism and concern to locate overreaching patterns of culture, Gramsci recognized that the ground of all culture is the spontaneous philosophy and shaped by each individual. This is not far from what William James called “our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.” He says that Gramsci’s feel for the concrete details of social life prevented him from falling prey to bloated abstractions… “It would be a supreme irony if this great thinker and linguist, who did so much to free the Marxist tradition from iron necessities and hypnotic formulae, were to be reincarnated at last in the prison house of language. But somehow, I think the wily Sardinian would slip away.”
In an appropriate sense Gramsci's thought provides the rationale for our understanding of Dalit movement and its social formation and Dalit literary and cultural articulation. The language of Dalit discourse needs to be understood in the context of particular histories and processes of domination. This makes it possible for us to examine the discursive frameworks through which particular kinds of class, caste, religious or regional associations are formed in the context of unequal and power-laden social fields. Joan Scott observes that "attention to language has become the order of the day. Words like 'discourse' and 'rhetoric' appear with increasing frequency in journals and books and analyses of ideology have acquired renewed prominence." On one hand, while many of these analyses offer vehement critique of materialist approaches to class, culture and politics, in their understanding of discursive frameworks within hegemonic processes, on the other hand, they stand in an uneasy relationship to poststructuralist approaches to language and discourse.

Let us first briefly look into the notion of 'discourse.' The term, discourse refers to a form of language use in everyday communication, public speeches or more generally meaning ways of speaking. In the field of sociology, discourse refers not merely to the language use, but also to the ideas or concepts associated with it. For example, 'the discourse of neoliberalism' encompasses the language use of the neo-liberal thinkers or politicians as well as the ideas and philosophies propagated by them. At an abstract level, discourse also refers to specific types or social domains of language use like 'medical discourse' or political discourse. In linguistics,
discourse refers to the verbal structure of the language namely auditory sounds and visual marks. Further removed from the traditional notions, discourse refers to the action and interaction within a society. That is discourses do not only consist of (structures of) sound or graphics, and of abstract sentence forms (syntax) or complex structures of global or local meaning and schematic forms. Discourses may be described in terms of social actions accomplished by language users in social situations and within society. Therefore, at all levels of discourse, we thus find traces of a context in which the social positions of the participants play a fundamental role, such as their gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, origin, position or other forms of group membership. This does not mean that such social contexts are always given or static and that language users and their discourses passively obey the constraints of their group, society or culture. On the contrary, discourse and its users have a dialectic relation with their context, as they contribute to, construct and change the context. Flexible negotiation may be engaged in as a function of the demands of the present contexts and more general constraints of culture and society. Group power may be obeyed in discourse, but also challenged. Social norms or rules may be creatively changed or broken and such violations may give rise to new social arrangements.

The last decades of the 20th century were marked by a fundamental transformation of the structure and the content of human sciences and the methods of their study. The phenomenon of communication is clearly assigned an ontological meaning, and culture in general is viewed as a hyper-
communicative historical process. The questions of communicative strategies, of functioning of the human mind and spheres, of spiritual culture of humankind are given the leading roles. Russian thinker Michail Bakhtin, whose heritage had a visible impact on the modern way of thinking, had initiated the trend in dialogical thinking (along with the Western philosopher-dialogists M. Buber, F. Rosenzweig, O. Rosenshtok-Hussi and others). Bakhtin’s meta-linguistic theory of expression as a communicative act (discourse) was developed in the theory and practice of discourse analysis, widespread in humanities studies of the European countries, as well as in the new tendencies of regeneration and transformation of rhetoric (general rhetoric, new rhetoric, live rhetoric). Theory of discourse and general communicative strategies, the differences of which are making up the diversity of the human culture, becomes a common denominator of the above events. In general, the theory of communicative events (communicative culturology) is acquiring a methodological importance to the modern researchers in humanities.

Discourse can thus be understood as a domain of language use, structured as a unit by common assumptions. Continental discourse theorists such as Foucault, Lyotord, Donzelot, tried to use the term ‘discourse’ to refer to relatively well-bounded areas of social knowledge. So, at any given historical conjecture, it is only possible to write, speak or think about a given social object in specific ways and not others. A ‘discourse’ would then be what ever constrains – but also enables – writing, speaking and thinking within such specific historical limits. It is believed that what an individual, a
group or a society as a whole can imagine (let alone put it into practice) is both permitted and constrained by the discursive possibilities at its disposal. As Wittgenstein put it, 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.' Thus the world and our consciousness of it are discursive products, but at the same time discourse is a material condition that enables and constrains the socially productive imagination. These conditions can therefore be referred to as 'discourses' or 'discursive conditions of possibility.'

For Michel Foucault the 'social' is produced in the network of discourses and discursive practices through which we seem to acquire the knowledge of the world. Broadly, Foucault's argument is that it is the modalities of discourses and discursive practices that actually produce both the knowledge and the social itself, and the modalities function differently in different historical 'epistemescs'. The history of epistemescs is not a matter of progression or continuity, but of discontinuity. In his earlier work Foucault's attempts have been to uncover the concealed modalities of discourse which govern and produce various 'knowledges'. In Birth of Clinic and The Order of Things he investigates the 'discursive formations' of medicine and the human sciences, noting how these 'discourses' delimited a field of objects, defined legitimate practices and positions for 'subjects' to adopt, and fixed the norms for producing concepts and theories. Foucault's work has brought to the fore the operation of discursive practices within institutions and the terms of his analysis seem readily applicable to the study of discursive formations of literary studies.
Foucault believes that ‘discursive practices’ take place according to the ‘power relations’. That is, the meaning of ‘power’, here, should not be limited to its traditional sociopolitical concept. Because, power is not ‘owned’ by some privileged group and exercised ‘simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”’. “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” The traditional concept of power projects a paradigm in which the ‘centre’ always is powerful and the ‘margins’ or the ‘peripheries’ are devoid of power by virtue of the social class and caste formations.

Let us now discuss the concept of ‘linguistic turn.’ Let us begin with a version of a common proposition: if there can be no description or conception of reality outside of language, (understood as not simply words in their literal usage but the creation of meaning through differentiation), then perhaps, there is no preexisting social and material world independent of our conception through language. Language might be seen, then, to constitute the social. The challenge of this understanding to all materialists, including Marxists, is obvious. Gareth Stedman Jones has explored the dilemma for class analysis:

I became increasingly critical of the prevalent treatment of the ‘social’ as something outside of, and logically—and often, though not necessarily, chronologically—prior to its articulation through language. The title “Language of Class,” stresses this point: firstly, that the term ‘class’ is a word embedded in language and should thus be analyzed in its linguistic context; and secondly, that because there are different languages of class, one should not proceed upon the assumption that ‘class’ as an elementary counter of official
social description, 'class' as an effect of theoretical discourse about distribution or productive relations, 'class' as the summary of a cluster of culturally signifying practices or 'class' as a species of political or ideological self-definition, all share a single reference point in another social reality.²

Or consider Joan Scott's formulation:

Gender, in these essays, means knowledge about sexual difference. I use knowledge, following Michel Foucault, to mean the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in this case of those between men and women. Such knowledge is not absolute or true, but always relative. It is produced in complex ways within large epistemic frames that themselves have an (at least quasi-) autonomous history. Its uses and meanings become contested politically and are the means by which relationships of power—of domination and subordinations—are constructed. Knowledge refers not only to ideas but institutions and structures, everyday practices as well as specialized rituals, all of which constitute social relationships. Knowledge is a way of ordering the worlds; as such it is not prior to social organization, it is inseparable from social organization. It follows then that gender is the social organization of sexual difference.³

If we focus on the treatment of 'knowledge' in Joan Scott's discussion, we see a movement from the acceptable and necessary assertion of relationship between 'knowledge' and 'social organization' to a much more problematic and questionable collapsing of social organization into knowledge as part of an indissoluble unity. Here, rejection of class as an 'anterior social reality' outside specific languages of class, or rejection of 'the social' as something outside of, and logically prior to its articulation through language' establishes one's understanding of structuralist and poststructuralist theory.
It is a common place assumption of the contemporary intellectual disciplines that language and social life are inextricably linked. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving special problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

The idea of Sapir as stated above brings into perspective the ways in which linguistic practices and products are caught up in, and moulded by, the forms of power and inequality, which are pervasive features of societies as they actually exist. Classification is the basis of language and thought. Without acts of classification no one could relate concepts or messages, because words and concepts only exist through classification. Since language provides the major access for individuals into the classification system of their society, the analysis of language provides the easiest way into an analysis of that system. Classification imposes order on what is classified. So classification is an instrument of control in two directions: control over the flux of experience of physical and social reality, in a 'science'; and society's control over conceptions of that reality. The basic system of classification is itself abstract, and isn't manifest until it is made actual by human agents engaged in social interaction. This abstract character is both a source of
strength and weakness: strength, in that the system itself is never scrutinized, so it is not usually open to criticism; weakness, because it is constantly being subtly renegotiated by individuals who are responding to forces outside the language system. Classification only exists in discourse. Marx and Engels\textsuperscript{11} said, "the ruling ideas in every epoch have always been the ideas of the ruling class." Bernstein\textsuperscript{12} argues that "it is not only capital, in the strict economic sense, which is subject to appropriation, manipulation and exploitation, but also cultural capital in the form of symbolic systems through which man may extend and change the boundaries of his experience." One of the merits of the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (of whom we shall discuss later) is that it offers an original sociological perspective on linguistic phenomena which has nothing to do with abstract conceptions of social life. Bourdieu's writings on language offer more than an illuminating critical perspective on the work of Sassure, Chomsky, Austin and others.

Although extreme versions of a linguistic turn have provoked a large response from Marxists, Raymond Williams has provided one of the most thoughtful commentaries. The chapter on "language" in \textit{Marxism and Literature} grants a central, constitutive role to language and rejects mechanical conception of a split between "reality" and "conceptions of reality" or language as a "reflection of reality." Indeed, the chapter is central to William's outline of a cultural materialism (although interestingly it does not discuss at length hegemony and dominant culture). He insists on two points, both of which are necessary for the reassertion of social and material
(although within language). First he rejects a temporal ordering of linguistic
or social constitution. "The difficulty arises," he writes,
as it had also arisen in a different form in previous accounts,
when the idea of the constitutive is broken down into elements
which are then temporally ordered. Thus there is an obvious
danger, in the thinking of Vico and Herder, of making language
"primary" and "original," not in the acceptable sense that it is a
necessary part of the very act of human self-creation, but in the
related and available sense of language as the founding element
in humanity: "in the beginning was the Word." It is precisely
the sense of language as an indissoluble element of human self-
creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as
"constitutive." To make it precede all other connected
activities is to claim something quite different.\textsuperscript{13}

Second, he contends that we need to understand language as activity
and we need to place that activity in history. Much of his discussion, which
draws on and extends the work of Volosinov, elaborates these two
dimensions, placing language itself within the social:

The real communicative "products" which are usable signs
are...living evidence of a continuing social process. This is at
once their socialization and their individuation: the connected
aspects of a single process which the alternative theories of
"system" and "expression" had divided and dissociated. We
then find not a reified "language" and "society" but an active
social language. Nor...is this language a simple "reflection" or
"expression" of "material reality." What we have, rather, is a
grasping of this reality through language, which is practical
consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity,
including productive activity. And, since this grasping is social
and continuous...it occurs within an active and changing
society.\textsuperscript{14}

That is, while language constitutes the social, in this view the social
also, decisively, constitutes language. By removing language from a purely
systemic level and placing the establishment of differentiation within shaping
historical processes, Williams restores the centrality of social experience and material social process.

This calls upon us to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach drawing resources from culture studies as well as sociological theories to make a better analysis of Dalit discourse. For this reason let us examine Raymond Williams’ concept of cultural studies. Culture, according to Williams, is “one of the two or three complicated words in English Language.” In his *Culture and Society*, he had identified four kinds of meaning that attach to the word, referring respectively to: an individual habit of mind; the intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group of people.\(^\text{15}\) The distinction that most fascinated him, however, was that between the latter two meanings. The concept of culture, he would later note, had “played a crucial role in definitions of ‘the arts’ and ‘the humanities’, from the first sense ... an equally crucial role in definitions of ‘human sciences’ and ‘social sciences’, in the second sense.”\(^\text{16}\)

Where traditional literary studies had defined literature as timeless, an “aesthetic” category, cultural studies would see cultural values as socially constructed. From its very inception, then, cultural studies would be interested in the interplay between cultural texts and such conventionally “sociological” indicators of social inequality as caste. It was the sense of “ordinariness” of culture that had first led Williams to propose the notion of “structure of feeling” as a mediating term between “art” and “culture.” The “structure of
feeling”, he wrote, “is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization.” He continues, “in this respect ... the arts of a period ... are of major importance ... here ... the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon.” This sense of ordinariness of culture had led him to formulate the new theoretical perspective termed “cultural materialism.” Cultural materialism, he explained, “is a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices of ‘arts’, as social uses of material means of production.” From this perspective, cultural tradition becomes the “selective tradition”, a product of contemporary interests. For Williams, “culture ... has to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” and tradition itself as “always more than an inert historicized segment ... it is the most powerful practical means of incorporation.” As such, it is dependent for its practical efficacy upon identifiable “institutions” on one hand and “formations” (that is intellectual or artistic movements) on the other. In his *Marxism and Literature* Williams argues that the specializing concept of literature is essentially one of a series of “evasions”, by which art and thinking about art “separate themselves ... from the social processes within which they are ... contained.” To such evasions, and to their often transparently elitist ideological functions, he seeks to counterpose a stress on “the multiplicity of writing”, and on “the variability, the relativity, and the multiplicity of actual cultural practice.”
For Williams language is best understood "as activity, as practical consciousness", that is whether spoken or written, language is not a "medium", in the sense of an intermediate communicative substance, mediating between thought and expression, but rather a constitutive element of material social practice. More particularly, language is in fact a special kind of material practice: that of human sociality." Linguistic signification is, then, a "real and demonstrable activity", with its own distinctively material, and in a sense "formal" properties. But these formal meanings function within "lived and living relationships." And is these relationships that "make all formal meanings significant and substantial." Writing is special form of language, which unlike speech is at once both materially objectified and reproducible. This reproducibility is necessarily dependent on the socio-cultural system within which it operates. Saying this, Williams readily concedes the problematic status of the figure of the author. While insisting that authorship cannot be reduced to an effect either of textuality or of institutionalized processing of texts, he argues that dynamic interrelationship between social formation, individual development and cultural creation taken together allow a fully constitutive definition of authorship.²¹

Let us briefly examine the resources available from sociology and the concept of sociology of literature. In general, the institutionalized academic division of labor had ensured that the discipline of sociology would tend to steer clear of any too direct an encounter with literature proper. The pre-eminent French "sociologist of literature" in the 1960s was Robert Escarpit,
literary criticism, the literary text itself. Where Escarpit had evaded the questions of aesthetic value, Goldmann set out to develop a sociological hermeneutics that could be applied precisely to the "great" works of literary art. He felt that a literary "work" should be studied as a "whole" in the light of its "historical evolution" so as to bring out the "work's objective meaning." Like Escarpit, Goldmann too believed that literary work should be understood as the effect of an extra-textual human agency. Goldmann assumed that literary work is the object of "collective consciousness" (that is entailing a certain consciousness of social class). He wrote that "every time it was the question of finding the infrastructure of a philosophy, a literary or artistic current, we have been forced to consider ... a social class and in relation to society." The crucial mediating agency between the life of a social class and the work of an individual writer is for him the "world vision", that is, "the whole complex of ideas, aspirations, feelings which links together the members of a social group ... and which opposes them to members of other social groups." For him, social class world visions could exist on two different planes. One plane is that of the "real consciousness of the group" and the other plane is that of their "coherent exceptional expression in great works of philosophy or art." His coupling of coherence with exceptionality is fundamental to his argument that the coherent expression in art, of what is in everyday life ever incoherent, thereby represents the "maximum of potential consciousness" of the group or class to which the artist belongs. He maintained that not only all work of art do in fact coherently express such a world vision, but also that "it is precisely because their work has such a
coherence that it possesses ... literary ... worth.”23 The structures of intratextuality and intertextuality elucidated in structuralist accounts of literature were, in Goldmann’s view, better understood as the central informing categories central to the world visions of social class. Thus it is possible to trace structural “homologies” between the work of the individual writer and the world vision of the social group and the social situation in which the group finds itself. Goldmann defines “homology” as a systematically patterned set of parallels between different objects of analysis, a parallelism so systematic that in the case of truly “strict” homology, “one might speak of one and the same structure manifesting itself on different planes.”24 While advocating his sociology of literature or “genetic structuralism”, he continued to insist on a radical discontinuity between “high” art on the one hand and popular commodity culture on the other. Pierre Bourdieu came up with an effective deconstruction of this distinction.

Like Raymond Williams, Bourdieu came from an unusually plebeian and provincial background and in some respects his work is close to Williams’ in tome, purpose and subject matter. Bourdieu’s reputation as a sociological thinker revolves around the “theory of practice.” He followed closely the developments of Levi-Strauss’s method in his early works on ethnography. Soon, he was dissatisfied with the theoretical and methodological problems and came up with his own theory. He attempts to theorize human sociality as the outcome of the strategic action of individuals operating within a constraining, but none the less not determining, context of values. This, he
describes with the term "habitus." According to him, habitus means "an
acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular
conditions in which it is constituted." The habitus is simultaneously structured
and structuring, it is materially produced, and, interestingly, it is very often
"generation-specific." Like Williams, Bourdieu argues that modern capitalist
societies are still class societies and that distinction between the dominated
classes (the working class, the peasantry) and the dominant class is obvious.
The distinctions are not simply matters of economics, but also of habitus.
Moreover, according to him, the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, is divided
into two main fractions – the dominant fraction that controls the economic
capital and a dominated fraction within the dominant class that controls
"cultural capital." All practices, including those purporting to be disinterested
or gratuitous” can be treated as “economic practices directed towards the
maximizing of material or symbolic profit.”

In his Distinction, the best
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example of his work in cultural sociology, Bourdieu analyzed the correlation
between zone of taste and class of affinity based on a detailed sociological
survey conducted in 1963 and 1967-68. He identified three main zones of
taste – “legitimate,” “middlebrow” and “popular.” He characterizes legitimate
taste in terms of what he calls its “aesthetic disposition”, that is its disposition
to assert the “absolute primacy of form over function”. Artistic and social
functions are inextricably interrelated according to him. He argues, “it should
not be thought that the relationship of distinction (which may or may not
imply the conscious intention of distinguishing oneself from common people)
is only an incidental component in the aesthetic disposition. The pure gaze
implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world which, as such, is a social break.” The “popular aesthetic” by contrast, is based on the “affirmation of continuity between art and life” and a “deep rooted demand for participation.” Hence its hostility to representation of objects that in real life are either ugly or immoral. Bourdieu’s analysis of legitimate taste and other tastes is as follows

The aesthetic disposition ... presupposes the distance from the world ... which is the basis of bourgeois experience ... Economic power is first and foremost power to keep economic necessity at arm’s length ... The detachment of pure gaze cannot be separated from a general disposition towards the “gratuitous” and the “disinterested” ... This affirmation of power over a dominated necessity always implies a claim to a legitimate superiority over those who ... remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies.26

If there is indeed any “coherence” to art, it is, for Bourdieu, only ever that of a coherent attempt to sustain the boundaries of social exclusivity. Commenting on the class struggle of Eighteenth century English society, E. P. Thompso on the image of a field of force,

In which an electrical current magnetized a plate covered with iron filings. The filings, which were evenly distributed, arranged themselves at one pole or the other, while in between those filings which remained in place aligned themselves sketchily as if directed towards opposing attractive poles. This is very much how I see eighteenth century society, with, for many purposes, the crowd at one pole, the aristocracy and gentry at the other, and until late in the century, the professional and the merchant groups bound by lines of magnetic dependency to the rulers, or on occasion hiding their faces in common action with the crowd.27

As he turns his understanding of such a field toward the analysis of popular plebian culture, he suggests that its “coherence...arises less from the
particular field of force and sociological oppositions peculiar to eighteenth century society; to be blunt, the discrete and fragmented elements of thought become integrated by *class.*” While this argument hold good for a bipolar societies, it cannot be applied in the exact manner to the modern complex multivalent societies. However, Williams’ notion of dominant culture, which we have discussed earlier, and Gramsci’s notion of hegemony help us to understand the relationship and tension between discursive fields and social fields of force in a more complex society. Gramsci begins his notes on Italian history with some observations concerning the history (and the study of history) of “ruling” and “subaltern” classes. “The historical unity of the ruling classes,” he writes,

> Is realised in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political (though such forms of unity do have their importance too, and not in a purely formal sense); the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and ‘civil society…”

He continues, The subaltern classes on the other hand,

> … by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’: their history, therefore, intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formations of the subaltern groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. Their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of the attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. The birth of new parties of the dominant groups and to maintain control over them; 4. The formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims
of a limited and partial character; 5. Those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but without the old framework; 6. Those formations which assert the integral autonomy, …etc.\textsuperscript{30}

According to Gramsci, both the ruling and the subaltern are not homogenous in the sense that they imply plurality and diversity for whom unity is a political and cultural problem. However, the unity of the ruling class is unproblematic as it is achieved through the control of the state. That is to say, unity requires control of the State, the control that is juridical, political, cultural and moral. Despite the unity at a broader level, the ruling classes are prone to spatial differentiation—uneven and unequal development of social powers in regional spaces—at a narrow level. The same logic can be extended to the subaltern groups but with some modifications. The very definition of subaltern classes indicates that they are not unified because they are not the state. There is also diversity in their objective formation in the economic sphere—the movements, developments, and transformations in production and distribution in space and time. Therefore, to understand the hegemonic process, it is also necessary to consider what associations or organizations of kinship, ethnicity, religion, region, or nation bind or divide them. Gramsci clearly mentioned that the subaltern groups carry the "mentality, ideology, and aims" of preexisting social groups; they “affiliate” with preexisting political organizations as they attempt to press their own claims; they create new organizations within a preexisting social and political “framework.” Thus the process of hegemony can be understood as a struggle, the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations,
institutions, and movements used by subordinate population to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination shaped by the process of domination itself. This brings us back to the concept of language in the social—the common material and meaningful framework, discursive process—a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur. Conceptualizing such a process in terms of the necessity of constructing discursive framework allows us to examine both the power and fragility of particular order of domination. Let us consider the idea of State power according to Corrigan and Sayer:

The arcane rituals of court of law, the formulae of royal assent to an act of parliament, visit of school inspectors, are all statements. They define, in great detail, acceptable forms and images of social activity and individual and collective identity; they regulate...much...of social life. In this sense “the state” never stops talking. Out of the vast range of human social capabilities—possible ways in which social life could be lived—state activities more or less forcibly “encourage” some whilst suppressing, marginalizing, eroding, undermining others. Schooling for instance comes to stand for education, policing for order, voting for political participation. Fundamental social classifications, like age and gender, are enshrined in law, embedded in institutions, routinized in administrative procedures and symbolized in rituals of state. Certain forms of activity are given the official seal of approval; others are situated beyond the pale. This has cumulative, and enormous, cultural consequences; consequences for how people identify...themselves and their “place” in the world. 

Though the same situation prevailed in colonial India, nothing changed in the post-independent India except for the royal assent. The particular merit of the understanding of hegemonic process aids us in drawing a more complex map of field of force. That is, the formation of particular regional, religious,
ethnic, national, or class/caste communities and identities needs to be understood in relation to historically specific processes of domination and struggle. This understanding of discursive framework works as a reference point to the analysis of Dalit literature, which emerged as a resistance literary movement literature in India.

The evolution of Dalit discourse as a new discursive practice has its origin in postcolonial India. The late eighteenth century Orientalist tradition saw ancient texts as the source of authentic knowledge about immemorial custom and tradition. The Sistras and Koran, it believed, set out the codes of conduct of Hindus and Muslims, and defined the customary laws which mediated social relationships as well as conflicts within communities. This meant that Dalits can be represented either by Hinduism or Islam. It is obvious that Indian sociology brought Dalits under the banner of Hinduism—the dominant religion. Practices were seen as legitimate only when conformed to the injunctions of ancient texts. This point makes the role of literature and language crucial to the discussion of discursive formations. As Dalits had no written codes of their own and as literary scholarship was inaccessible to them, they relied hugely on oral tradition for a considerable period that extends up to the late colonial times. The absence of written documentary code of their own, the present Dalit practice is not the acceptable proof of valid custom: it could represent perversions, distortions and deformations of the original principles—a standard attack on Dalit community. Colonial rulers of India believed that practices became tainted
with the passage of time; marked with the imprint of generations, the real principles were buried under the weight of history. Therefore, to preserve immemorial custom a return to the original form was essential: custom had to be purged of foreign influences and Vedic law has to be consolidated where an amalgam of practices had developed. Hastings felt that the original authoritative texts have to be translated and understood; and colonial codes had to be based on and authorized through these texts. This legitimized the Vedic texts rewritten and reinterpreted during the colonial rule as the authoritative texts on Indian society. This Orientalist thinking on custom, tradition and law was relentlessly attacked by Utilitarian positivists inspired by the idea of Bentham as conservative ideology pathologically opposed to liberal reform. In the absence of a written code, how was the Dalit custom to be defined and discovered? What were the sources of its authority? The Indian Pundits came in to the scene. The question of knowledge became linked to the discourse of morality. Soon the contributions of Pundits became controversial and were replaced by village headmen—chaudhuris and mukkuddams. This inquiry began another phase in the redefinition of custom. But, when it came to the issue of Dalits, there was no much difference between the discourses of Pundits and the Village headmen. This process of translation of vernacular statements, and the re-reading of textualized records and systematization of evidence provided a wide space for colonial authorial intervention in the making of the custom. This resulted in appropriation and reconstitution of custom defined by specific frames of reference through which local reality was perceived.
The process of codification restructured rural power relations and was also shaped by those relations. The inquiry into custom opened up a space for negotiation and conflict over the truth of practice. We are aware that the language of judicial discourse continuously slips from the deductive to the inductive, from the mythical to the 'real', transcending such oppositions and intermeshing them inseparably. The imagined reality of the coparcenary community became part of official and judicial common sense and imposed its own specific order into the rural world of customary practices. The boundaries of the proprietary community were sharply demarcated; the entry of 'outsiders' into it was legally restricted. The logic of the argument led to the Land Alienation Act of 1900, when communities classified as 'non-agriculturists' were debarred entry into the rural market. The colonial regime of customary law thus sharpened the opposition between the outsiders and the insiders, the 'agriculturists' and the 'non-agriculturists', the proprietary body and the lower castes. In short, the discourse on custom reveals a dialogue between masters and natives. The native voice was inscribed within imperial discourse, but it was constrained, regulated and ultimately appropriated. This was a male, patriarchal voice, the voice of dominant proprietary body speaking against the rights of non-proprietors, women and lower castes. Despite this, the official discourse was not monologic: the dominant voice could not represent all others. Through the cracks opened up by contestation, evidence of alternative practices becomes visible. Not all the voices could be easily accommodated within the imperial discourse on customary law, not all
evidence was always recognized. Codification was also a process of silence and erasure. Imperial officials defined terms of validity of custom and the criteria of reasonability and equity; they distinguished between the norm and the exception, between antiquated and living practices. Through their classificatory process they sought to repress troubling evidence and fix the meanings of customs in the act of encoding them. The common argument that customs are frozen through codification is premised on a simple contrast between the oral and the textual. The oral tradition is seen as fluid, open to a variety of meanings and interpretations, a range of appropriations according to the context. When oral tradition is textualized the fluidity disappears and meanings are fixed. But, texts too convey a variety of meanings; and new meanings are continuously inscribed onto texts in the process of interpretation and elaboration. Beneath the regime of codes was the reality of uncodified practices. Inheritance rules, rights of women, and norms of marriage did not all change with codification. There were violations of rules, a public flouting of norms, a silent persistence of alternative practices. The official mind could not close itself to the pressure of this subversive evidence. Colonial officials could not continue living in a world of imagined reality, gloriously ignorant of native understanding and practices. Subversion and contestation did not simply constitute a private transcript which remained hidden behind the public transcript – a code to which people submitted. The private transcript persistently asserted itself in public spaces, the language and understanding of the rulers felt the strain of contest. In the process of this cultural confrontation, colonial structures and categories of representation were
dislocated and reconfigured, while the public transcript imprinted itself onto the private in invisible ways.

This codification of customary practices resulted in Vedic literature becoming a *de facto* social norm for Hindus. *The Puranas* became instruments for the propagation of Brahmanical ideals of social reconstruction and sectarian interests, a medium of absorption of local cults and associated practices, and a vehicle for popular instruction on norms governing everyday existence. The cumulative effect of the composition of *Puranas* and the popularization of Puranic ethos was constituted in somewhat imprecise categories, what is popularly known today as 'Hinduism.' The impression of two English civil servants of the early twentieth century regarding what constitutes Hinduism will serve to illustrate the point. Malley describes Hinduism thus:

Considered purely as a religion...Hinduism may be described as a conglomerate of cults and creeds. The non-Aryan tribes who were admitted to the fold of Hinduism and the Hindus of Aryan descent reacted on one another, the former adopting the rites and customs of their conquerors, while the latter assimilated some of their less civilized cults and incorporated in their system the objects of popular devotion. The higher and the lower forms of religion still coexist side by side. At one end of the scale, therefore, is the cultured monotheist of the eclectic pantheist for whom no mysticism is too subtle. Pantheists actually form a small minority, and the great majority of Hindus are theists believing in one personal god, though they are at the same time polytheistic in their religious observances. At the bottom of the scale is a great multitude of people in a low state of religious development, some of whom have scarcely risen above mere fetishism.

Hutton defines Hinduism as follows:
If the view be accepted that the Hindu religion has its origin in pre-Vedic times and that in its later form it is the result of the reaction by the religion of country to the intrusive beliefs of northern invaders, many features of Hinduism will become at once more comprehensible, while the very striking difference between the religion of the Rigveda and that of the Dharmasastras will seem natural... This would explain Hinduism's amalgamation with and absorption of local cults and its excessive multiformity, and is, moreover, in entire accordance with the manner in which it still spreads at the present day, absorbing tribal religions by virtue of its social prestige, by identification of local gods with its own, by the experimental resort to Hindu priests, and by the social promotion of pagan chiefs who are provided with suitable mythological pedigrees. Into the early Hindu beliefs spread in this manner the religion of the Rigveda has been imposed and absorbed.  

Brian K. Smith has identified two criteria as constitutive of Hinduism:
1. Recognition of the authority of the Brahmana class and 2. Recognition of the authority of Vedas. On this premise he defines Hinduism as the ‘religion of those humans who create, perpetrate and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda.’ We shall return to the idea of Hinduism in relation to Dalits and Dalit literature in Chapter 3.

The colonial system initiated by Macaulay and Bentinck and elaborating during the course of nineteenth century had many facets and functions, among which its contribution to the creation of a new ‘cultural common sense’ figures as the most enduring and critical. This facilitated educational opportunities to the lower castes. The cultural impact of new literacy was not confined to English literates. There was a spill over effect on vernacular readers. The written word as a cultural factor became increasingly
important and influential during the course of nineteenth century. The access to printing technology opened new instruments of communication—both literary (for example, novels and short stories) and non-literary (magazines and newspapers). The novel became a popular genre of late nineteenth century.

Access to education has brought about a radical change in the perception of the Dalit about her/himself and the society (s)he was part of. The Brahminical order was challenged and deconstructed in that a new discourse that centralized identity and dissent emerged. The emergent discourse designated as Dalit discourse is ideologically subversive and politically self-conscious in post independent India.
Endnotes


2. Ibid.


5. An episteme is a historical period that is unified by the rules and procedures – the modalities – for producing knowledge.


Ibid. p. 37.


Ibid. pp. 117-20, 153, 158-9, 165-8, 187-92, 201


24. Goldmann, L. 1975. *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*. Tr. A. Sheridan. London: Tavistock. p. 8. In his studies of Kant, Pascal and Racine, Goldmann relates the structure of the “tragic vision” as world vision to two concepts. First, he relates it to the textual structures of the philosophical writings of Kant and Pascal and the theatre of Racine; secondly, to the social structures of seventeenth century France and eighteenth century Germany. Goldmann believes that “structures are born from events and ... except for the most formal characteristics, there is no permanence in these structures.”


28. Ibid. p.77-8

Ibid.


