i. Interview with Mr. R. Athiyaman

Scholar: Good morning sir. I am much pleased to meet you as a part of my research on Dalit literature.

Mr. Athiyaman: Good morning sir.

Scholar: I come to know that you are the founder of Athithamizhar Peravai. Can you say something on this organization?

Mr. Athiyaman: There are many organizations working on the theme of Dalit emancipation. Athithamizhar Peravai is one among them. I founded this organization keeping in view of the contemporary political scenario. The political parties which has to work for the emancipation of people, have invariably failed, as far as Dalit emancipation is considered. Being a Dalit, I found it necessary to fight for the rights of Dalits. After realizing the need to fight a battle, I founded this organization and right from its foundation, this organization is working for the emancipation of Dalits.

Scholar: As you have talked about politics, Dalits too are participating in politics. Does politics not help the Dalit to empower?

Mr. Athiyaman: Well. Politics in Tamilnadu is based on caste identities. Only the upper caste can shine. Upper caste people hold the key posts; Dalits are used as laymen. Dalits are required to mount

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- Mr. R. Athiyaman is a government employee turned social activist, working for the welfare and empowerment of Dalits. He is the founder of Athithamizhar Peravai.
- The interview is translated by the scholar.
the flex and posters. Dalits are considered as mere vote banks of various political parties. The political parties in Tamilnadu do not care about the empowerment of Dalits, but on the contrary they are afraid that Dalits empowerment may hinder the politics of the upper caste people. Eventually Dalits are kept as Dalits even in politics. We emphasize political emancipation of Dalits, because politics is everything; it is the deciding factor in Indian society. Dalit organizations should unite themselves under a single umbrella and unitedly contest the election. This will make Dalit emancipation easier.

**Scholar**: As you are a social activist, you may have space to contact many people. How is the status of Dalits in Tamilnadu, as far as you have observed?

**Mr. Athiyaman**: First of all I would like to make it clear who Dalits are; all the Scheduled Caste people which are in the government list, are known as Dalits, they are the most ostracized, most oppressed, most subjugated in Indian society. They are deprived of their rights. There are many castes listed as Dalits, prominent among them in Tamil Nadu are Pallar, Parayar and Arunthathiyar. These three castes are mostly vanquished. Among the three Parayar and Arunthathiyar have the habit of beef eating, since they are professionally dependent on cattle that they used to peel of the skin of the carcasses of dead animals, whereas the Pallars are not associated with this habit. All the three castes are still living in the outskirts of every
village. In some of the villages their colonies are adjacent to graveyard which further worsens the condition of Dalits. These colonies are branded as Dalit colonies. In Tamil these colonies are identified by the names as “Cheri” and “Pacheri”. Even after independence the status of Dalits remain unchanged.

**Scholar**: The Depressed Castes are known by the term “Dalit”.

Some of them do not accept the terminology whereas some do. How do you see this terminology?

**Mr. Athiyaman**: As you have said, Dalit is a common terminology that can bring the suppressed people under a single umbrella. But the term is more politicized and it is considered as the meanest and most deteriorating term in Indian society. All people want to shed away the caste hierarchy. Consequently, they detest the term “Dalit” to signify the depressed classes. They unite themselves and agitate against the caste atrocities.

**Scholar**: Women are the worst sufferers in Indian society. Even the upper caste women enjoy no privilege. Such is the state of women in general. What is your opinion on the status of Dalit women?

**Mr. Athiyaman**: I also accept that in Indian society, women suffer a lot. They have to fight their battle. Though we are living in the modern age, the subjugation remains in villages. In cities too women do not enjoy the privileges as men do. There are differences between men and women. Gender disparity is wider in Indian
society. Dalit women are subject to sexual assaults and harassments in the hands of the upper caste men, only for the fact that they are Dalits. Dalits socio-economic condition makes them dependent on the upper caste landlords, which further deteriorates their condition. Even then Dalit women especially the Arunthathiar women enjoy some privileges within their community especially in their spousal life. They have the freedom to choose their grooms and at any point of time of their filial life they can reject the husband and choose the new one based on her whims and fancies. We have the widow remarriage system which is mostly forbidden among the upper caste. Brahman widows are tonsured their head and also they have restrictions in day to day life. But we do not have such restrictions.

Scholar : What do you think about reservation for scheduled caste in educational and job opportunities?

Mr. Athiyaman : Reservation is a boon to Dalits that makes the socio-economic empowerment possible. Reservation is necessary for the people who are perennially denied of the opportunities. Scheduled Castes enjoy 18% of reservation in educational and job opportunities. As far as Arunthathiar are concerned they enjoy an inner reservation among Dalit communities, since among the three prominent Dalit communities, Arunthathiar are mostly undeveloped. Now they realize the need to study. The former Chief Minister Karunanidhi has promulgated an
ordinance allotting 3% inner reservation which makes almost sixty persons in every profession per year. Reservation must continue till Dalits are fully empowered. I insist that reservation should be extended to the private sector also, since Government is intensifying the process of privatization.

Scholar : Ambedkar advised Dalits for religious conversion and to concentrate on education. What is your advice to Dalits in the process of annihilation of caste?

Mr. Athiyaman : Ambedkar put forth his advice keeping in view of the status of Buddhism on then days. He considered Buddhism as the revolutionary against Hinduism and has no caste disparity and consequently, he led religious conversion. But the present religious scenario shows that almost all religions are obsessed with caste. So the religious conversation has failed to shun the cast hierarchy. But I will not accept that education has failed to bring equality. Education will do; Dalits should be properly educated. Our organization advises Dalits to vacate the villages, because Dalits are forced to do menial works like removing the carcasses, cobbling and mending shoes and the like, being in village; caste was initially determined based on the job. Urbanization may be helpful in handing the caste at present and in course of time caste will vanish, I hope.

Scholar : Everyone has their own culture. Historically Aryan culture was imposed on the native, which has subdued the native culture. Do you have any idea of developing the Dalit
Culture?

Mr. Athiyaman: Culture is unique and also dynamic. One culture may be dominant at present; it may perish in course of time. At the same time I do not think that there is Dalit culture. Culture cannot be ostracized through the phrase “Dalit Culture”, because culture is a set of values; practices cannot be termed as wrong. As I have said that culture is dynamic; what you say as wrong today may be right tomorrow. For example Hinduism does not allow women coming out of their homes. Even the Tamil Poet Bharathiyar was accused for bringing his wife out. But now even Brahman women also go for work, realizing the economical need of the family. Our organization has a proposal to revive the small God worship and we would like to bring out history of our ostracized heroes like Ondiveeran and Madurai Veeran to make our people aware of our culture.

Scholar: You have said many valuable things. Your organization is wonderfully working towards Dalit emancipation. We hope, “Future will mend all the faults of the past”. Thank you very much for spending your valuable time with me.

Mr. Athiyaman: Thank you.
## ii) Interview with Rev. Dr. R. Dhanraj

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>:</th>
<th>Good morning, sir.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Dhanraj</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>Good morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>Congratulation for being conferred an award. Please say something about the award.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Dhanraj</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>This award is called Bharatha Jothi award. That was presented by our former governor of Tamilnadu Bhisma Narayan Singh. They gave that award on the meritorious work for social upliftment and also religious unification of our people. I don’t know how they have selected my name. They also did not reveal that. That was a grand ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>I came to know that you are organizing the Dalit people and you have a party known as Dalit Christian Welfare Association. Can you brief something about the evolution of this association and the works conducted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Dhanraj</td>
<td>:</td>
<td>Basically I was a Government officer for twenty years. I Opted for voluntary retirement and came for full time God’s ministry from 1996 - 2007. I was concentrating on building my own churches. In 2007, there was a debate in the Supreme Court of India; one Chief Justice, Lahoti was present. One petition was filed in march 2014 by Prasant Bhushan,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shasti Bhusan and Mr. Franklin Caesar Thomas, initiator of the move on the issue of forfeiture of all the privileges for the Dalit Christians. One act was enacted in Aug 10, 1950. They want to delete the act saying that the act was unconstitutional and violation of fundamental rights. In that condition Government said that they will refer to the commission for linguistic and religious minority welfare to take care of the issue. The chief justice asked the Government in retaliation that they have given their plight presented to commission and why you are referring to another commission. The Government was adamant; just to pass the time, they assure that the commission will probe the matter. In the year 2007 may 21. Justice Ranganath Mishra commission has submitted the report to Government of India. In that report they categorically explained and finally the said in para 3 a person who practises a religion other than Hinduism shall not be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste that means if you want to enjoy the privileges as SC you must stick to Hinduism. If not, you will not be given by privileges. That order was enacted in 1950. Then the Sikh converts fought against the issue. In 1950, they got a first amendment staying that they can enjoy the privileges as SC. In 1990, there was a great debate for two days to include the Buddhist and Christian Dalits the list of SCs. The bill was presented only with Buddhist. The then labour minister Ramvilas Baswan assured that they will
be included in the bill. That was also a pass time activity; so any convert from SC to Buddhism and Sikhism can enjoy the rights as SCs. The Christians were excluded. We ask the same thing because caste is different in India; religion is different in India. India is a caste based country. When a child is born definitely there is a mark of caste on his head that will continue till the grave. Nobody can change. Religion is temporary; caste is permanent. So merging of caste and religion is bad. This Indian society wants a section of people always be enslaved. In 2007 we started Dalit Christian welfare movement; we have waged a number of protest, conferences, seminars and agitations. We have a minority commission that was appointed under the presidency of Desh Pandey of University of Delhi. Having probed this issue for two years, they concluded that we find no significant reason to assign Scheduled Caste status to Christians and Muslims of SC origin and he added that we have already done a wrong and this is high time to right the wrong. So we wanted the then Government either to pass a bill or to answer the court to deliver the judgement. The judgement is pending want to answer from the Government. Our organization urges the government to respond positively through our 6th conference.

**Scholar** : You have taken many efforts to approach the governments to make ordinances. But you see, you cannot achieve anything without people’s awareness. How what kind of
activities you have taken from your organization. How for you have achieved?

Dr. Dhanraj : Our organization comprises of a pastorate under which there are some pastors serving in the villages where mostly Dalits are living. So our organization is coupled with ministries. I ask my pastors to make the Dalits aware of their rights through their sermons, not merely teaching Bible. The Biblical teachings are supported by the social condition of people in general and Dalits in particular. It is not done in other ministries. Even in my sermons in my church, which is functioning in my village, Kuvalaikanni, I teach the people on how to attain the socio-economic empowerment the process is going and it will consume some times to work on since we are dealing mostly with the illiterates

Scholar : Christianity is the religion which teaches equality among people, as far as I know. But I think that churches are not so; churches unleash the caste based discrimination. What do you thing about the operation of caste in churches?

Dr. Dhanraj : You are correct. Christianity has no disparity. The evolution of mankind which is in Genesis says that everybody is made from the same clay and the breath of God animates all human beings. Eventually the theoretical aspects pronounce no discrimination among human beings. India is the soil of discrimination from ancient times. The culture of this land influences Christianity too which in turn observes the caste
systems prevalent in Indian society. In churches one can find the operation of caste system. The upper caste pastors are respected, whereas we, the Dalit pastors are not. I personally felt caste discrimination from my previous experiences. I was called in to deliver a message in a particular church conducted by an upper caste pastor. As soon as I had delivered the message I was made to sit in chair among the participants of the ministry not in the podium, where there were four upper caste pastors were seated. Not one or two times, whenever I am called to that church I was made to sit among the audience. Day by day I came to understand the real intention of the pastor and I stopped going there. I started a new ministry exclusively for Dalits. So it is an undeniable fact that there is caste discrimination in churches.

Scholar : People initially converted to Christianity to shed away their caste identity. After becoming Christians, they are branded as Dalit Christians. You too support the views of church by conducting a ministry for Dalits. Don’t you think that you too are fostering caste discrimination?

Dr. Dhanraj : Sir, I am not supporting the caste discrimination prevalent in the churches. The churches conducted by the upper caste people treat Dalits as down to earth creature. They require Dalits service in cleaning church and after that no prominent role is assigned to the Dalit participants in the church. Dalits condition is that churches are becoming worst. It is not denied
that people converted to Christianity to shed away caste disparity may be the initiative is advised by Dr. Ambedkar.

But caste is the major criteria by which people are segmented in the modern society. So I don’t find that it is wrong to conduct a ministry for the upliftment of the suppressed Dalits.

Scholar: Why do you need reservation in Government jobs under the category Scheduled Caste after becoming a Christian?

Dr. Dhanraj: After conversion the official record says that these people are Backward Classes. Dalits are economically backward. There are many miles to go to attain freedom. Now you can say that India attained freedom on 1947 itself which I don’t deny but it is a bourgeois independence that is the independence to a particular group of people not to all, Dalits are still considered as Dalits; they are enslaved by the upper caste. To have the socio-economic empowerment we need reservation on par with Dalit Hindus, as there is no difference between Hinduism and Christianity in the operation of caste. We are working towards that; we hope to succeed.

Scholar: Congratulations sir for the success in your venture. Your ministry is doing a brilliant job and also thank you for spending your precious time.

Dr. Dhanraj: Thank you sir. I feel very happy in meeting you.
iii. Interview with Mrs. P. Sivagami, IAS

Scholar : Good evening madam

Mrs. P. Sivagami : Good evening

Scholar : I came to understand that you have founded an organization, Samuga Samathuva Padai by name. Can you brief on the organization?

Mrs. P. Sivagami : Actually I am an IAS officer, worked in various department of bureaucracy in Tamilnadu government. I got a voluntary retirement and started this organization. At present, it is not a full-fledged political party. This organization is formed to work for Dalit emancipation and time may decide whether it can be transformed into a full-fledged political party.

Scholar : In India politics in the deciding factor, as far as my little understanding is concerned. What is the part played by Dalits in politics?

Mrs. P. Sivagami : Yes, you are right. The politicians frame the policies and impose it on the officers for promulgation. Dalits are fully ostracized in politics. They are not given their due share. Even after independence they are not able to contest in the election from a general constituency. Even contesting from a reserved constituency seems difficult for them, as there is a threat of life by the so called upper caste.

Mrs. P. Sivagami is a former IAS Officer and founder of Samuha Samathuva Padai. She is a writer, politician and social activist working for Dalit emancipation.
There are sporadic incidents then are there by which a Dalit panchayat president, even after being elected in a democratic way is not able function. But it is one of the upper caste rich person in the area who functions as the panchayat president making the elected Dalit president as subordinate. So Dalit are not in a position to do their duty in political field.

**Scholar**: As you were in the bureaucracy, what is status of the operation of caste in governance?

**Mrs. P. Sivagami**: Governance is fully caste biased. The upper caste people occupy the key position in governance, and Dalits are allotted only the mean departments. For example, in the allocation of portfolio for ministers, the key departments like finance, education, home affairs and the like are allocated to the upper caste members and only Adi-Dravida welfare department is perennially allocated to Dalits. Even among the officers one can witness the operation of caste. The ostracism of Dalit officers is clearly evident, though the officers are well educated, the caste disparity and discrimination is deep rooted in their minds and it cannot be de-rooted. No department is free from caste bias.

**Scholar**: What do you think about reservation, in Government departments in the process of Dalit empowerment?

**Mrs. P. Sivagami**: Reservation was initially enforced to equip the subjugated
whose opportunities were perennially denied. Reservation equips Dalits in a large extent in improving the socio-economic status, no doubt but in most of the government departments reservation is not implemented properly. It is the upper caste authorities who are responsible for this status. Reservation is implemented in the initial appointment which is the entry level of a department, but not in promotion which makes a less number of Dalit representatives in top most post of the governance. Though some Dalits could reach the top positions, they are not able to perform freely.

**Scholar** : The Depressed class of a society is known by the term “Dalit.” Some of them accept the terminology and some do not accept. As a social worker how do you view the term?

**Mrs. P. Sivagami** : Actually “Dalit” is a term initially used by Dr. Ambedkar to denote the suppressed. The word might have its origin from Marathi. As a term “Dalit” comes to mean the “broken” “Suppressed” and the like. Keeping the root of the word in view, there is no specification about caste. But in course of time the term comes to denote the lowest of the caste system. There is nothing wrong in the usage of the word in the present context as most of the people noted as scheduled caste are subject to subjugation. But socio-political thinkers should understand that Dalit is the terminology that can be applied even to the economically ostracized people belonging to the upper caste.
Scholar : As a woman, that too belonging to a Dalit community and a social worker, say something about the status of Dalit women

Mrs. P. Sivagami : Being a woman in general in Indian society is a curse regardless of her education status and her position. A woman is considered as an untouchable in the male hierarchical society. They have nothing to choose, even though you may say that we are living in a modern age in which woman are considerably empowered. And the situation becomes worse for being a Dalit woman. Dalit women are the worst sufferers, that they are subjugated by the society as a Dalit and then by the Dalit men for being women. They have to go to the work places to earn the livelihood and as they come back home they have to do their familial works like cooking serving taking care of children and so on. They face sexual violence in the work places too. Dalit women are doubly ostracized and humiliated.

Scholar : What is your opinion on Dalit writing?

P.S : Dalit literature is one of the ways of bringing the Dalit consciousness among Dalits which may be helpful in making Dalits aware of their rights in society. The writers write about Dalits taking intuition from the black literature we have a handful of Dalit writers in Tamil like Bama, Poomani, Idhayavendan, Ravikumar and so on. They do their due in their respective fields.
Scholar: Do you think Dalit literature arouse the awakening among Dalits?

Mrs. P. Sivagami: Certainly. Literature is of the most significant tools of empowerment that is felt across the world. So in that context Dalit literature will do the job of making resonance among Dalits.

Scholar: As a writer and social activist what do you expect from Dalits?

Mrs. P. Sivagami: Dalits should unite themselves. They are scattered in the name of caste there is untouchability even among the Dalits. They should come out of the caste disparity and be united under a single umbrella called Dalits. They must understand that union is strength. Their unity will do a lot in their emancipation.

Scholar: O. K. madam you are doing a wonderful job for creating awareness among Dalits. We hope, the future will witness a good horizon for Dalits. Thank you very much for spending your time amidst your busy schedule.

Mrs. P. Sivagami: Thank You.
# GLOSSARY OF TAMIL TERMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayyankaachi</td>
<td>ghosts/spirits that appear in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakkiliyar</td>
<td>One of the Dalit Castes who perennially indulge in Cleaning cobbling or skinning off the dead animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chavadi</td>
<td>a meeting place in every village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chellaanguchi</td>
<td>a game, boys usually play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheri</td>
<td>the Place where Dalits especially Paraiyars live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jallikattu</td>
<td>a Sport in which participants attempt to gain control over racing bulls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadichukkira</td>
<td>a gravy like substance usually used as side dish to the meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karma</td>
<td>spiritual principle of cause and effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kizhavi</td>
<td>an old lady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kodangi</td>
<td>drum-like musical instrument usually used to attract attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuzhambu</td>
<td>gravy made of either vegetables or meat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kulavai</td>
<td>ululation sound made by women on an auspicious occasions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kummi</td>
<td>a folk dance done by women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moi</td>
<td>monetary gift given at a family function like wedding or puberty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mudalali</td>
<td>employer or proprietor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muni</td>
<td>bad spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naicker</td>
<td>a caste in Tamilnadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalla Kaariyam</td>
<td>an auspicious occasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nattaamai</td>
<td>The village head who redresses the issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odaiyaru</td>
<td>gifts offered by tenants to their landowners during festivals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oppari</td>
<td>dirge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pacheri</td>
<td>a colony of pailars</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pallar</td>
<td>a Dalit caste</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parisam</td>
<td>a monetary gift given by the groom’s parents to the bride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pongal</td>
<td>harvest festival celebrated on the first day of Thai, the Tamil month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ragi-kuuzh</td>
<td>gruel made of ragi</td>
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<tr>
<td>roraattu</td>
<td>lullaby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seer</td>
<td>betrothal gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tali-tying</td>
<td>the central rite in Hindu wedding ceremony</td>
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<tr>
<td>thaayam</td>
<td>a game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vannan</td>
<td>a Dalit caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varnasramadharma</td>
<td>a systems propagated by the Hindu philosophy by which people were segregated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vellavi</td>
<td>the process of heating clothes before washing. This process is used to kill germs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villupattu</td>
<td>one of the folk theatres of Tamilnadu.</td>
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Languages in India

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Situating Dalit Literature in Indian Writing in English
S. Ramanathan, M.A., M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed. PGDDE

Abstract

Etymologically speaking, the term *dalit* has originated from Sanskrit, *dalita* meaning ‘oppressed’. It seems to have been borrowed from Hindi recently. It means (in the traditional Indian Caste System) a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. The origin of Dalits as a clan may be traced back to the Rigveda, the oldest Veda of Hindus. Four Varnas are identified in ancient classics and religious literature of the Hindus. The four varnas or castes are subdivided into many subcastes and there is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowliest of all, so impure and despicable that they stood outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether. This final stratum is known as ‘Dalits’ in modern linguistic terminology.

There is a general traditional assumption among the caste Hindus/upper caste Hindus that the Dalits did not have their own cultural institutions, arts and fine arts, etc. This paper focuses on the presentation of information which proves that the Dalits did and do have their own culture and have had their own traditions, music, rites of passage, worship of gods, and knowledge of many kinds of fine arts, handicrafts and so on. Many stories or books on them by well-meaning authors did not mention this cultural side of their miserable lives, and focussed on only the oppression and abuse perpetrated upon them by the upper caste Hindus, and so we had not heard of their cultural traditions. The paper presents the arguments and facts using information available from various sources such as Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and describes the current state of Dalit literature with particular reference to Tamil literature.

Keywords: Dalit, Varnas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Shudras, Rig Veda, subaltern literature, Indian Writing in English, Modern Dalit literature
Introduction – Dalit Community

Etymologically speaking, the term *dalit* has originated from Sanskrit, *dalita* meaning ‘oppressed’. It seems to have been borrowed from Hindi recently. It means (in the traditional Indian Caste System) a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. The origin of Dalits as a clan may be traced back to the Rigveda, the oldest Veda of Aryan supremacy. The celebration of “Purusa-Sukta” myth dictates the origin of the Indian Caste system. *Purusa* is described in the Rigveda as, “the man… with thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet… the ruler of immortality” (30), and it is said and believed by millions that all creatures are part of him; the human beings also are descended from his monstrous body. The Rigveda further enunciates, “His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the business people and from his feet the servants were born”. (30) This forms the four Varnas: Brahmins (the learned men who become priests and religious leaders), the Kshatriyas (the strongmen who would be the warriors) the Vaisyas (the men of business acumen who ensure prosperity through commercial transaction), the shudras (the humble toilers who lacked the governing graces of the other three varnas). The four castes are subdivided into multitudinous subcastes and there is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowliest of all, so impure and despicable that they stood outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether. This final stratum is known as ‘Dalits’ in modern linguistic terminology.

Post-Colonial Literary Texts

Post-colonial literary texts eventually represent the culture of a particular land in which the text is produced, which is crushed, deteriorated as time passes and people turn to new fashions, industrial revolution, and science. So the literary texts, regardless of the genre are considered as a typical representation of the culture of the writer’s class. The colonial texts have an urge to represent or conceptualize colonialism and its effects and to re-establish the culture of the natives. It is viewed as a Cultural determinism. These texts seem to reject the master narratives that are produced under the impact of western influences. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham say, “the major element of post colonial agenda is to disestablish Eurocentric norms of literary and artistic values, and to expand the literary canon to include colonial and post colonial writers”. (Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham307)
The early stage postcolonial texts have foregrounded the differences in perception between the colonizer and the colonized and set up a plane of duality such as ruler/the ruled:

“Foregrounding differences and diversity, celebrating hybridity, plurality and ‘otherness’ as potential sources of vitality and change and rejecting notions like standardisation, conformity, universalisation that are seen as sources of power, hegemony and colonialism—these notions are gaining ground. . .”

(Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra 93).

The Subaltern Literature

This stratum is followed by the national or nationalized literature with the national culture as its subject. In this perspective the literature of a country like India, with multiple diversities in cultural and traditional values represents the hybridization and the hybrid identities have given a unique flavour to the literature as “Subalternism”. “The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse…..” (Abrams and Harpham, 307). It aims at an understanding of the linkage between the structures of knowledge and forms of oppression. The writers tried to portray the differences between the oppressed and the oppressor in their works and to re-establish or regain their identity through their literary texts.

Cheran in a very succinct poem which talks about the futility of war proclaims:

when you are oppressed,
you see the blood of tears.
when you are the oppressor
you see the tears of blood. (Cheran 71)

These lines typically represent the two terms discussed in subaltern studies, oppressed and oppressor. The oppressed want to relieve themselves from the tyrannical clutches of the oppressor, against which the oppressed protest to establish themselves. So, the literature of the subaltern group is usually portrayed as protest literature, in which the oppressed try to release themselves from the clutches of the oppressor.
On Defining Subaltern

Subaltern is a group, that is socially, linguistically, culturally politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the contemporary society; ‘subaltern’ as the term indicates, speaking linguistically, through the etymological roots that the word originated from the Latin term ‘subalternius’ meaning next (sub), every other (alternus), imbibed into British English during the late 16th century, originally meaning, “any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain”, Oxford Dictionary explains. And when transferred to cultural studies, it has assumed the present meaning. It is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Anotoio Gramsci, the author of Prison Notebooks (1926) The term has entered into the field of cultural studies through the works of Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of South Asian historians who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who are the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites in the history of South Asia.

Colonizers and Settlers

In Indian history, a very significant distinction is to be made between colonizers and settlers. In this subcontinent, the Aryans have come and settled down, the Moghuls also, and they established their rule over the area for a long time and settled down. During the process of settlements the Aryans have wreaked a battle against the aboriginals and have subdued them. In this connection Majumdar in The Advanced History of India observes, “. . . the white hued Aryan invaders were marked out from their dark skinned opponents, who were called dasa, dasyu or sudra.” (Majumdar, Roy Chaudhri and Kalingar Datta 26). From this line one can clearly perceive two things: that the Aryans were invaders, and there has been already a race existing in these places in which Aryans began to settle and the process is known as “Arya Varta” (Nehru 13). The natives had been thrown out of power and they had become a subaltern group and the power had been transferred to the Aryans, and those people, considering the description of the historians, “dark skinned, flat nosed race who spoke a tongue unintelligible to the Aryans,” and “they posses many properties like forts and herds of cattle” (Majumdar. Roy Chaudhri and Kalingar Datta 26), and this is the first instance of the evolution of subalternity in the history of India: “the race who has been in power hitherto has been overthrown and has become powerless and subordinated. They are the dalits, and to add this point the group which has been called as, ‘dasyus’ by the Aryan has worshipped god ‘Indra’, who according to the Hindu mythology is the god of rain and he
is otherwise known as ‘Varuna’. Dalits are the people who worked in the fertile lands and their profession was agriculture. They worship god ‘Indra’ believing that the worship may please god to bring rain which may be useful to their profession.

The British Rule

The British have colonised the people and have subjugated them. They have empowered everybody irrespective of the social class that have been created by the Aryan: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. The Literature, produced during that period has portrayed this subaltern status of the Indian race. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and A Bud* seems to be one of the best examples of this kind of writing. Basavaraj Naikar observes on Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and A Bud*, “The novel is an attack on the evil effects of imperialism, capitalist economy and exploitation of helpless labourers” (Naikar 33-34). “The coolies suffer not only this low level of wages, but frequently from indebtedness to their employers in outlandish districts where he is dependent upon shops provided by employers for his food stuff, fuel, etc.,” (Anand, *Two Leaves and A Bud* 126).

But when you look at the history of pre-colonial India, all the different rulers, kings and queens, emperors all did the same thing to their subjects. The lower castes suffered untold oppression and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes and one cannot just keep on blaming the British for the suffering of the Dalits. Anand’s other novel; ‘The Untouchable proves that. Actually the colonial rule brought to the common man education that had been denied him for centuries of Aryan rule and it also paved the way for the education of girls and the rise of many men and women reformers in India.

Early Indian Religious Texts and Suppression

The early Indian religious texts confirm the view that the subjugated Dravidians have been reduced by their oppressive conquerors to a sub-human state. Chandagya Upanishad compares the Chandala (outcaste) to a dog or a pig. The Ramayana speaks of a dalit youth, who has presumptuously learned penance and meditation. When the valiant and much celebrated Lord Rama comes to know of this incident, he slays him for his blasphemy. One can understand the status of Dalits through such episodes. The *Mahabharatha* further exemplifies the much degraded status. There is a Character as Ekalavya, a Dravidian indigenous boy (Dravidian race is considered as low caste by the Aryans), has learned the art
of archery and has dared to challenge the valiant Arjuna in archery. As a punishment, he has the thumb of his right hand cut off. Such was the status of the Dalits in the society, they were not allowed to learn anything, not allowed to enter the religious place; and even their touch was decried as the polluting force by the upper caste people.

Different Names for Dalits

Dalits were called by different names in different parts of India, invented by caste people and all entailing insult and contempt. Such names include words like \textit{dasa, dasya, raksasa, asura, avarna, nisoda, panchama, chandala} and so on. The British had called them as “Depressed classes” and the term “Scheduled Caste”, after Indian became a Republic, has come to denote the entire Dalit communities officially. It is very sad to say that untouchability is prevalent even in modern Indian society, where educational opportunities are decentralized and the practice of untouchability is banned through Article 17 of the Constitution of India.

Dalit Art Forms

Poetry, music, dance, drama, painting and sculpture reveal the aesthetic richness of the Dalit tradition. Dalit culture expressed itself through these art forms. All the forms of fine art are prevalent in Dalit culture. Aesthetic study of indigenous literary forms of Dalits seems to be challenging and enriching. “Pallu literature” is identified as the earliest known Dalit literature in Tamil. Right from the ancient days the Pallars (they hail from Tamil Nadu), are identified mainly with agriculture. They tilled the land and reared crops for rich landlords when they did not own land; at each stage of their farming, they used to sing some songs to relieve themselves from fatigue. This collection of songs exhibits the richness of Dalit culture; they exploit many literary devices. Each song has its own purpose too, like love, negritude, worshipping God for rain and farming and so on. The Pallu literature is believed to be the earliest documented source for a new genre “Dalit Literature” that has later sprouted with a new critical and creative vigour.

Not Merely a Protest Literature

Looking at surface level, Dalit Literature is termed as protest literature, but it also shows the cultural values of Dalits. It talks about the art forms and their oppression also, thereby it helps the reader to understand the Dalits’ way of life. In this connection
Situating Dalit Literature in Indian Writing in English

Lalmingthani observes, “we can see from reading Dalit literature that spans several decades, that the suffering of the untouchables is a never ending chain” (Lalmingthani 11).

**Religious Conversion and Dalit Recognition**

Non-Dalit writers also contributed to Dalit literature. Significant among them is the novel *Saraswati Vijayam* written by Potheri Kunhambu originally in Malayalam and was later translated into English by Dilip Menon. The novel explores the plight and suffering of Dalits. The novel addresses the suffering of Dalits and also criticises the Brahmins and the Hindu caste system. It is a novel which celebrates colonial modernity. The untouchables who entail a subordinating, secondary position in the Hindu patriarchy are directly influenced and swayed by Christianity. The novel highly glorifies Christianity and speaks about how conversion helped to bring about modernity. It states that conversion to Christianity provided food, shelter and education by the Christian missionaries. The foreigners did not practice untouchability and provided equal opportunity; keeping this in view, more and more Indians especially, the dalits who had been ostracized by the main stream Hindu Culture, willingly converted to Christianity, as they believed that there was no emancipation for the lower caste within the Hindu tradition. The novel picturously portrays the existential dilemma of the Dalit Community in the Hindu Society and Culture and shows how they at last found deliverance through conversion.

**A Significant Novel in Indian Writing in English Untouchable**

Another significant novel, produced by a non-Dalit conformist, which portrays a day’s events in the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha is Mulk Raj Anands *Untouchable*. This novel, indeed is an eloquent testimony of Dalit life. The novel was the result of several inchoate and wild urges that pressed the mind of Anand, and in “The Story of My Experiments with a white lie”, he comments:

> “The Vanity of youth wanting recognition the departure from the abstract psychological theories towards the search of philosophic insights based on the lives of human beings, whom one knows in flesh and blood, the urge to express oneself at all cost in an absolutist manner, so as to expose the ugliness of death in life by deliberately dramatizing even through distortion the non human realities which impinged on one from all sides.”(Anand 6)
Untouchable is an impassioned plea for social justice, and equality. It exposes the evil effects of Untouchability and analyses its various aspects social, moral, psychological, philosophical, historical and so on. Through incidents which provide structural unity to the novel, not only the novel narrates the pathetic conditions of the untouchables, but also the psychological conditions, whereby the mind of the protagonist is studied very intensively and hard realities are portrayed. E.M. Forster in this connection observes:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound to his master and forever born into a state, from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. (E. M. Forster iv)

This novel also talks about conversion to Christianity. In a moment of anger against the devilish social structure of those days, which wreaked misery and injustice upon Dalits through untouchability, the protagonist Bakha thinks, “Yessuh Missih must be good” (Anand, Untouchable 130). Premila Paul rightly observes, “the novel is a Kaleidoscopic projection of the protagonist’s miseries”. (p. 20)

Pain and Agony Portrayed But Lack in the Portrayal of the Dalit Culture

Both novels present the existential predicament, psychological dilemma, pain and agony of Dalits in a caste-ridden Hindu Community. Both present the conversion to Christianity, which thematically considers everybody as children of God. They vividly and vivaciously juxtapose the events to create pathos; the suffering of the lower caste people presented in the novel, arouse pity and there the readers find a psychological purgation of their mind. It seems that the authors in these novels focus on the individual feeling of despair associated with such a degraded life. By creating such an atmosphere in those novels the authors give the readers a psychological theoretical perspective on the atrocities of caste discrimination. Anyway in both the novels there is no representation of the Dalit Culture. For example Anand portrays the life of a sweeper as bereft of any niceties of life.

Post-modern Dalit Writers
The perspectives of the non-dalit writers differ from those of the modern day Dalit writers. Post-modern Dalit writers portray the Culture, existential crisis and protest for liberation and empowerment of Dalits. Dalits had never protested against their ill-treatment for many centuries, till powerful leaders rose up from among their ranks to inspire them to fight. Dangle points out, “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality”. (qted. Mukherjee 1)

Literature through Regional Languages

Dalit literature is usually presented in the concerned regional languages and then they are translated into English and other international languages. They are usually translated into other regional languages of India when they are available through English. To cite an example Thakazhi Sivankarpillai’s Thottianmahan was translated into Tamil recently. Tamil

Tamil Dalit writing has been heralded with the publication of Bama’s Karukku in 1992, in which Bama details her trajectory in the caste-ridden society. The Tamil Dalit literary space includes a handful of works in various genres: novels, poetry, autobiography, short stories, critical essays and plays. Dalit Tamil aesthetics focuses also on folk songs, which are considered as the perennial celebration of their folk arts and are being circulated in CD form; it conveys their pervasive impact on the cultural domain that stands embedded in the political, literary and ideological matrix of contemporary society.

Bama observes, “Reading and writing are Political Practice for dalits” (Bama 193). Dalit writing relates to dissemination of Dalit writing and enabling continuity of Dalit discourse. In the perspective of Indian English Literature or Indian Literature in English Translation, almost all the literary historians kept silent over the genre “Dalit Literature”. They celebrate Gandhi’s or Nehru’s writing whereas they have neglected Ambedkar’s writing, to discuss as literary pieces. The Mainstream culture, the Hindu culture, almost always overlaps in India. It is imperative to unravel the polemic patronage. Neglect and marginalization has extended to early dalit discourse.

Modern Beginnings of Dalit Literature in Tamil
Though Bama is considered as the forerunner of this typically new genre in Tamil, this genre has gotten its origin from another era. Roughly 50 years before, Karukku Retta Malai Seenivasan had published *Jeeviya Charitra Churukkam* (“Brief Biography or Brief Life History”). Seenivasan was a close associate of Ambedkar in the thirties and forties and belonged to parayar caste. He had also worked for Dalit emancipation and empowerment. His *Jeeviya Churukkam* is an early articulation of Dalit assertion of self and the community. This work had been unaccessible and could only be accessed through secondary sources, by way of brief quotations and cursory references till 1999, by which time the work had been republished. It coincides with Ambedkar’s notes, related to his life incidents. Seenivasan tirelessly struggled for educational opportunities for Dalits and scholarships to the Dalits who had converted to Christianity, or to other religions. It is a political strategy to consider the converts to Christianity as backward caste and not as scheduled caste, and this has become a heated political issue today that the Dalit converts register their voice in the national forum demanding the government to recognize them as Dalits. His pioneering work, both creative and agitationist, significantly indicates a subversive, interventionist phenomenon that it can be considered as a lead to the present day Dalit writings.

Another important leader and thinker of Dalit philosophy who was subverted and subordinated by the mainstream culture of India is Panditar Ayotidasar. Very recently, some of his writings have been edited by Raj Gautaman, a Dalit critic. Pandit Ayotidasar had adopted his teacher’s name against his original name Kathavarayan to point out the significance of education to Dalits. He was the first person who bravely announced that Dalits are not Hindus, and had called them as *Aadhi Tamilar*. He embarked upon a rationalist critique on Hinduism, but he is not widely known to the historians as E. V. R. Periyar.

Ayotidasar founded *Dravida Pantiyan* in 1881 to write his critique on Hinduism, brahmanical order, hegemony of priest and related issues. He also founded a weekly journal, *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* that was very popular in Chennai. In meetings, organized by him, Ayotidasar demanded opening up of the wells to the untouchables. His major contribution to the upliftment of Dalits was his inculcating a social awakening amongst the community through his writings. He used his journals to disseminate the Buddhist ideology to the people. He was a pioneer Dalit thinker, a philosopher, writer and social interventionist, who emphasized equal educational opportunities and legislative reforms for the benefit of Dalits.
Ayotidasar’s and Seenivasan’s writings, perhaps because of their focus was mainly on the Dalit community, were not as much read and their lives were not historiographed like those of others like E.V.R. Periyar, Annadurai and others.

**Present Day Dalit Literature in Tamil**

Some present day writers have also faced such hardships that their works were not accepted initially, especially if they wrote on controversial subjects like the oppression of the untouchable by caste Hindus. Though the novel *Untouchable* had been written by Caste-Hindu Mulk Raj Anand, many publishers had rejected it. Cowasjee writes in this connection, “By September 1934, the book had been rejected by as many as nineteen publishers and the author contemplated suicide, but was saved by the timely intervention of a young English poet…” (Cowasjee 27).

Bama and Gunsekaran have also met such things and Bama details her experience relating to the publication of *karukku* “. . . it had unexpected results . . . many praised it, many scorned it” and “They decided finally that it was a new genre in Tamil literature”. (Bama ix) Dalit writers work for providing the Dalits with an identity in the society. Lakshmi Holmström says, “. . . in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self of the self and the community as dalit, which rejects outright the notion of varna and which, on the other hand, refuses to ‘sanskritize’ to evaluate dalit lifestyle according to mainstream Hindu Values”.(xix)

**Poomani’s Novels**

There are many other writers who portray the Dalit life that has remained unexplored and unrepresented in the mainstream literature. One among them is the writer, Poomani. In his novels, he portrays Dalits as hard and honest workers. His novels *Piragu* (1979) and *Vekkai* (1982) show that Poomani has preferred to work within the well-trodden Marxist paradigm and that he has refused to recognize the shackles of the caste system. Poomani’s *Piragu* represents the life of *chakkiliyar* (cobbler) community realistically and with a sense of humour. The protagonist does not protest against the social structure but the upper caste characters are shown as liberal humanists. The good hearted but powerless upper caste people show sympathy to the protagonist. The novel moves towards humanism. His second novel *Vekkai*, depicts a young Dalit protagonist’s counter violence against power structure in rural
society. Dalits are primarily represented as agricultural workers, or as those who uphold traditional attachment to agrarian land rather than view it as a potential source of income.

Other Writers of Dalit Literature in Tamil


To Conclude

The process of developing Dalit literature into a powerful tool that contests the claims of the upper caste Hindu society is in progress. Historicization of Dalit writing alerts one to the process of self-actualization and self-articulation. It is also considered a reassertion of this process in contemporary literary space.

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