Annexure

Interview with Civakāmi

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1. What is the present status of Dalit literature in Tamil?

It sails well. There has been a spurt of Dalit writers in the last decade. It is an accepted fact that Dalit problems have formed the crust of Tamil literature at present. To an extent, Tamil literature today, means Dalit literature. In the 90s, one cannot visualize the totality of Tamil literature without the impact created by Dalit literature.

2. Do you agree that Dalit literature is a part of Protest literature?

It is not just a Protest literature. More than that. To me, it is an important factor, which brings in real changes in society. It makes the Dalits aware of the problems of oppression, social and religious inequality and the psychological subjugation. It is also considered as a vehicle that inculcates Dalit consciousness among the oppressed.

3. Don’t you think your novels speak more on feminism than Dalitism?

Well. I treat both on equal counts. I have spoken it on many occasions that Dalit literature itself is the voice of women against the decadent social and religious institutions. My first novel does speak on that. Even in my third novel Pa Ka ĀKu, I have discussed the inter-relatedness of these two views. I cannot just dismiss either of these as distinct from the other.
4. What are the constituents of Dalit identities in your novels?

Dalit Identity naturally emerges out of the protest against untouchability. Untouchability is not just a religious problem. Eventually, it associates with the economic and bourgeoisie's oppression. Untouchability helps the rich maintain 'the master – slave' dichotomy. Dalit identity is invariably a struggle against this social inequality.

5. In this process do you say that your characters have realized the importance of their self?

Self-realization is rational and it is with everyone, who is capable of thinking. My characters do think and realize the significance of their selves. For that I wish, everyone whether a Dalit or a non-Dalit to be rational.

6. What do you perceive as the constructed other on Dalits? How do you relate them in your novels?

Untouchability, ugliness, religious denigration, bondage, slavery, ignorance and so on. My writings are earnestly the product of my ambition to eliminate all these beliefs found in the society. I write as a reaction against all these high caste notions.

7. I consider that your novels centre on the realization of the self and the negation of the other. Do you agree?

Yes. Of course. The Dalits react to the constructed otherness forcefully. Rejection of what they are not is a fitting reply to the beliefs of the upper caste. I write for the emancipation of Dalits. By reacting against it, they create the counter culture in which they invariably realize the importance of their being.
8. Do you think Dalit literature is proud of Dalits or it merely portrays the victimization and the tragic life of the Dalits?

To be frank Dalit literature is yet to achieve that. It still depicts only their hardships and sufferings. The problem is so big that they have to overcome it first to find some pride in their culture. Rather, it is highly academic. Some of the contemporary Dalit writings portray the inner harmony found in their relationships.

9. Why do Dalits mostly hesitate and feel ashamed to reveal their caste identity?

Do you think so? I don’t fully agree with you on that. Perhaps they are degraded, ill-treated and victimized to such a level that they may feel ashamed. But, I personally feel that they should come out openly to declare their caste identity like other caste Hindus do.

10. Regarding your characters, are they self-pitied? Especially, Kauri, Cantiran, Tañkam and Piccaipillai?

Self-pity is only a passing cloud. Basically, they are all rebels aspiring for changes in society. Sometimes as you say, they fall victim to self-pity in sheer helplessness.

11. What do you prescribe for Dalit liberation? A common minimum programme!

(Smiles) First, we should organize all Dalits shedding their internal caste differences. This unity among Dalits will certainly help to eradicate untouchability and its consequences. To say, Dalits are proletariats, but it is not possible to include all the working class to fight against suppression. Dalit problem is unique and in the present political context, it is highly impossible for the Dalits to join hands with
the other working class people. The immediate objective before us is just to mobilize the Dalits into a cohesive mass to root out casteism and oppression.

12. Under the present conditions, do you perceive liberation for Dalits will be a near possibility?

Yes. Certainly. It is possible if we take the principles of Ambedkar to the grass roots. We must do everything for the spread of Ambedkar’s philosophy.

13. Are you familiar with African American literature?

Not yet. But, I love to read them in future.

14. Black literature generally feels and speaks high of African culture and tradition. The very objective of their writing is to exhibit their cultural treatise to others. It also seeks approval and recognition for their art and artefacts. For example, Jazz, Popular music and their dance forms. Does Dalit literature present and feel proud of their culture?

Like the Blacks, Dalits do not have a powerful separate culture. Theirs is intertwined with the culture of India. Perhaps the protest against the untouchability creates a counter culture against the present one. Dalit must turn their pain into pride. Well, it is to be historically discovered and established that Dalits are originally Buddhists. The culture will be recreated in this line of thinking.

15. Do you believe in political and economic liberation of Dalits? Could you relate them into a creation of counter culture?

Dalit liberation is a combination of all these components. Dalits’ development in the past 50 years was based on reservation. Yet the impact of reservation has not brought the desired economical and political emancipation of
Dalits. Hence, Dalits must highlight this lacuna through various platforms like art, literature and culture. Doing so, we, the writers could at least put an end to the Sanskritization prevalent among the educated Dalits.

16. Do you agree that regaining the lost roots is culture? Does Dalit literature speak on that?

Dalit life is closely associated with nature. Protecting the environment from the shackles of urbanization, industrialization and globalisation might help Dalits to regain the lost glory. Dalit literature as an organised entity is yet to cultivate these themes more powerfully.

17. Why do Dalit writers not present their culture and life with pride? You are not an exemption too. Even you have portrayed them only as victims. Eventually, collective self-esteem leads to cultural pride. Your comments please..

Dalits are openly coming out to fight against the evils of casteism. They strive for a new society that has equality and brotherhood. This is unique and it is, I would say, their virtue. In my writings, I highlight this fighting spirit. If some people fail to do that I find fault with them in my works. Self-criticism therefore, is inevitable. It is made not to laugh at but bring them to the right ways. I strongly believe this opposition constructs a counter culture.

18. When and how will you bring the new order that you visualise?

Changing the old order and bring in the new order is inevitable in any society. No fixed point or time frame can be attributed to that. The society changes; so is our outlook. Take for example the age of Ambedkar and the present period. There have been changes. There is no retreat or going back. But, one is
certain that we must keep fighting. This spirit alone will change the old order and bring in the new.

19. Carō in Kurukkuvtu goes beyond the moral norms prescribed in Indian society. Is she not flawed? Or it is just a violation of male attributes of chastity?

Circumstances force us to do certain things. We break the value systems because we are forced to do it. When we question situations, we change human relationships. Circumstances are created or altered in favour of human relationship. Caro is one. (Frowning) Chastity! What is that?

20. How did you develop the sub-text in Kurukkuvtu? Has any one attempted this parallel narrative method earlier?

Kurukkuvtu is not just a story of Caro. She is a symbol of family system, fidelity, chastity, motherhood, love and marriage. It is a story of the private, perhaps, the secret life of any human being. I create the sub-text in order to sublimate the private life.

21. Can you say Anantāyi, a Dalit novel? As a reader, I find the theme—women subordination—is more common among all the peasant communities. Moreover, you haven’t given any reference to specific Dalit identity.

Can’t you say all the writing by a Dalit is Dalit literature? Their approach differs mainly from others.
22. How can it be? How could we call a novel a Dalit novel without any Dalit consciousness?

I have not perceived any specific trait of Dalit culture in my life. Oppression of women is universal. It is a contagious disease. No woman escapes from this. A Dalit woman is not an exception too. The characters in Ānantāyi are those whom I have come across in my life. I would say, it is a Dalit novel. Since I dealt with Dalit life as a background, I have not given any specific caste reference to the characters.

23 Why is there a shift in theme in Kurukkuvaṇṇu? It does not have any semblance to the Dalit theme that you handled in Pālaiyāna Kalītalum and Pā Ka Ā Ku.

It represents the author's perception of life at that time. It always changes. One could decipher the various planes in my writings. I don't believe that I should write only in a particular way. Sometimes I present the life as I viewed. At times, the life I aspire for. But, Dalitism is the undercurrent in all my writings.

24 It is perceived that the portrayal of Kāttamuttu in Pālaiyāna Kalītalum is a distortion of your father Palanimuttu. What is your present view on Kāttamuttu's Dalit politics? Is Dalit politics relevant in the present day context?

Yes, this fact I accepted in Pa Ka Ā Ku. Regarding politics, I believe the Dalits cannot achieve political freedom by joining caste conscious political parties.

25 What are your views on Dalitism and Hinduism?

Dalits are the ignored and neglected lots in Hinduism. They are oppressed by the caste Hindus. They treat Dalits as slaves. By being a Hindu, Dalits cannot obtain equality. We must look for a new social system for the development of Dalits.
26 *In that case, do you agree with the principles of open temples?*

God and religion have never been the central point at any time. They always remain an obstacle to the development of the society. We want freedom, not based on any religion but on equality and brotherhood. Open temple or free worship does not make any relevance.

27 *How do you react to the double oppression of Dalit women?*

No doubt, they are oppressed as many times as possible. They are suppressed more both on the basis of sex and gender. They should emerge first as woman, overcoming their sexual differences. And then, a dynamic Dalit encountering the casteist beliefs.

28 *Can a non-Dalit create Dalit literature?*

I don’t think so. Non-Dalits in their writings leave only their impressions, not their experiences.

29 *Can’t the Dalit high achievers instil hope among their fellow Dalits and wage an intellectual war against oppression?*

The Dalit high achievers expect others to come forward to follow them and emulate their success. In reality, it is not so. They must associate with their fellow Dalits. Ambedkar was very successful as an individual. But, he became more powerful when he associated himself with the problems of Dalits. The high achievers in Dalit community, at first, should unite together to fight against casteism.
I have discussed in my thesis that the oppressed in their quest for identity and an assertion of it enable to realize the importance of their self, negate the other and ultimately reintegrate with their community. How do you react to this?

Yes, I do agree with that. Hope, you might have argued well. The oppressed gain identity only by revolting against their oppressors. Any revolt by the oppressed let it be individual or collective, issues mainly from self-respect and it finally associates with the community.
Glossary

Nātār
Nāyākkar
Paḷayācci
Reṭṭiyār
Uṭaiyār
Vanniyar

Basically Farming communities in Tamilnadu, India.

They belong to Backward Caste.

Cakkili
Paḷḷar
Paraiyar

The Outcastes in Tamilnadu, India. Presently called as Dalits. They belong to Scheduled Caste.

Panchayat - Village council in India.
Taluk - Division of tax district, covering several villages.
Tahsildar - Taluk revenue officer.
Sub-Collector - District revenue officer. Head of the District next to the District Collector.
Paramōlam - Percussion Dalit music.
Koǐlmōlam - Percussion music played in temples by the upper caste.
Aravānis - Androgynous persons, suffering from Kinefelter’s Syndrome.