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Politics of Caste and Identity in Contemporary South India*

K. Satyanarayana

The phenomenon of mass killings of Dalits and the rise of Dalit movements in the late 1980s and 1990s resumed the debate on caste and the social and political status of Dalits in India.[1] The killings of Dalits and caste-based oppression are not new issues. But the new political development is the form of massacre (burning the huts, cattle and other property, looting, arson, sexual assault on women, murders in public) in the changed context of state led modernization in post-Independent India. In this new situation, the idea of caste-based oppression, both the reality of this oppression as well as the conceptual understanding of this oppression are freshly approached and debated.

For instance, take the discussion and explanations offered to understand the phenomenon of mass killings of Dalits in Karamchedu, a village in Andhra Pradesh in 1985.[2] The mainstream and Left commentators struggled to explain why Dalits were identified and killed as a social group based on caste identity. The massacre was explained in terms of the larger changes in the economy (land reforms and green revolution) that benefited the land-owning upper caste groups and the consequent gap between them and Dalits who were largely agricultural labourers. The discussion was centered on class polarization (the rise of a new propertied class, feudal culture), the failure of liberal state (modernization policy, agrarian reforms, civil rights) and the representative model of democracy (elections, vote bank politics). In

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these accounts, the social division of Karamchedu village on the basis of caste identity is not examined. The story of consolidation of the dominant caste Kammas in Andhra Pradesh and its connection with the massacre of the 'lower caste' Dalits did not form part of the debate. It is in this context, the emergence of Dalit movement and its critical and literary writings assume great significance to offer a new explanation and to provide a new perspective of Indian society.

In his famous song 'Dalita Pululamma', (O' Dalit Tigers) people's poet and balladeer Gaddar captures the dimension of Dalit assertion in Karamchedu village and centrality of caste conflict in the massacre. Referring to the Dalit youth as tigers, he sings:

Youngsters resembling heavyweights
Well versed in martial arts, as well as education;
Ask those who belittle and denigrate them
to mind their own language.
They wear sparkling white clothes,
move in their hamlet like jasmines
'We may not own property,
but we have self-respect,' they say.
When we sip coffee sitting on a chair,
rich lords seethe with anger.
'We are not living off someone else's father;
We are eating our own money; it is our right,' they say.[3]

The song represents something new: the confident and assertive educated Dalit youth and the questions of dignity and self-respect. The common sense explanations missed the rise of Dalits (public presence, appearance and assertion) and also the new meanings of caste as humiliation ('belittle and denigrate') and as people with 'self' and 'respect'. Among the significant changes that the Dalit movements of the late 1980s and 1990s inaugurated, this essay will focus on the Dalit critique of sociological view of caste, the subjective dimension of Dalit politics, and the Dalit representation of caste as identity and politics. I would like to locate this shift in thinking in the context of Dalit mobilizations in the 1980s and 1990s.[4] This shift in the meaning of caste in relation to politics and identity is most pronounced in the

upsurge of creative, cultural and theoretical writing by Dalits from south India.[5] Therefore, my arguments are based on the Dalit literary and cultural writings of this phase.[6]

The Context

The phenomenon of mass killings of Dalits all over India in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the anti-reservation agitations (against reservations for backward castes in the 1980s as well as Mandal reservations in the 1990s), the struggles and campaigns of the Dalit social groups against caste violence and discrimination, caste-based mobilisation of Dalits for elections, and assertion of Dalit jatis based on jati identity—all these developments contributed to a great social churning that has had a deep impact. It is the argument of this paper that a new conception of caste is at the heart of this social process. The incidents of atrocities revealed caste as a form of power and dominance and the upper castes invoked traditional caste norms (hierarchy, status, untouchability) to assert their authority in the present. The anti-reservation agitations appeared to articulate questions of merit and educational and employment opportunities but these mobilizations turned out to be attempts to retain social privilege based on the dominant caste status.[7] The self-representation of the students in the anti-reservation agitations as 'meritorious' and 'guardians of the nation' and therefore, casteless citizens in fact obscured the caste based social division in Indian society. The anti-Mandal agitations, it was argued, had actually mobilized upper-caste youth to display their caste arrogance, superiority and power.[8] The pro-reservation activists pointed out the representation of 'lower castes' and 'Dalits' as non-meritorious people who have been assigned to do menial occupations of sweeping, scavenging and leather work. In the context of the nationwide debate on Mandal reservations, the idea of caste is invested with notions of privilege and power as well as human dignity and self-respect. Interestingly, Dalit movements of this phase engendered a split in the unitary and singular notion of caste. While caste is practiced and called upon to reassert dominance and power by the upper castes, caste is also posited as a positive identity of a subordinated community of untouchable castes in the list of scheduled castes. The collective idea of 'Dalit' in the struggles against atrocities,

the electoral strategy of castes as vote banks (numbers) for horizontal alliances with the other dominant castes and the mobilization of individual untouchable jatis are some strategies of the Dalit movements.[9] It is important to point out that caste divisions, caste-based violence and caste associations are not new in the colonial period. What is new in the post-Independent India is the modern form of caste specific Dalit massacres, horizontal mobility of Dalit castes, caste-based electoral alliances and the reformulation of the nationalist agenda of annihilation of caste and also the Dalit struggle for dignity of untouchable castes.

This larger context of Dalit engagement with the mainstream is important for us to map Dalit representation of caste. The sociological and anthropological studies characterized caste as a structure or a system are based on the assumption that caste is an externally imposed order, a historical residue and it is in decline. Therefore, the transformation or decline of caste can be studied based on some objective criteria of 'facts' and 'evidence'. The momentous development of the 1980s and 1990s: the rise of Dalits and their movements opened up many issues such as the subjective dimension of caste, the contemporary life of caste and the inadequacy of the abstract sociological criteria to define castes or caste system.

The Idea of Caste System

The commonly held idea that caste is a remnant of a pre-modern, hierarchical, purity–pollution formation specific to Hindu religion is criticized and rejected.[10] Caste, the Dalit theorists point out, is a live force in modern Indian culture and politics. The remnant-of-the-past thesis transforms what is actually a contemporary form of power into an outmoded religious practice that disadvantages those subjected to social stigma and social oppression. In this common sense view of caste, the social and political dominance of brahmins and other upper castes, their role in perpetuating and extending caste discrimination and inequalities, the benefits they derive from the formation and the role of caste in modern culture and modern institutions—all remains uninvestigated. In the Sociological and Anthropological studies, the 'caste system' was conceptualized as a social structure that encouraged consensus by emphasizing the principles of 'reciprocity' and

'interdependence' among various caste groups. The focus in these studies of caste has been on social mobility of caste groups, in order to understand the distribution and appropriation of resources and the workings of Indian democracy. Another strand conceptualized caste as a consensual system, following M.N. Srinivas's concepts of sanskritization and westernization which valorizes 'consensus' in the caste order and reduces Dalits and the lower castes to the status of imitators of the upper castes.[11]

It is important to note that when Dalit and other subordinated castes describe existing theory as upper-caste or brahminical, the criticism is not only directed at the academy that produced this theory but also at the efforts of the Indian state to address caste inequities that are based on such theory. In fact, the anthropological notion of caste as a religious hierarchy has informed state action. Thus, the Nehruvian consensus was to eliminate, through planning, education and administrative action, anomalies like caste in order to make India modern and secular. The state designed developmental programmes to address 'disabilities' such as bonded labour, untouchability, manual scavenging and atrocities through rural development, poverty alleviation, land reforms, the Anti-Untouchability Act and so on. In this scheme, reservations were considered compensation for past wrongs and not as remedy for current suppression and marginalization. The Scheduled Castes and other oppressed caste groups are regarded as suffering from known injuries, caused by residual pre-modern formations. Further, they are merely 'target groups' for welfare programmes extended by the state.[12]

The influential and interesting studies of caste were undertaken by the political sociologists like Rajni Kothari, D.L. Sheth and Sudipta Kaviraj among others. The important shift in these studies is to locate the caste system in the context of modern institutions of democracy. D.L. Sheth argued that 'the structural logic' of the caste system is weakened and this change resulted in 'secularization of caste'.[13] He observes that

> the changes that have occurred in Indian society, especially after India's decolonisation, have led to de-ritualisation of

> caste—meaning delinking of caste from various forms of rituality which bounded it to a fixed status, an occupation and to specific rules of commensality and endogamy. I further argue that with the erosion of rituality, a large part of the 'support system' of caste has collapsed. Uprooted from its ritually determined ideological, economic and political contexts it has ceased to be a unit of the ritual-status hierarchy. Caste now survives as a kinship-based cultural community, but operates in a different, newly emergent system of social stratification.[14]

The process of secularization, according to Sheth, transformed the caste system into castes and these castes are the power groups operating in the competitive democratic politics.[15] In this analysis, 'the caste system' is assumed to be an empirical reality. It is a traditional social structure which was subjected to changes by 'the larger historical forces of moderisation, secularisation and urbanization'.[16] The functionalist notion of 'the caste system' and the process of modernization do not acknowledge (in fact suppress) the agency of the people who are divided as social groups based on relative inequality or hierarchy. In Sheth's essay, the larger problem is the empirical view of caste inequality and also the denial of theoretical status to caste. The transformation of the caste system is described in the available sociological categories of middle class or kinship community and the very problem of 'representation' of caste is not paid attention to.

Rajni Kothari takes note of the Dalit assertion and the rethinking of caste in the 1990s.[17] Extending his arguments about 'politicization of caste' in the context of modern democratic institutions he argues: 'Ideologically there took place a basic shift from hierarchy to plurality, from ordained status to negotiated positions of power, from ritual definitions of roles and positions to civic and political definitions of the same'.[18] The assumed idea of 'the caste system' and shifts in its organizational logic such as from hierarchy to plurality remain the focus of Kothari's analysis. But the phrases 'ordained status' and 'negotiated positions of power' imply a subject. Kothari was writing in the context of Dalit movements and he directly names the conflict between the social groups in 'the caste system'. He observes: 'For long consciousness of caste was the preserve of the brahminic upper castes.

Today something quite different is happening: the very sufferers from the system (including the caste system) are invoking caste identity and claims'.[19] The contest between the upper castes and the Dalits ('the very sufferers') disrupted the caste system based on ritual hierarchy. The Dalits rejected assigned occupations and demanded representation in civil and political institutions. In Kothari's view, Dalits are using their caste identity for sharing power in democracy and therefore he calls this consciousness of caste 'secular upsurge'.[20]

Both Sheth and Kothari share the assumption that caste is a traditional system, its central principle is ritual hierarchy and its known structure is vertical. They arrive at the same conclusion that the caste system has collapsed in the modern institutional context and that now castes work as pressure groups in society. Kothari goes beyond this standard view of modernisation of caste thesis and suggests that it is the Dalits as active agents who caused this change in 'the caste system'. He aptly captures this in the very title of his essay 'The Rise of Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste'. However, in Kothari's view, caste still remains an empirical social reality. It is assumed that the modern institutional context affected changes in the caste system. Therefore, caste system is still defined in terms of the empirical sociological criteria (vertical or horizontal groups, mobility, modernization of tradition etc). But the rise of the Dalits poses a new problem: the imagination of caste groups and a politics between castes, within the caste order. In other words, caste is a site of struggle where questions of status, identity and power are negotiated. The modern state and its institutions only facilitate this conflict and dialogue between castes and within castes. In other words, the Dalit critique of caste rejects the abstract sociological criteria and governmental categories and brings in the role of negotiations of the Dalits in understanding caste.[21]

A Subjective Politics

Another important political development takes place at this time: the idea of caste as an objective structure (as in a caste system; or in empirical information such as census counts) is displaced; caste emerges as the subjectively effective identity of a social group.

Mandal moment precipitated an important break in Indian politics when caste resurfaced as a public issue at the national level. The opponents of OBC reservations represented themselves as secular and modern citizens by invoking 'national interest', 'merit' and 'efficiency'. In this argument, those who publicly invoke caste (by asking for caste-based reservation) are labelled as casteist and those who denied caste were considered casteless and therefore, secular.[22] Dalit critics pointed out that this understanding of caste was faulty and biased and that it obscured the connection between caste and the privileged life of the secular Indian middle class. 'Casteism' is not the entry of the Dalits and OBCs into public institutions on the basis of caste, it is the existing caste-based privilege and power enjoyed by the upper castes in these locations. In other words, the absence of Dalits in the media or the IT sector, and the monopoly of the upper castes in these sectors, is casteism.[23] and that caste is a functional (and indeed, functioning) identity of the Indian people, including that of the secular middle-class Indians. Another important line of Dalit critique of caste, therefore, is that of the norm of the secular citizen. This normative figure, and the assumed neutrality with which it occupies the public domain, was shown up as marked by caste and as reaping the benefits of caste power and privilege.

Dalits have hitherto been burdened with imposed identities—as untouchables, Depressed Classes, harijans or Scheduled Castes. Even the secular self-narratives in the Mandal discourse stigmatized caste identity, depicting it as divisive and as a social evil.[24] While the 'upper' castes bring their culture and self-esteem into the secular modern arena, Dalit life worlds are suppressed and Dalit misery is too rapidly interpreted—indeed taken as known. In the process, and in mainstream representation, Dalit identities are undermined, their arts, culture and history obliterated, devalued and stigmatized, their everyday life degraded, the actual forms of their misery obscured.[25] Dalit critics contested the tendency to treat caste only as an instrument of oppression (untouchability, violence and dehumanization) and recreated it as a new identity of self-assertion and pride. Thus Dalits and other subordinated castes invoke caste ties as signs of solidarity, fraternity, pride, self-respect, assertion and unity.[26] They regard the shared experience of caste as consisting not only of oppression but

also of the internal life of the community, its history, myths and beliefs and community practices, in short the culture of the social group as a whole. This caste identity, Dalit writers argued, captures Dalit community life in urban as well as rural–urban settings. It recovers and valorizes histories of specific caste leaders and reaffirms a range of Dalit cultural and religious practices. In these arguments and narratives, caste acquires a new meaning as the 'social, economic and cultural capital' of a community.[27] Such political identities also form the basis for determining access to resources and entitlement to rights in a modern democracy. While for the upper castes caste enables social dominance and hegemonic power, subordinated castes rework caste to affirm the solidarity of a community, regain a world and affirm self-possession and confidence.

Caste is now a conceptual formation that may be employed to theorize prestige, arrogance, privilege, dignity and power of social groups in India. It is articulated as a political question aimed at changing the existing equations of caste power. This new notion of caste is at work in the sites of village, university and the field of 'sub'-castes.

The Village

The massacre of Dalits (1985) in a village called Karamchedu in Andhra Pradesh was a turning point not only in the history of Dalit assertion in Andhra Pradesh but also in south India as a whole. It attracted national attention and raised fresh debates on the role of caste in India.[28] It was in the attempt to reassert their caste power that the upper castes killed Dalits as a social group. In Karamchedu and many other south Indian villages Dalits had slightly improved their educational status and were relatively free from the control of upper-caste landlords. Thus when Dalits stood for elections, entered public spaces (cinema halls, public wells) or converted to a religion of their choice, the upper castes were disturbed enough to kill them en masse. These massacres pointed to the importance of the caste question in India as well as to the failure of the Indian state's modernization agenda (development, welfare policies and legal provisions).[29]

Consolidating itself on the basis of Dalit identity, the Dalit leadership, together with a section of the Dalit, educated middle class, challenged caste power not only by organizing Dalits politically but also in the domain of literary, cultural and intellectual activity.[30] They produced little magazines, published the available writings of Ambedkar, critiqued the welfare initiatives of the state as well as the policies and the organizational structure of political parties. Each case of atrocity was turned into a national issue. The location of the struggle was shifted from the village to the Parliament, the judiciary and the media. In the process, the terms of the debate on caste were completely changed. Caste in this new modality became both a form of power and the identity of a community. For example, the Indian state enacted a special act called the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and declared the new forms of caste violence illegal. Hitherto caste is conceived as 'disability' imposed on the Scheduled castes. In the new act, caste is a legal category and it is a form of discrimination and atrocity. In the planned development model, caste is recognized as an index of deprivation.[31] We have yet to grapple fully with the new significance of caste as mobilized by Dalits.

The University

One of the consequences of the Mandal debate was the description of the university, and especially the big metropolitan universities, as a modern site of caste prejudice and discrimination. During the protests, elite upper-caste students had virtually brought universities to a close. This agitation and its humiliating campaign against reservations—and by extension against SC/STs who had hitherto 'enjoyed' reservations—made it necessary for Dalit students to form forums to articulate their concerns. Several new Dalit student forums and Ambedkar associations were set up at that time outside mainstream political-party-affiliated students' forums.[32]

These organizations scrutinized the implementation of reservations in student admissions as well as in the appointment of faculty. They pointed to the astonishing dropout rate of the SC/ST students. They publicly debated the high failure rate among these groups and discussed the deep-set culture of hostility towards reservations and Dalit students,

an alienating curriculum and teacher attitudes as possible reasons for dropout.[33] Student activists questioned the absence of the required percentage of SC/ST faculty in the universities and pointed to the lack of sympathetic mentors for SC/ST students. They documented numerous instances of caste prejudice in the classroom, in the hostels and in evaluation. They showed how the university was maintained as an exclusive space for elite sections of society.

To cite one example: the B.R. Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) of the University of Hyderabad was active since 1990. Over the years it had raised a number of issues and forced a discussion of caste as it was practised in the university. In January 2002 the university rusticated ten Dalit students, all leaders of the ASA, who were protesting against the high mess costs and the demotion of a Dalit warden to the care of 'sanitation and gardening'.[34] The students were charged with violence including physical assault on a warden. The faculty and non-teaching staff associations supported the university administration. They were only able to view these students as criminals. Neither the need for democratic norms to be followed before punishment was awarded, nor elitism and casteism in the university were addressed. The rustication of these students without an enquiry and the drastic, career-demolishing, punishment that was imposed attracted widespread criticism from several organizations in the city. Demands were made for an impartial inquiry into all aspects of the issue. The rustication, it was argued, was 'the face of contemporary casteism'; the university's action was 'part conscious, part reflex, part structural'.[35]

The report on the 'suicide' of Senthil Kumar on 24 February 2008, a Dalit research student at the same university, raised the issue of 'the widespread manifestations of caste prejudice ... where right from the ragging of students, to hostel accommodation, extracurricular activities, grades and classroom practices, all aspects of life bear the stamp of caste bias'.[36] Senthil's case led to a nationwide discussion of the suicides of Dalit students in universities. Again, in the same university, the issue of the university's culture was brought to the fore when a group of students decided to set up a beef stall in the Sukoon cultural festival in 2006. They faced a great deal of opposition. The university denied them permission to do so on the grounds that 'consumption of

beef... [in the campus] creates caste and communal tensions'.[37] This is an example of the hostility towards Dalits and their food culture, which is forcibly excluded from the public domain. The Thorat Committee Report on All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi also documented how Dalit students were subjected to segregation, discrimination and physical violence there.[38]

The curriculum, and indeed the disciplines themselves, also came under criticism. Newly appointed SC/ST faculty and Dalit activists questioned the absence of Dalit scholarship on caste and the exclusion of anti-caste philosophers such as Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar from the syllabus. Sociology is a case in point. Indian sociology continued to think of caste in the Indological mode, as the ugly face of tradition that was being modernized by the liberal democratic state. However, sociology was unable/unwilling to engage with the questions raised by anti-caste thinkers or by the new movements. Dalit life, their social protests and the questions raised in these protests found no place in sociological studies. In fact, Dalit assertion in the university pushed social sciences as well as the humanities into a crisis.[39]

This university was also the context for the emergence of a significant Dalit women students organization, the Alisamma Women's Collective, in 2002. Swathy Margaret, Indira Jalli, Sowjanya Raman, Ratna Velisela are among the founding members. In the context of a demand raised for representation of women in the students union, the Alisamma Collective brought up the question of reservation for Dalit women within the category 'women' and demanded that there be reservation on a rotational basis, or else the reservation would benefit only upper-caste women students. They declared: 'We Dalit women request you to recognize that it is not just male domination but casteist patriarchy which is at work in India'.[40] The fraught relationship of the Dalit movement with feminism had appeared in student debates in 2000.[41]

The Field of 'Sub'-castes

The sociological understanding of 'sub-caste' among the SCs takes a political form in movements such as those of the arundathiyar in

Tamil Nadu and the madigas in Andhra Pradesh, who use the term 'sub-caste' to critique and reject it. Engaging with the fields set up as SCs and 'Dalit', these new caste movements demand equality within these fields.

The late 1990s is marked by what have been termed splits and fragmentation of Dalit movements. Internal tensions and contradictions between Dalit castes among other problems divided the Dalit movement into specific caste movements and small forums. The Dalit literature of this period is marked by the awakening and assertion of individual untouchable jatis ('sub-castes').These 'sub-caste' movements and the new religious and cultural mobilization of jatis brought new questions to the fore. Questions were raised of structural hierarchy and social inequality among the different scheduled castes as also those of an oppressed caste identity that is rooted in culture and history and strengthened by its own myths and epics. I will discuss the madiga movement in Andhra Pradesh as an example of the 'sub-caste' movements and turn after that to questions of caste as identity and cultural or religious traditions.

The madigas, one of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) of Andhra Pradesh, formed the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) in 1994 to fight for the subdivision of SC reservations as well as the welfare benefits available to SCs. This movement, popularly known as Madiga Dandora movement, is seen as a movement for equality between the oppressed SCs. The madigas had put pressure on the State to pass a legislation subdividing SC reservations into A, B, C, and D groups on the basis of their relative inequality—social, educational and cultural—and the percentage of their population among the 59 listed SC castes in Andhra Pradesh. Of these, two formerly untouchable communities, mala and madiga, are the largest. Together these two communities comprise 80 per cent of the SC population of the state. The problem of subdivision, therefore, has taken the form of a mala-madiga conflict.[42]

MRPS, under the leadership of Krishna and Krupakar (who changed their names to Krishna Madiga and Krupakar Madiga in the course of the agitation), conducted dharnas, mass rallies, seminars,

public meetings, *rasta* and rail *roko*, and other campaigns. A cross-section of the madiga community, principally government employees, women and girls, as well as madiga writers and artists were among the first to join the movement, but it soon received support from other sectors too—so much so that the Madiga Dandora movement has been described as one of the biggest mass agitations in the recent years. MRPS consolidated the madigas as a community, and at the same time also sought and received the support of various Left and other democratic organisations as well as mainstream political parties. A solidarity committee (Madiga Dandora Porata Sangheebhava Committee) of different peoples' organisations and individuals was formed with the well-known balladeer, Gaddar as its convenor. It extended active support to the MRPS movement.

The immediate issue that came up for debate during the course of this massive mobilization of madigas from 1995 to 1999 is the complaint that a few among the Scheduled Castes had secured disproportionate benefits from SC reservations to the detriment of others. In 1996 the Andhra Pradesh Government appointed a one-man commission headed by Justice Ramachandra Raju to examine this issue. The commission substantially agreed with the complaint voiced by the madigas in its May 1997 report, and the A.P. Government accepted the following findings of the Commission in the same year: a. There is disproportionate distribution of reservation benefits in favour of the 'mala' and 'adi-andhra' groups of scheduled caste communities compared to their respective populations. b. Compared to their respective populations, neither the madiga nor the relli groups have been adequately represented in public appointments or in educational institutions. The commission recommended categorization of 'these S.C. communities into four groups 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' on a rational basis'. Soon after, the Government issued an order subdividing the SC reservation quota of 15 per cent. Of the 15 per cent, the lowest 'sub castes' in the ladder of caste hierarchy—relli, and mehtar—were included in group 'A' would get 1 per cent, the madigas and related castes categorized as group 'B,' would get 7 per cent, the malas and related castes as group 'C' would get 6 per cent, and adi-andhras and related castes as group 'D' would get 1 per cent. One could argue that the re-ordering of SC castes into four groups offers us a clue that 'the caste system'

is not fixed and natural. In other words, castes or caste-based identities are malleable and the role of the social groups in shaping the specific roles and order of castes cannot be undervalued.

The long-drawn-out struggle of the madigas is well-documented. This is a long story of political claims in the corridors of Law and Administration. With the enactment of A.P. Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act, 2000, categorization of SC reservations was implemented between the 1st of April 2000 and the 5th of November 2004. However, when the mala representatives appealed, the Supreme Court set aside the A.P. Act of 2000 on the ground that according to the Constitution, 'Scheduled Castes' is an indivisible category and any subdivision therefore unconstitutional.[43] The political form and the achievement of the struggles put in place by the madiga movement are in many ways unprecedented. They worked politically, with arguments and information , to bring together madigas and gather the support of others; at the same time they worked on the Government to marshal its support for the equal sharing of reservations. In the process the omnibus category of Scheduled Castes was redefined, the constitution reinterpreted and the reservation policy reformulated. What is more the madigas construction of their self and community and their agenda for democracy based on the unity of the oppressed castes (as opposed to caste annihilation) opened a new debate on caste politics.

Yendluri Sudhakar's poem 'Drum Beat' exemplifies this celebratory remaking of madiga self and the imagining of a community based on idea of equal share and respect to all untouchable castes.[44] Sudhakar speaks as a madiga, not as a Dalit now:

I now speak just as I am:
as a madiga, a cobbler,
a slipper-stitching slogger,
a carcass collector, a gravedigger, a scavenger,
these are all me.
These are my people,
and I am speaking about my race.[45]

The striking aspects in the poem are: the new subject, a madiga, and its organic relationship with the community ('my people,' 'my race'). This madiga is not ashamed of his caste-ordained occupations and identities; he sees them now as arts, as knowledge, as skill. He asserts that the madiga self contains all these occupations and identities ('these are all me'). The distinction between the Dalit (who were in fact madiga) victims of Karamchadu and the madigas of MRPS movement is significant. Sudhakar explains the reasons for 'the disparity among our own people [Dalits]'. He points out, 'The rungs of the ladder, the masks of insults, inequalities are marks not only of the upper castes' but also the Dalits. He ends by giving the reluctant malas a call to come forward to build 'a new Dalit world'.

The immediate demand of the 'sub-caste' movements' is to subdivide and 'share' reservations and other welfare benefits. But these movements open up larger theoretical questions. We will examine two of them: the revision of Dalit agenda of caste annihilation and the construction of new discourse of caste.

In the Dalit movements of the 1970s and 1980s 'Dalit' is proposed as a term for the untouchable castes as a whole. This is a politically significant effort to integrate the untouchables into a single community and mark their difference from caste Hindus. In addition it held up the ideal of the annihilation of caste-Hindu imposed identities (such as panchama, chandala, harijan etc.) were viewed as stigmatized. From the time of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Dalit movements had held up 'Dalit' as an unmarked collective imaginary and proposed a programme of caste annihilation to create a democratic society.

The madiga struggle showed a reservation policy that did not recognize disparities among the SCs of Andhra Pradesh, it actually reproduced the disparity. Secondly, madigas proposed a revision of the Dalit social revolution by valorizing a madiga identity (practices like attaching madiga as a suffix to the name and invoking madiga history and culture). In the field of caste politics, a clear shift from 'annihilation of castes to equality of castes is a new theoretical development. Caste annihilation, this indicates, has to be re-thought as a project where caste identities may remain as markers of a culture and history but

inequalities and indignities will be eliminated. The failure of equality for individuals and the tension between human dignity vs. caste dignity are new theoretical issues for further exploration.

In addition, these post-1990s movements and after, add a new dimension—that of cultural identity to the notion of caste. The world of untouchables, once stigmatized and banished from public account—reappears. This is made possible by shifting the discussion from annihilation of caste to equality of castes, and from the equality of individuals to equality of castes. It was argued that it is the dignity of the madiga caste that will ensure dignity to the individual madiga, his or her identity and culture. Interestingly, this fashioning of a distinct caste identity is part of a struggle for fighting the indignities and inequalities of the caste order.[46] I cite two examples to illustrate my point: one, the recent beef festival in Osmania University[47] and two, the search for religious and cultural traditions of the Dalit castes.

Not only Dalit castes but their food culture is also stigmatized and barred from the public spaces. Dalit activists have been debating food culture around the issue of serving and consuming beef in public. The much-publicized beef festival in Osmania continues this engagement. There Dalit, OBC and Left student activists questioned the exclusion of Dalit food cultures from hotel menus, restaurants and other public spaces. The public beef eating was not just an assertion of the right to food or a celebration of India's diverse food cultures. As Sambaiah Gudimeda, Dalit scholar, argues, the suppression of Dalit food culture in a modern public space reinforces the exclusion and humiliation and also causes injury to the agency and identity of the marginalized caste community. Therefore, he suggests that according representation to marginalized cultures needs to be accompanied with respect of 'the other'.[48] In other words, recognition and respect of the identity of the madigas and all other Dalit castes is the message of the beef festivals.

The debate around the question of religious and cultural traditions of the Dalit castes assumes significance in the post-1990s period. Dalit scholars and writers have searched out and documented the alternative histories embedded in the mythology of madigas, dakkalis and other Dalit castes. Yendluri Sudhakar's *Mallemoggala Godugu* (Narratives

of Madiga Life) is a re-creation of the history of madiga ancestors. In one of the stories in this collection, he talks of their expertise skills with the *dappu*, which they could play in such a way that it would stop a galloping horse in its tracks by picking up its heart beat![49] Vemula Yellaiah argues for a critical appreciation of cultural heritage, and cites the achievement of the *Jambapuranam*, a well-known madiga origin epic performed or narrated with massive illustrative scrolls. K. Ramaiah's initiative in the Adima school makes it a principle to draw on the various knowledges of the Dalit inhabitants of the boulder strewn hills of Kolar. Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy discusses the important turn to Buddhism, reclaimed as a Dalit tradition, among Kannada writers.

A new generation of Kannada Dalit writers have set up a search for cultural elements (lower caste cults, mythical figures, folktales, narratives and so on) which were sidelined, distorted, rejected or suppressed by the upper castes and sometimes just assimilated into the dominant culture. New research studies point to a cultural tradition of gods, religious practices, myths and rituals that are of Dalit origin and egalitarian in their outlook. These groups have continued to have substantial following, mostly from the Dalits and backward castes. For example, the annual Manteswamy *jatras* in Kollegal district in south Karnataka, their main ritual centre, attracts large numbers. These cults attach value and respect to all the condemned practices (eating meat, consuming bhang and other intoxicants, leading an itinerant, possession-free life, etc.).

Conclusion

The Dalit activist-intellectuals inaugurated a new debate on caste-based discrimination and power in contemporary India. Their critique of the sociological construction of 'the caste system' as an externally imposed system (either by Hinduism or colonial state) obscured the entrenched interests in the present. The social science interpretations of caste as a consensual system, a system of interdependent castes or a number of pressure groups in elections was criticized and rejected. While these interpretations offered useful insights, these interpretations also denied agency to Dalits, undermined contemporaneity of caste

and the role of modern state and other institutions in the perpetuation of caste. Dalit theorists criticized the common sense view of caste and the sociological construction of caste and offered new insights into the forms of caste in contemporary society. Their significant contribution, which did not get critical attention, is to retrieve caste from the empirical domain and to accord conceptual status by suggesting new ways of representing and conceptualising caste as identity and politics.

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Notes

[1] See for a detailed documentation of the incidents of Dalit massacres in India, *Broken People: Caste Violence against Indi.1999.* New York: Human Rights Watch. For a discussion on Karamchedu killings and reservations issue, see Balagopal, K. 2011. *Ear to the Ground: Selected Writings on Class and Caste.* New Delhi: Navayana.

[2] For a detailed discussion on Karamchedu, see Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu (eds.). 2013. *From Those Stubs: Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. pp. 13–24.

[3] These lines are my translation. For the complete song, see JNM (Jana Natya Mandali) Publication. July 1995. *Karamchedu Porata Katha*, p. 23.

[4] This paper could not address the complexity of conceptualizing caste in the context of questions raised by Dalit feminists and Other Backward Classes. I thank Mary John for bringing up the question of caste and Dalit feminist initiatives in the discussion.

[5] While the specific trajectories of Dalit movements in south India may be different but the broad conceptual shift in thinking of caste is noticeable.

[6] It was pointed out that the Dalit critique of caste is a view of a small group of intellectuals. Yes, it is a view of a small minority like the sociological view of caste. But the Dalit view offers a totally new perspective.

[7] In a recent study, the monopoly of the upper castes in education, employment and the political arena, and the absence of Dalits and OBCs in these domains, revealed caste dominance in Indian public institutions. See Deshpande, Satish. 2003. *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. New Delhi: Penguin. pp.116–20.

[8] Balagopal, K. 1990. 'This Anti-Mandal Mania'. *EPW*. 25 (40): 2231–34.

[9] Caste is also officially recognized as institutionalized discrimination and human rights violation after a successful compaign by the Dalit organizations, Dalit NGOs and other agencies. The Bhopal conference in 2003 and the Durban conference in 2001 are significant initiatives from the Dalit NGOs and Dalit Diaspora.

[10] The continuing hold of this model in anthropological literature and by

extension in the humanities and social sciences is evident in Dumont's much celebrated 1966 work, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. The Dumontian view is rightly criticized by anthropologist Gerald D. Berreman as 'a brahminical view of caste.'

[11] Satish Deshpande interrogates the failure of the discipline of sociology in studying the question of caste. See Deshpande (2003).

[12] M. Kunhaman talks about 'the target-group approach' in his essay 'Socio-economic Development of the Dalits in India: A Macroeconomic Overview' in Satyanarayana, K. et. al. (eds.) *No Alphabet in Sight: New Debit Writing from South India.* New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. pp. 516–524.

[13] Sheth, D.L. August 1999. 'Secularization of Caste and Making of New Middle Class,' *EPW*. 34(34–35): 2502–10.

[14] Ibid., 2504.

[15] Sudipta Kaviraj makes a similar argument. See Kaviraj, Sudipta. 2000. 'Democracy and Social Inequality' in Frankel, Francine R. (ed.) *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 102.

[16] Sheth acknowledges that the lower castes or Dalits functioned as pressure groups but this recognition did not inform his debate on caste. We find no reference to contemporary Dalit movements of the 1980s.

[17] Kothari,Rajni. 'Rise of Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste' in Partha Chatterjee (ed.) *State and Politics in India.*1998. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. pp. 439–58.

[18] Ibid, 444.

[19] Ibid, 441.

[20] Ibid, 443.

[21] The sociologists do not acknowledge the significant role of the Dalit movement in our understanding of forms of caste today. In a recent review of sociological studies of caste, caste is still interpreted as a problem of the discipline of sociology and other related social sciences. See Jodhka, Surinder S. 2012. *Caste*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[22] Dhareshwar, Vivek.1993. 'Caste and the Secular Self'. *Journal of Arts and Ideas*. 25–26: 115–26.

[23] Uniyal. B.N. 30 January 2000. 'Wanted, a Dalit Journalist', *The Pioneer*.

[24] M.N. Srinivas, A.M. Shaw and B.S. Baviskar describe caste as divisive in their reply to Rajni Kothari. See Kothari. Rajni 'Rise of Dalits and Renewed Debate on Caste', in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *State and Politics in India.* 1998. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 443.

[25] See Ayyappan's story 'Madness' in Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu (eds.). 2011. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. New Delhi: Penguin: 363–367.

[26] The arundathiyar and the madiga movements are examples where a new meaning of caste identity is invoked.

[27] Sunny Kapikkad uses this formulation in his 'Kerala Model—A Dalit Critique', in Satyanarayana, K. et.al. 2011: 463. Kapikkad is describing caste as cultural capital with reference to the upper castes. He is also arguing for reworking caste as capital for the Dalits.

[28] For a detailed discussion of Karamchedu and other massacres, See Srinivasulu.K. 2002. 'Caste, Class and Social Articulation in Andhra Pradesh: Mapping Differential Regional Trajectories.' London: Overseas Development Institute. http://www. odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp179.pdf (accessed on 20 June 2007).

[29] Ibid.

[30] The Dalit political and literary movements emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s in south Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

[31] Ch. Hanumantha Rao, an economist and a member of Planning Commission, observed that caste was recognized as an index of deprivation in the Planning Commission as late as 1986. He made this observation in a round table on 'Appraisal of Dalit Studies' held at Osmania University on 29-02-2009.

[32] For example, United Dalit Students' Forum (UDSF) in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, came into existence in 1991. The Dalit students' magazine, *Insight*, was first brought out in September 2004, by a small group of students from JNU. The magazine was an attempt to create a platform where Dalit students could share their views and experiences. It was an instant success and soon reached out to many other campuses.

[33] S.V. Srinivas analyses 'The Politics of Failure' in Natarajan, Srividya et. al. 'The Anatomy of a White Elephant: Notes on the Functioning of English Departments in India', in Susie Tharu (ed.). *Subject to Change*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman: 72–84.

[34] Anveshi Law Committee. March 2002. 'Caste and the Metropolitan University.' *EPW*, 37(12) 23 :1000–03.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Senthilkumar Solidarity Committee. 16 August 2008. 'Caste, Higher Education and Senthil's "Suicide".' *EPW*. 43 (33):12.

[37] Gundimeda, Sambaiah. 2009. 'Democratisation of the public sphere: The beef stall case in Hyderabad's Sukoon festival'. *South Asia Research.* 29(2): 131.

[38] Cited in 'Senthilkumar Solidarity Committee Report'.

[39] Gopal Guru (2002) analyses the crisis in the social sciences from a Dalit point of view. See Guru,Gopal. December 2002. 'How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?'. *EPW*. 37(50): 5003–09.

[40] Alisamma Women's Collective. March–April 2002. 'Different Sisters'. *Dalit*: 45.

[41] Joint Action Committee. 'Negotiating Gender and Caste A Struggle in Hyderabad Central University', *EPW*. Vol. 35, No. 43–44, 21 October 2000.

[42] For a detailed account of the Madiga struggle, see essays by Krupakar Madiga and P. Muthiah and also Krishna Madiga's interview in K. Satyanarayana et.al. (2013).

[43] Balagopal. (2011), pp. 448–463.

[44] See the poem in Satyanarayana, K. et.al. (2013). pp. 590–592.

[45] Ibid, p. 590.

[46] In 1996, Nagappagari Sunderraju, who is a product of madiga movement, founded the Madiga Sahitya Vedika. He argued that the questions raised by the madiga movement in the context of political representation and reservations are applicable also to literary and cultural fields. The very next year Sunderraju compiled a collection of madiga poetry *Madiga Chaitanyam*. A second collection, by Krupakar Madiga and Joopaka Subhadra Kaitunakala Dandem: Madiga Kavitvam appeared in 2008. Both volumes clearly establish the importance of this

literature, which not only forges a new identity but also gives dignity and respect to their life and culture.

[47] For a news report on the beef struggle, view this link: http://www.sunday-guardian.com/investigation/the-beef-eaters-of-osmania, (accessed on 25 October 2013).

[48] Gundimeda. (2009). p. 149.

[49] See Satyanarayana, K. et.al. (2013) for a sample of these writings.