

Debating Community, Print and Dalit in Kerala, India

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Abstract

The emergence of print within Dalit publics, which acts as the modern cultural site of individuated and communitarian political articulations, rekindles the cultural tensions in the community's encounter with modernity and also within the evolution of the Dalit political subject. The differing signifying practices of the modern articulations of the Dalits are represented in the discursive print space of Malayalam Dalit magazines. This paper looks into the Dalit debates in the Malayalam speaking regions of Kerala, by locating it at the narrative praxis of print culture as represented in some of the literary spaces and in the little journalistic space of Dalit magazines. The attempt is to understand the latent socio-cultural process which shapes the community formation among Dalits in the sub-national space of a post-colonial region known as Kerala in India. The assumption is that such an inquiry into Dalit discourses of the region would reflect upon the nuances of socio-cultural transformation taking place in the society, the locus point being the structural power relations centred and based primarily on the institution of castes.

Keywords

community, Dalit, language, print culture

Introduction

Print constitutes one of the modern cultural spaces of articulations and it emerged with colonial modernity of the region. While the autobiographical testimonies of the regional elite expressed at the social reformatory praxis signified the modern anxieties as to who would represent culture and power within the region, the strategic radicalism embedding the Dalit publics envisioned a larger universe of an ethical society. It debated not only the political imaginations of community, but also a larger ethical social universe where Dalit² as modern individuals started redefining their modern concepts.

The term Dalit publics is used to denote the complex web of multiple 'publics' and the debates which takes place within, which determine the contours of the Dalit discourse. The idea of Dalit publics owes conceptually to Nancy Fraser's (1990) notion of the 'subaltern counter-publics' where she argues that the 'members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. Fraser proposes to call these subaltern counter-publics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of these subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.' Further, it is argued that the subaltern counter-publics demonstrate dual character in which they function as spaces of withdrawal and re-groupment. On the other hand,

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²Unlike the conventional social science disciplines where the descriptive terms of caste / sub-caste are preferred, the term Dalit and Dalit movement are used throughout the paper. Here, the term Dalit is used not as a descriptive category, but in the political sense of a critical analytical category. That is why, though the term Dalit was not in use in colonial Kerala and gained political currency later in the postcolonial period, the term Dalit movement is used to denote the socio-political struggles of the 'untouchable' castes.

they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides (Fraser,1990).

However, the inaugurating moment of the modern individuated Dalit was marked as that of the community. On the one hand, the normative modernity shaped by the technological self of the state situates the Dalit modern under the administratively imagined pan-national community of scheduled castes. On the other hand, the political struggles within the emergent Dalit publics tries to imagine a political community of Dalits, which in the postcolonial period is shaped, by and large, in response to the statist imagination, and at times, radically departing from it to envisage a larger radical fraternity of its own political community. Both these streams of political imaginations fail to recognize the independent existence of the individual Dalit beyond the communitarian boundedness. The emergence of print within the Dalit publics, which acts as the modern cultural site of individuated political articulations, rekindles these tensions. These differing signifying practices of the modern articulations of the Dalit are represented within the discursive print space of Malayalam Dalit magazines.

This paper intends to suggest a theoretical ground to the evolution of Dalit community magazines in the print space of Kerala. The attempt is to understand the historically evolving print cultural space, which helps in shaping the community's formation. It may also reflect upon the nuances of socio-cultural transformation taking place in its society, the locus point being the structural power relations centered on the institution of castes.

In the Indian context, Dalit, the historically marginalized 'untouchable' social group, possesses the political potential of a socio-cultural transformation as its evolution into a political community could challenge the existing hegemonies. The conceptualization of such a community should happen from within and should be self-reflecting and politically engaging. The modality of such an evolution engages the ideological dispositions of various agency narratives such as that of Indian state, Hindu community discourse, Dalit movement and academic discourses. This process also imbibes ideas and energy from the history of social movements / struggles and contemporary social / cultural / political realities.

The engagement with these debates is limited to the narrative praxis of the print cultural practices of the Dalits and its cultural connotations in the context of emerging community assertions. The debates taking place in the literary and journalistic narrative spaces are signifiers to the evolving cultural discourses that shape the aspirations and consciousness leading to the / integration of the community and vice versa. This paper is arranged in two parts. The first part will discuss the social / cultural / political context that makes it imperative to look into these discourses and the second part deals with where these print narratives are interrogated and interpreted so as to contribute theoretically to the discourse.

The vantage point of these cultural debates demands subjective interventions from within the community. The category Dalit has been used here not as a homogenous category, but that works within a caste hierarchical, class conscious and gendered system constructing multiple levels of power relations. In order to pose itself as a counter hegemonic value system, Dalits strive to address all these aspects at the deepest possible level. That is the potential I see in this historically driven and politically conscious cultural category.

Dalits and Modernity

The critical engagements of Dalits both with modernity and the nation has been one of the causes of socio-political leapfrogging in the last six decades of independent India. The Dalit discourse always tried to interrogate on the question of the nation at various levels of socio-cultural milieu. This has been contested by the nationalists as 'deviant', 'sectarian', 'casteist' and as a 'side issue' or 'something insignificant' that could be addressed after the political question on the sovereignty of the nation. The concept of a nation has masked the whole discourse and Dalits have challenged this hegemonic construct of nation at various historical junctures. The discourses dealing

with the question of equality, citizenship, cultural plurality, right to cultural, and political and economic resources were fundamental to the Dalit discourse on the nation.

The nation was built on the pillars of a modernist's tryst with the past. The Nehruvian development agenda that carved out the notion of a modern nation-state aping a western secular model of nation, hesitates to address the internal struggles of a newly imagined national community. The offerings of colonial past that paved the path for the construction of a nation-state had been denied to the vast majority of the population in the name of nationalism. The modern temples of development were built on the subjugated aspirations of a culturally complex social system. It was critiqued from various ideological and socio-political milieus. The hegemonic denominations built on a Hindu revivalist rightist ideology sees it as a threat posed by modernity on tradition. The myth of secular development has been contested and attempt was made to re-impose traditional cultural values in the public realm via political rhetoric, institutions, print and visual media (Rajagopal, 2005;Thirunal, 1997).

There seems to be the emergence of a critique of modernity from Dalit / Adivasi / women / minority Muslim positions. Dalit / Adivasi / women's politics had problematized the grand narratives of modernity, at the same time, critically assimilating and strategically negotiating with its offerings. This critique need not be misinterpreted and limited to the traditional discomforts with modernity. Its re-emergence in the recent past could be traced to the historical evolution of identity movements across the globe. Its context in India has been politically narrated by the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 80s, the growth of rightist Hindu revivalism, demolition of Babri Masjid, changes in global politics in the context of Kuwait and Iraq wars. However, the genealogy of a Dalit / subaltern critique maybe historically traced back to Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar, Ayyankali and various anti-caste movements in particular regional contexts. Aditya Nigam views the emergent Dalit critique of modernity as an 'absent presence' in the large body of Dalit writings and espouses a new theoretical framework to be looked at critically within the modern political institution of a nation (Nigam,2000).

The emergence of new discourses from the shadows of grand narratives has occupied the centrestage of the renewed realm of political thought and activism. The (unwritten) micro histories of the nation has challenged the notion of the 'universal' and brings to light the multiculturalism and plurality that grows beyond the binaries of good / bad, mass / class, and high art / low art. The influence of these grand narratives on the outcome of a nation remained the same. The status quo in the power structure was maintained and adhered to with the renewed neo-conservative enthusiasm. Modernist engagements and its narrative contracts were extended to retain the traditional power positions of the nation. These critiques of the Nehruvian modern nation, points to the limitations of the grand narratives of secularism and nationalism.

The private realms of the society remained traditional in essence and the public realms ushered in the glories and gains of modernity. Modern nation with its federal wings and new cultural artifacts was built in heterogeneous times of modernity. Press as a cultural artifact and democratizing instrument played a major role in the process. The scope of print capitalism was extended to journalism which later grew as a post-colonial capitalist and corporate enterprise with a neo-liberal facet. It is by making a claim on nation that communities began to engage with the modern institution of a nation-state. During the colonial era various communities based on the institution of caste and religion began asserting their identity and attempted to intervene on the colonial discourse of a nation. Representation of these various communities vis-à-vis caste, religion, gender was central to these debates. Many contemporary political discourses could also be traced back to these colonial debates.

As Stuart Blackburn(2006:1) points out that "no scholar can ignore the influence of print, especially its power to cast oral traditions in new forms, to new audiences, across linguistic and geographical boundaries." The press acts as an instrument in constructing these debates in contemporary history. It helped communities to imagine and reach out to each and every member of the community via opinion leaders. As communities began asserting politically, the press became the tool to disseminate their angst and aspirations to all its members. The print became a tool to

imagine an identity for the community. The dominant community imaginations could translate the idea of community into that of nation thereby acquire cultural supremacy.

Kerala Model and Dalits

Kerala attained statehood with the linguistic reorganization of states on 1 November 1956. As a region, it has culturally evolved out of various socio-political movements that envisaged and experienced the ideals of modernity. The print culture has played a prominent role in defining this society. The influence that various community / caste organizations had on this process also cannot be overlooked. The conflicting community / caste aspirations together with the nationalist discourse had defined the region, the backdrop of which was the spirit of Renaissance brought forth by various social reform movements. Arunima has pointed out that the naming of the region and people residing there—Kerala and Malayali—occurred “as a result of the complex negotiation between different community identities and different kinds of ‘selves.’ The fragility of this nascent ‘Malayali’ self is the one that found voice in the early literary prose genres (Arunima, 2006: 63).”

In the olden days, Kerala was a place of imagined boundaries and constraints- boundaries on where particular people might go; constraints on what they might do (Jeffrey, 1992). The institutionalized form of caste system in Kerala was so inhuman and rigid that it treated the ‘lower’ castes as not only as ‘untouchable’ but also as ‘unseeble.’ It was this barbaric nature of the caste oppression in Kerala that made Swami Vivekananda lament that the Kerala was a ‘lunatic asylum.’ The fact that the Kerala was one of the most caste-ridden parts of India has been agreed by scholars from different disciplines (Iyer, 1970; Jeffrey, 1992; Nambudirippad, 1968; Panikker, 1998). Noted historian K.N.Panikker(1998: 180)observes:

“The subservience of ‘lower’ castes was manifest in all realms of social intercourse. A Nayar could not touch a Nambudiri, a Thiyya [or Ezhava] had to keep at least 32 feet away from him, and a Cheruma 64 feet. Even the style of conversation indicated the superior / inferior status. The violation of these rules led to excommunication, the denial of village services like those of a barber or washer-man and the facilities of village temples and wells.”

Over the years, Kerala has overcome these barriers and become a developmental model, popularly known as Kerala Model of Development. This model had and has a phenomenal influence upon the development discourse of post-colonial India. It is a model of development that envisages high level of social progress without recourse to economic growth. Gemma Cairo (2001) has analyzed the influence and pressure that various social groups had exerted on the state in order to fulfill their interests and in that way helped to produce Kerala’s distributive model.

The claims of Kerala Model have been contested by the struggles of various Dalit / subaltern groups in the region. The Dalit and women scholars have been attempting to theorize these movements and a coherent body of Dalit / women’s critique of the ‘Kerala Model of Development’ has evolved. Whenever there was a general improvement in socio-economic conditions, the Dalits heaved a sigh of relief. But within the social structure their status remained the same. K. Kunhaman (2002: 101-2)points out:

“[...] in the intellectual marginalisation of the Dalits and Adivasis, Kerala seems to have out-performed the other Indian states... while they have got some access to general higher education, they are terribly under-represented in professional and technical education... There are no Dalit / Adivasi among top ranking journalists, scientists, technologists or university Vice-Chancellors. Thus, social discrimination and intellectual untouchability are very strong, perhaps stronger than in any other states in India.”

The cultural and political discourse of the region has been largely carried forward by caste / religious aspirations. But the social public domain remains dominated by the rhetoric of class determinism, masking the modern cultural evolution of caste and religion. Dalit assertions on the other hand are ambiguously divided and therefore, inadequately represented in the political domain. The apolitical caste / sub-caste organizations by and large, function as patriarchal / revivalist groups ideologically confined within the umbrella of Hinduism. The emerging Dalit intelligentsia in the state has shown the courage to dethrone the hegemonic ideals of Hinduism and is in the process of

re-writing history from a Dalit perspective, theoretical platforms of which are yet to evolve.

The land reforms in Kerala, initiated on 8 December 1957, by the first communist government in Kerala and ‘completed’ on 1 January 1970, with the official abolition of feudalism, had given land-ownership only to the non-Dalit tenants who were middle-men between the landlords and the labourers (Koch, 2008). The Dalits were also kept away from the cultural realm as the dominant Malayali culture pertains to be that of the ‘upper’ castes.

Kerala is a state with highest proliferation of newspapers and magazines. Jeffrey (1992) has pointed out that the even in the early decade of twentieth century many Malayalam newspapers and magazines had high circulation. The reading culture that was nourished within the interface of journalism and print cultures helped the region to carve a niche out of the ordinary modes through which such a media space developed in other parts of the country. The emergence of scholarship on the concept of region points to the linkages of vernacularization of public sphere vis-à-vis print capitalism with the emergence of linguistic regions.

Rich Freeman (2006) argues that in relation to identity formation, literature as a special kind of reflexive language practice enables communities in creating and indexing various sorts of cultural capital and cultural identity, both regional and trans-regional. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) hypothesis that print culture fostered the formulation of the myth of a past and geographic and ethnic community that replaced a sense of extra-territorial religious community may not be applicable to all the South Asian contexts. However, the expansion of print culture and its use by individuals who did not belong to the original secular elite encouraged the diffusion of new multiple conceptions of extra-territorial communities, however “nationalist” they may or may not have been. What I am trying to argue, in this paper is that the neo-literate engagements of Dalits offer the possibilities of re-imagining a community beyond the statist hegemonic construct. The questions that arise are: Do Dalits as a community possess the agency to narrate its ‘Self’?; how far has the political identity of Dalits been transformed into the cultural terrain?; and do literary practice enable them to acquire the print capital and will it catalyse the process of community formation among Dalits?

The print culture of the region has addressed these questions as part of colonial literary consciousness and discourse, eventually carved out of the grand narratives of modernity. The early Malayalam novels such as Potheri Kunjambu’s *Saraswativijayam* (1893), and Lady Collins’ *Ghatakavadham* (1865) advocated religious conversion as an agency for solving these problems of tradition placing it within the ambit of colonial modernity.³ The critique of such a discourse could be seen in the emerging Dalit cultural debates made visible by various literary and print engagements of Dalits. Although ‘Dalit’ had occupied thematic centrality of early Malayalam literature, the Dalit as a writer arrived only in the literary horizon of 1960s. The contemporary political significance of print for Dalit lies in the emergence of this new category—Dalit writer / intellectual—which has inaugurated the cultural moment of political modernity through which Dalits articulate their agency.

Dalits have tried in vain to assay forth this hegemonic cultural sphere with their own cultural practices. These attempts, by and large, reflect the conflicts and commotion among the Dalits of Kerala in addressing the politics of asserting one’s identity. And it is through these debates that Dalits attempt to re-define their identity and construct the ‘Self’ of a community.

Print Narratives of Community

The Dalit interrogations of caste experiences in the region re-invoke the dialogue on nation and nation-state. The orientalist gaze of colonial modernity and the governmentality of national modernity tried to co-opt the emancipatory project of the marginalized. The print culture has been one of the contested spaces for the marginalized in various regions to engage critically with these projects.

³For a detailed discussion see Menon (2006: 73-144).

The process of community formation among Dalits offers not a linear narrative as imagined by the nationalist or Indian state. On the contrary, it brings forth complex and multilayered narrative which at times could be contradicting as well. The problematizing of structural inequalities in Indian society could not be effective unless one addresses the nuances in the process of community formation among Dalits. It could bring forth the internal tensions and strategic negotiations that various narratives and historical junctures possibly. The temporal and tangible terrains of the process demand a new theoretical perspective.

The recurring print themes may bring forth the latent process of constructing an unbound seriality narration. This constructed unboundedness helps the community to imagine the self in a particular fashion. These narratives also rely heavily on the dominant notions that define the whereabouts of a nation and provide access to it in order to make a claim. These narratives are centered on certain debates that shape the identity of Dalits as a community such as the issue of reservation, Hindu religion, religious conversion, identity, caste and gender. It could be seen that the differing ideological positions bring forth a multi-layered narrative. The anger of young community members could be seen in these writings. They urge the community to take a pro-active role to fight the casteist Brahminical exclusionary measures of the public domain and create their own spaces within this sphere by utilizing any possible means.

Conclusion

The complexities involved in the formation of a socially constructed, culturally perceived and politically articulated community of Dalits evolve from the print narratives. Although placed in the hetero-normative and gender-problematic cultural terrain the debates emanating from the narrative praxis of these magazines envisages a renewed political translation of culture vis-à-vis the lived experiences of the Dalit / subaltern. It demands a new theoretical approach and agency to the downtrodden. I was trying to map some of the visible facets of these debates and argue that; the process of community formation among Dalits is a complex one and may not confine to a linear and monolithic understanding and theorization; the categories placed as binaries such as oppressor / oppressed, Dalit / Brahman, male / female, and hetero / homo may not be the only sources of knowledge production to address the political question of Dalit emancipation. Though culture is practised within the framework of opposing binaries, its complexity also needs to be addressed. While addressing the binaries one should be able to see the conflation of various floating identities that determine and contextualize the political / cultural / social outcomes; print engagement of Dalits is part of a historical continuity which necessitates the expansion of the newly emerged cultural terrain to other media forms and various cultural practices. These are invisible in the mediated and caste-constituted Indian public / media sphere. The politics of community assertions / formations of Dalits assay forth as an emancipatory project that challenges both the grand narratives of tradition and modernity, at the same time negotiating with the latter in order to overcome the hurdles posed by the existing structural inequalities.

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