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DALIT IDENTITY AND LITERATURE: THE KERALA CONTEXT

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The theorization of caste has transformed significantly after 1990s, especially after the presentation of Mandal Commission Report¹ and the debates based on that. The debate on caste has taken many turns in rapid succession in this scenario. Before, the commonly held idea about caste was that it is a remnant of pre-modern, hierarchical, purity/pollution formation specific to Hinduism alone. But, today, this formulation is rejected and even criticized by many in the academe. Today, everyone considers caste as a live force in Indian culture, society and politics. The caste issue has resulted in the compartmentalization of the society into two sections such as dominating or submissive, based on the economic and social statuses of the individuals belonging to these sections.

Dalit: Etymology

The word Dalit has come out of the narrow sense that had been attributed to it and, it has undergone lots of transformation so as to include different groups of people with similar life experiences. In older days, the word Dalit was used to indicate those groups of people who were situated at the bottom level of the society according to the caste hierarchy prevalent those days. As this hierarchy was an upper caste creation, those people who are placed at the bottom level of the social ladder had to remain there acquiescently.

Dalit is not a new word. In 1930's it was used as a Hindi and Marathi translation of "Depressed Classes" which, in turn, was the term used by the British to refer to "Scheduled Classes." Ambedkar used this word in many of his Marathi speeches to refer to the depressed caste people of the country.

¹ A report submitted in December 1980 to the Indian Government by *Mandal Commission* headed by noted parliamentarian - Bindheshwari Prasad Mandal. The commission was set up in 1979 by the then *Janata Party* government. Commission suggested reservation for OBCs which resulted in many debates and assaults against OBCs in the country.

In Sanskrit, Dalits, the plural of Dalit is both a noun and an adjective. As a noun it can be applied for all the three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral. In all this case the root word is *dal* that means to crack, open, split, etc. When used as a noun or adjective, it means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed, etc (Massey 6). A few people are of the opinion that the word “Dalit” has Hebrew origin.

In Indian context, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, the great social reformer from Maharashtra used the term in nineteenth century itself, to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and victims of our caste-ridden social system (Zelliot 271). Some people believe that the term was first coined by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In *The Untouchables*, Published in 1948, Ambedkar used the term “broken man” as the English translation of the word “Dalit” (Webster 76).

However, it was the members of the *Dalit Panther Movement*² who, during 1970s, gave currency to the term. They revived the term and in their 1973 manifesto, expanded its reference to include the Scheduled Tribes, “neo-Buddhists”, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion (Omvedt, 1995: 72). Today, this term is used frequently and thus has become popular among Dalit people of various protest movements, all over India. Apart from its common use, the term Dalit is being used to represent those people who, on the basis of caste distinction, have been considered “outcastes.” Dalits are those who were made to bear different kind of disabilities in the form of oppression for centuries.

Today, many of them use the term Dalit as an expression of hope for them in recovering their past and lost identity. James Massey notes:

In fact, because these people were regarded as outcastes and their struggle, this term *Dalit* has gained a new connotation, which has a more positive meaning. It must be remembered that *Dalit* does not mean low caste, or “poor”, it refers to the state of a section of people to which they have been reduced and now they are living in that predicament (Massey 7).

Today, almost all Indian languages have Dalit as term in their terminology. In the case of Malayalam, the great poet Ezhuthachan used this term in his *Mahabharatam Kilippattu*, though not in the same sense of the term as we use today. Another famous poet and reformist Kumaranasan used it in his *Nalini*, even though without any implication on the caste system

² Dalit Panther Movement is a social movement by Dalit Panthers which was founded by Namdev Dhasal in April 1972 in Mumbai and inspired by Black Panther Party, a revolutionary movement amongst African-Americans, which emerged in the United States and functioned from 1966-1982.

(Pradeepan 15). The Dalits in India are known by different names which include *Dasa*, *Dasyu*, *Raksasa*, *Asura*, *Avarna*, *Nisada*, *Panchama*, *Mletcha*, *Svapaca*, *Chandala*, *Achuta*, Exterior Castes, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Harijans, Untouchables, etc. Besides these names, there are many more names for Dalits at regional level. All these names are given by upper caste people and used to show Dalits' relative inferiority and thus their contempt for them. All these names have very obvious and vicious historic connotations.

In Kerala, all those who are kept aside by birth itself come under this category. *Vaalan*, *Arayan*, *Mukkuva* and those who were called "harijan" by Gandhi encompass the category "Dalit." *Thiyyas* and *Ezhavas*, though *avarnas* by birth, do not come under this category. Religious minorities like Christians and Muslims as well do not belong to this group (Pradeepan 16).

Untouchables or scheduled caste are not the words sufficient to represent those who suffer exploitation of different kind, both socially and economically and belong to the lower strata of the society. To those who were in search of a term which stands for the pain and suffering of the suppressed in its fullest proportion, the term "Dalit" became a widely acceptable one (Purushothaman 15).

The term "Dalit" got importance primarily as a denominator for downtrodden and untouchables. Later on, so many other sections of the lower caste and lower class people are incorporated into the term. The term has evolved, beyond the caste consciousness of lower caste/class people, as a marker of social and historical awareness. Malayalam writer C Ayyappan notes, "Today, the usage 'Dalit' makes the coming together of different groups possible. It is not a caste. If that can accommodate people with similar views, (*C Ayyappante Kathakal* 192).

Dalitness is an anti-caste standpoint and, at the same time, it is an identity consciousness. In all dominant discourses including literature Dalits are seen and represented only through upper caste, brahminical slant. Dalits and Dalit movements, after Ambedkar, have achieved a novel awareness which was characterized by destroying all the constructed images of lower castes by the brahminical knowledge system. Today, they are able to understand and recreate their own knowledge forms and cultural capital and enhance them.

The identity formation of any social group happens only when its people understand themselves from their surroundings and by detaching themselves from others. Here, the transformation of Dalits from recipients of the social changes to the carriers of social changes is notable. Socialization has helped them to enter the social and political arena of everyday life. Being victims of the same knowledge system, Dalit consciousness has become a common characteristic for all depressed castes/classes and minorities as well. Thus,

irrespective of the minor differences that exist amongst them, these groups come together and fight against the oppressive mechanism in the society.

Caste System

Caste is a prevalent characteristic feature of Indian social system. Ancient religious texts of the Hindus like Manusmriti³ suggest the Chaturvarna⁴ theory, according to which there were only four castes. The Brahmins were priests; the Kshatriyas, warriors; the Vaishyas, traders and the Sudras, skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers doing menial works.

The Brahmins spread the theory that they themselves were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. Hence, the Brahmins were the most superior, next came the Kshatriyaas, and so on. Theories such as this were put forth in the Rigveda which was again claimed to be God-made (Dangle 235).

Dr. Ambedkar discusses the development of the caste system in India in his works like *Castes in India –Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *Who were Shudras?* (1948).

According to D L Seth, the term caste has been derived from the Portuguese root word *casta* and it has got currency along with the Portuguese invasion in India. The term ‘caste’ has since been used to designate the *varna-jati* system which has been prevalent in India. Portuguese were the first among Europeans to provide detailed account of caste and its functioning in the Indian society.

In the colonial era, after the Portuguese regime, there were not any significant accounts on caste for around 250 years. After the British rule was established in India, a “second discovery of caste” that is, a new colonial discourse on caste was born. This particular discourse on caste departed from the then existing pre-colonial discourse and set new guidelines for any take on caste henceforth.

This new discourse looked at the issue of caste through different perspectives. First, they analyzed whether the impact of caste system on Indian society was positive or negative. Orientalist scholars were of the opinion that caste system had some positive functions, whereas Christian missionaries saw it as a staring evil. Then they saw caste system as a rigid hierarchy in terms of ritual purity and impurity. Unlike the Portuguese, the British discovered and studied Hindu religious scriptures and thus caste became a prism through which they

³ It is the part of the Dharmaśāstra textual tradition of Hinduism. According to Hindu tradition, the Manusmriti records the words of Brahma.

⁴ According to this, there are four castes in the society among Hindus: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Sruddas.

began to see the whole Indian society. They conducted a few village and land surveys and, in the end, started viewing village as a microcosm of Indian society and caste as constituting its social, political and economic organizations legitimated by its religious ideology.

Eventually, they began looking at this issue through Western prototypes of society. They introduced a new, theoretical-comparative dimension for viewing caste. They approached caste using the normative and social paradigms prevalent in the West. After some empirical researches they came up with a new concept of castes as separate communities often divided by descent, race, tribes, political organizations and customs. From 1901 census onwards British started caste wise enumeration of Indian population and that was updated once in every ten years. Often, the census officers, for their convenience, gave some or the other names for each caste which in turn, has become established caste names. Whenever there happened to be any dispute over the status of some castes, the census officers' decision was final. Such reports highlighted that the social and economic advantages were accrued to those caste groups who occupy high position in the social order. And, the marginalized groups remained marginalized in the society.

The colonial regime, along with introducing new discourses on caste system, also introduced some new policies which were aimed at delegitimizing the power of traditional social elites. Some of these policies, along with the larger historical forces of modernization, secularization, urbanization, etc played a significant role in making Indian society aware of the evils of caste system prevalent in those days. These, in turn, had a potent effect among the lower caste people. As a result, a new, trans-local identity among "lower-castes" a collective consciousness of being "oppressed" by the traditional social hierarchy was formed.

The established caste categories of ritual hierarchy began to be confronted with new categories like "depressed castes" and "oppressed castes." This consciousness resulted in the formation of several "like-minded" groups at local and national level and these groups began negotiating with the state projecting their larger social identity and numerical strength. In this venture, they attacked the very ideological foundations of the ritual hierarchy of caste with the help of modern ideological terms: justice and equality. After independence, even after becoming a liberal democratic country, the changes and the shifts in Indian society remained and continued to be interpreted in the old, colonial evaluative framework.

The terms and categories that are used to describe all these changes in caste system have derived and developed from the colonial discourse. Two opposite views have been predominant about the changes in the caste system. One view sees these changes in the caste system as functional adjustment of some kind, made by the system itself for its own survival and sustenance. The second group, considering the economic criteria, holds the view that the

process of modernization transforms the caste system into class system of some kind. This change in the conceptualizing caste in post- independent India, in short, got stuck in the dichotomous debate on “tradition” verses “modernity” and “caste” verses “class” (Seth 2503).

Changes in caste are directly related to the process — “Secularization of Caste” which, in turn, could be read along with the de-ritualisation and politicization of caste. These changes not only brought caste out of the frames of the traditional stratifying system but also linked it to the new structure of power relations in the society.

In India, caste has been conventionally considered as an isolated system of hierarchy which has ritual status as its basis. In this system, the religious ideology of purity and pollution; techno-economic and political organization of villages and food production and distribution; and customs and tradition of caste that evolved over centuries play crucial role. The rootedness of caste behavior in the religious ideology is the axiomatic characteristics of Indian caste system. This “rituality” of caste facilitates the upper caste in India to maintain and sustain the autonomy of status hierarchy, even in the face of both economic and political changes.

In most of the cases, upper caste people did not accommodate changes of any kind. In some cases, even if they accommodated some changes, to some extent, they were too cautious of not losing the structural and cultural integrity of the power structure while absorbing those changes. They wanted to conserve the insularity of the caste system and to an extent, they succeeded in doing that (2504). Because of the erosion of ritual basis of caste system, a large part of its support system has collapsed. It now survives as a cultural community which is a kinship based entity.

Modernity and its Treacherous Deal

The adoption of ideas and values of “modernity” to the Indian society – modernization of economy and democratization of political institutions – has played a crucial role in dismantling the economic and political power of the upper caste people. This, in turn, helped for the emergence of new power structures in the society which is based not on religiously sanctioned values but on economic and occupational statuses. The hierarchically ordered caste groups are now fighting for power and control over the resources of the society.

Dalit writers and critics do not conform to the proposals of modernity as such, as its developmental paradigms are not in conformity with the problems that the Dalits and other minorities confront. They, instead, come up with a Dalit critique of modernity that “. . . do interrogate the two great artifacts of political modernity in India – secularism and nation.

Dalit poetics . . . refuses to get incorporated into either term of the binary of nationalism/colonialism, and secularism/communalism” (Nigam 4256). This Dalit critique represents a resistance to some of the key political and theoretical categories of our modern political discourse. Since the anti- Mandal agitation in the early 1990s, the upper caste discourses, undergoing a sudden shift in the tone of approaching minority issues, started speaking the language of merit, efficiency, class, economic deprivation and so on and thus managed successfully to repress the category of caste.

Regarding the caste question, both the nationalists and the communists can be considered as the two sides of the same coin. They, along with the upper caste right wing Hindu forces, try to suppress the cause diverting the attention of the masses to some other topics. In the per-independent era, Gandhian nationalism managed to suppress the seriousness of the caste question as he demean the issue by introducing a common and upper caste term Harijan. Nehru, mentioning Gandhi’s announcement of his fasting protest against the decision to grant a separate electoral to the ‘Depressed Classes’, criticized Gandhi for giving unnecessary importance to a “side issue” or “something insignificant”. Nehru writes

“. . . for choosing a side-issue for his final sacrifice – just a question of electorate. What would be the result on our freedom movement? Would not the larger issues fade into the background, for the time being at least? . . . And was not his action a recognition, and in part an acceptance, of the Communal Award...After so much sacrifice and brave endeavor, was our movement to tail off into something insignificant? ” (J Nehru).

In the post independent scenario, Hindu nationalism represented by Tilak and Gandhi was brought into practice by Nehru through recruiting more Brahminical people to control the state structure.

The communists delimited the caste issue into the power struggle between two classes. Moreover, they hold a view which is similar to that of the Brahminical nationalists. Noted communist leader E M S Namboodiripaad who became the first chief minister of Kerala, comments on the Poona Pact in his work *History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, “However, this was a great blow to the freedom movement. For this led to the diversion of the people’s attention from the objective of full independence to the mundane cause of the upliftment of the Harijans” (qtd in Gail Omvedt, 1994 p177). Aditya Nigam states that “what finds expression in both Nehru and Namboodirippad here is precisely a modernist discomfort with the category of caste...” (4258). D. R. Nagaraj (1993) refers to this modernist discomfort as “the treacherous deal that was struck between the forces of modernity and the caste system.”

Kanshi Ram's metaphor about the Brahminical upper castes as "white snakes in green grass" and Brahminical Marxist as "green snakes in green grass" is highly useful in understanding this discomfort of both the nationalists and communists towards caste and identity based politics. Kancha Ilaiah, explaining these metaphors, states that the anti-Dalit position of the Brahmins can be understood easily whereas the Marxists' take on the lower caste can not easily be understood. Marxists bring down the caste question into the class question and analyze them with an upper caste mindset.

Kerala Context

The Dalit question in Kerala context can easily be understood by analyzing it in terms of Kanshi Ram's metaphor about the Brahminical Marxist. In Kerala, being a state that has been ruled alternatively by Congress led alliance and Communist led alliances, the condition of the Dalits is not much different compared to other states. Though the Land Reform Bill⁵ had brought in some changes, partially putting an end to landlordism, neither alliance have done much for uplifting the lower section of the society.

Dalit movements in Kerala is characterized by small group initiatives in the intellectual and academic domain, the recovery of important historical figures, struggle for equality in the church and other public spheres, and so on. The availability of Ambedkar's writing in translation was a path breaker in this regard. These works help the leaders to reevaluate the Kerala model renaissance and reject mainstream economic interpretations and reforms.

Based on the time period, Dalit intellectual movement and activism in Kerala can be classified into two: during 1980s, the activities of SEEDIAN (Socially, Economically, Educationally Depressed Indian Ancient Natives) group and the activities of Dalit Christian groups; and in the post 1990s period, the activities of Dalit Women's Society, Dalit Student's Forum, the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha, etc.

SEEDIAN was an initiative by a group of people who have assimilated both Marxism and Ambedkarism and applied these two in their thoughts and actions. K. K. Kochu, K. K. Baburaj, K. K. S. Das, K. K. S. Ambirajan, Paul Chirakkarodu, V. V. Swamy, Sunny Kappikkadu, and so on are the main members of this group. The group produced the journal

⁵ Even before the formation of the State of Kerala, there had been endeavours at land reforms; the Restriction on Possession and Ownership of Lands Bill, 1954, being the best example for the same. After the formation of the State of Kerala the first major achievement was the [Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill, 1957](#) which was passed on October 15, 1960. This Act was repealed in 1961 and was substituted by [The Kerala Land Reforms Act, 1963](#). This act had provisions relating to the fixation of ceiling on land holdings, the vesting of lands in excess of the ceiling in Government, Assignment of surplus lands, abolition of tenancy system, assignment of proprietary right on land to the cultivating tenants, the conferment of the right on Kudikidappukars to purchase land and the constitution of a Kudikidappukars Benefit Fund. <<https://kerala.gov.in/land-reforms>>

named *SEEDIAN* and they took initiative to introduce some western writers and philosophers to the Kerala public sphere. These group, later come up with another independent journal called *Soochakam*. Recently, this group has entered the publication venture as well beginning a new publishing company called *Subject and Language Press*.

Dalit Christian movements started in early 1960s itself. Separate Administration movement led Vattappara John Stephen against the upper caste power structure of the Syrian Christians. In 1980s, under the leadership of T M Yesudasan, some Christian youths protested against the Church of South India demanding proportional representation for Dalits in jobs in church controlled institutions.

Some other similar groups like Janakeeya Vimochana Viswasaprasthanam and Dynamic Action, etc brought in issues related to land rights. Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) is another similar attempt that had kept alive Dalit memories of slavery and had in fact shaped a theology and ritual practice around that issue (*No Alphabet In Sight* 31). Kerala Dalit Panthers, Indian Dalit Federation, Dalit Women's Society, etc. are some attempts of the similar fashion.

The Adivasi land struggle at *Muthanga* forest of Wayanad district, Kerala has got national coverage. This struggle by Adivasi's over land got full support from radical Dalit groups as well. It was forty-eight days long struggle of Adivasis led by C K Janu and Geethanandan in 2001.

The term 'Dalit' has transformed a lot from representing only the lower caste people who occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy. Today, this term provides a vast vista in which all the oppressed groups can be accommodated. The Mandal Commission Reports and the debates came out related to that provides the minorities as well to think in the similar lines of the Dalits. The coming together of these groups facilitates the formation of a Dalit-Bahujan alliance.

Literary and other artistic production of this new alliance provides the medium for circulating their ideas/ideologies into the public. Their life and experiences get representation in their literary productions.

What is Dalit Literature?

Sharankumar Limbale, one of the earliest Dalit writers to draw an outline for Dalit literature and Dalit literary criticism, defines Dalit literature as "Literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (Limbale 30). However, Limbale also states somewhere else that Dalit literature is "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (Limbale, 19). Even though

Limbale's second definition is quite confining, his emphasis is on Dalit consciousness. And elsewhere in his book, he defines Dalit as "All the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes" (Limbale, 30). It is possible to argue, and rightly so, that the writings by non-Dalits with a Dalit consciousness about Dalits can very well be regarded as Dalit literature.

Dalit Literature emerged as a literature of protest and resistance in the wake of the crumbling of Nehruvean socialism and its failure to deliver the promised social justice. The corpus of Dalit literature grew hand in hand with the Dalit social and political movements. Dalit literature questioned the existing aesthetics of literature determined by the *savarna* mentality. In the beginning, Dalit literature was written primarily to raise awareness and not for any aesthetic purpose as such. That is one reason many critics regard Dalit literature as lacking literary merits. However, these writings should be looked at from a sociological perspective. How can we expect, in Dalit writings, an adherence to an aesthetics which is determined by the *savarna* influence on the literary history against which Dalits fight?

Dalit writers and critics have questioned the *savarna* aesthetics of mainstream literature. They argue that Dalit literature is different as it is emanating from real life experience or lived experiences, there should be a separate yardstick to analyze such literature. The mainstream aesthetics, which is more based on the senses may lead to erroneous analysis of the text.

Dalit Literature as "Minor" Literature

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari define minor literature as a literature that a minority constructs within a major language. The three characteristics that Deleuze and Guattari outlined are: that in a minor literature, language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization; that everything in them is political, and that in it everything takes on a collective value (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). We can, without any doubt, consider Dalit literature as a minor literature. It is a literature that a minority, Dalits create in a major language, while introducing elements of their minoritarian culture to it.

Dalit literature is highly political. Unlike most of the "major" literature, Dalit literature is not concerned with the aesthetic but with the real world experiences. They deal with questions of caste, inequality, social justice, etc. Dalit literature has a collective value. One text in Dalit literature is not the words of a single author, but that of a community. The nature of Dalit writing is communitarian and not individualistic. The characters in Dalit writings speak for a community, not for any particular person. Dalit autobiographies, the most commonly used

genre in the beginning of the emergence of Dalit literature, can be treated as *testimonies*, the narrative of an entire community.

Dalit Literature in Kerala

Long before Dalit literature emerged as a body of literature in the Kerala literary scene, there has been number of Dalit writings in the literatures of neighbouring states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The educated, mostly first generation, Dalit youth were highly fascinated by the life and thought of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. However they did not see their histories or lives in the books they had to read and study. With the spread of education, Dalit youth became articulated about their identity. They started expressing their aversion for the inequality in the existing social systems. It is their anger against such social systems that sowed the seeds of modern Dalit literature.

Like the other parts of India, in Kerala also Dalit literature grew along with Dalit political movements. However, “Dalit movement in Kerala is altogether a different phenomenon. It was a protest movement against rituals and civic disabilities and a widespread organized effort for religious reformation” (Dalit movement in Kerala). Dalit literature has been invisible from the mainstream Malayalam literary scenario for a long time.

As Poykayil Appachan sings:

About my race...

I see no alphabet

about my race

I see histories

of many races (*Malayalam Dalit Writing*, 5).

The lives of Dalits in Kerala as such were excluded from Malayalam literature. When their lives were represented, the mainstream took recourse to stereotypes which resulted in a negative portrayal of Dalits. The hegemonic discourses represented Dalits in a way suited for their domination.

Malayalam literature has been determined by the literary traditions of Sanskrit. The literature was highly influenced by the *manipravala*⁶ tradition. Malayalam literary sensibility was focused on concepts like spiritual liberation, fulfilment and sensual ecstasy (Dasan et al, xxiv). Even the term Dalit appeared in the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala only in the late 1970s (Dasan et al, xiii). Under the grand narrative of class emancipation and secular nationalism, the questions of caste were either silenced or co-opted. Under the influence of progressive literary movement and the socialist realism and secular nationalism the questions

⁶ Manipravalam was a literary style used in medieval liturgical texts in South India, which used an admixture of Tamil (early Malayalam of Kerala) and Sanskrit

of caste identity were sidelined. In the normativity of secularism, talking about one's caste or religious identity makes one "backward."

With the resurgence of Ambedkarite thought in the wake of Ambedkar centenary celebrations in 1991 and the erection of Ambedkar statues in various places, there was an upsurge in the Dalit literary scenario in Kerala. Also, the socio-political events like anti-Mandal agitation, Babri Masjid demolition and the rise of the Hindutva party BJP to power at the centre also influenced the flourishing of Dalit writings in Malayalam. The translations of Potheri Kunjampu's *Swaraswati Vijayam, etc.* into English set in motion the discussion around Dalit literature in Kerala.

For a long time, the question of caste was silenced under the normativity of secularism and progressive nationalism. The Dalits were under a false consciousness that Marxism or nationalism can bring changes in their lives and social status. However, in the 80s, different kinds of new social movements started claiming their space in the Kerala public. It is at that time that Dalit intelligentsia, many of them disillusioned with Marxism and Naxalism started critiquing the Brahminism and *savarna* nature of the Kerala public sphere and Malayalam literary scenario.

A consolidation of Dalit identity and a Dalit consciousness emerged in Kerala when cracks began to appear in the much celebrated Kerala experience and Kerala model. Dalits and other marginalized sections came to realize that they were being cheated by both the nationalists and the Marxists.

From the 1990s onwards the Malayalam literary scenario has seen celebrations of the differing and plural voices of the historically marginalized, oppressed and unrepresented (Dasan et al, xxxii). The proliferation of Dalit literature needs to be read in this context as well. M Dasan argues that:

Any new movement has to pass through three phases: ridicule, resistance, and acceptance. Dalit literature in Kerala has fast forwarded to the third phase and is beginning to provide the colour and power that only people who live close to the earth can express (Dasan et al,xxxiii). With the publication of two anthologies of Dalit literatures: *No Alphabet in Sight*, edited by K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu; and *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*, Dalit writings in Malayalam is reaching to a wider audience. These two books have made many resources available on the Dalit cause and literature and the socio political contexts in which they are produced.

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