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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Hall of shame: Dalit woes take centre stage

Srijana Mitra Das, TNN, Jan 23, 2011, 02.42am IST

JAIPUR: In 'Hall of Shame', a Jaipur Literature Festival session, writers Chandra Bhan Prasad, Meena Kandasamy and Patrick French discussed ways by which Dalits were identified and excluded.

"There is no caste' gene," said French. "Despite bans on inter-marriages, no exclusive caste-based genes developed among Indians. So, there's no scientific basis for castes." Kandaswamy responded. "The concept of 'upbringing' is used instead. If I poured water clumsily into a jug, my awkwardness would be explained by my 'Dalit upbringing'." Prasad commented that methods to 'identify' Dalits were used by non-Indians too. "When I visited Durban with a delegation, foreigners came to have pictures taken with 'the Dalits'."

Kandaswamy said she initially didn't use a Dalit writer' tag.

"When I translated a Tamil Dalit writer, people got suspicious. They enquired, 'Are you a Dalit?' was asked constantly, I started saying, yes." She remembered how insulted she felt visiting the editor of a prominent newspaper down south. "He only spoke to the politician accompanying me with this translated book. He asked him, 'Is she a Dalit? She speaks good English.'" To the packed hall, Kandaswamy continued, "Indians are always in denial about the caste distinctions they make."

Prasad felt economic liberalisation was changing mindsets considerably. "Earlier, people lived by social markers like sacred threads," he said. "Now, they are switching to economic markers. Mobile phones, money, cars are becoming more important than caste or colour." Kandaswamy disagreed, pointing out Dalit villages in the south made prosperous by Gulf earnings. "Despite their wealth, no-one is willing to marry them or make them friends. Instead, they get attacked by the police acting with Brahmins. Caste emancipation is much more political than economic."

Remarking how he had never heard of inter-dining' before he read Gandhi who disapproved, French said, "Ambedkar didn't fit the Congress Party's version of history written after 1947. He was never mentioned. Today, he exists widely but as a statue. He is used as a political symbol but not explored as a writer, a thinker, which he was like Orwell, deeply passionate and very direct." Prasad enquired, "How many people here have invited a Dalit home to dinner? That is a marker of how we view caste today. After a few drinks, people confide they think Dalit guests would mix soda in wine, demand meat, laugh loudly." The audience responded by laughing loudly, moved by indignation over injustices old and new.

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