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INTERVIEW

'Dalit unity is undermined'

D. KARTHIKEYAN

Interview with Hugo Gorringe, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh.

S. JAMES



Hugo Gorringe: “The notion of space is the central social idiom of the Dalit struggle.”

In the recent past, there has been a lot of debate on the emergence of Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu’s political sphere on the basis of Dalit identity. A larger identity constructed by the Dravidian movement has not only failed to transcend caste identities but has also suppressed the Dalit question through its hegemony. In this interview to *Frontline*, Hugo Gorringe, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* (Sage 2005), talks about the emergence of Dalit movements, Dravidian hegemony and the future of Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu.

Gorringe has written several articles on caste, violence, protest and policing. He was in Madurai recently. Excerpts:

How did the idea of doing research on a Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu evolve?

My father worked in the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS) in Madurai, so I grew up in Tamil Nadu between the ages of 4 and 11. During these years, I was able to make good friends. After we left, I had the opportunity to visit Madurai once every three or four years to keep up the connection with my friends, maintain my Tamil and meet people. The TTS is a place where Dalit theology is very important and I was exposed to dialogues between Gandhi and Ambedkar on untouchability as well as the social inequalities prevalent here. For my bachelor’s degree, I wrote a 10,000-word project about my experience with Dalits in India. I thought that the project was easy to do and also would give me opportunities to meet my friends.

During that project, though, I met more people and learned more about persistent caste inequalities. Following up on that experience, and realising that not much work had been done about Dalits and their movements in English, I thought of filling that gap. That was how my PhD project came

about. Scholars like Michael Moffat (*An Untouchable Community in India: Structure and Consensus*; Princeton University Press, 1979) had argued that caste was based on structural consensus and that groups at the lower order replicated the forms and relationships of those at the upper strata.

Others argue that the lower caste groups in fact fight against caste. The situation has changed dramatically since Moffat's work was published, and Dalit movements have mobilised across the State. I wanted to understand these contemporary caste relations and chart the challenges to caste hierarchy.

How important was your PhD in developing your understanding of caste and exploitation that continue to frame the lives of Dalits?

My PhD introduced me to the everyday life of Dalits. Once I got to know members of the movement, my PhD research took me into villages and urban slums that I had not visited before and opened my eyes to the subtle manifestations and the everyday practical difficulties of Dalits and how they are discriminated against both in civil as well as political society.

One of the significant features of your work was the concept of production of space and reclamation of rights to public space. How important is this concept in the case of Dalits?

The notion of space is the central social idiom of the Dalit struggle. At least superficially, the transformation of Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT) and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) as political movements has enabled them to claim space within urban areas on par with other parties as can be seen in wall posters, flagpoles and murals. Likewise, few towns and villages in the urban periphery remain untouched by the symbols of Dalit politics. Given the immense struggles and battles that ensued to gain acceptance for these symbols, the fact that they are now commonplace in itself is extremely significant. On a more concrete level, Dalits in urban areas continue to live predominantly in slums or particular enclaves. Urban space in that sense is still marked by caste; people seeking homes for rent are often asked about their caste or are asked to get references from upper caste people before being offered a place. In rural areas, Dalits still reside in *cheris* outside the village and must struggle for access to roads and common resources.

Even in the case of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government's Samathuvapuram project, [a residential area] where people of different castes live side by side, lack of engagement between them in common cases and spaces indicate the continuing resilience of caste sentiment.

How important do you think is the emergence of Dalit parties such as the VCK and the PT in Tamil Nadu's political sphere?

The rise of parties like the VCK and the PT is precisely about compelling the Dravidian parties to accept Dalits as political players. In the case of the VCK, so far they seem to have achieved that but the accusations that they levelled against other Dalit politicians – as being non-representative and out of touch with the realities of untouchability – are now being levelled against the VCK. Dalits I have spoken to felt that there are so many pressing issues that need to be addressed, but the VCK leaders have failed to address them in their pursuit of larger issues like the Sri Lankan conflict.

Whilst it is a real sign of progress that a 'Dalit Party' can speak out on wider issues, the failure to engage with the concerns of their core constituents can foster disillusionment.

Dravidian hegemony, achieved through the Dravidian parties' investment in symbolic capital such as social honour and trust and creation of symbols, idioms of glorious past, was one of the major reasons for the suppression of the Dalit question. How far do you think the Dalit parties are able to challenge the hegemony?

The Dalit parties' failure to challenge Dravidian hegemony is one of action rather than analysis. If one listens to [VCK leader] Thirumavalavan in Dalit circles or reads his work or that of D. Ravikumar [Member of the Legislative Assembly representing the VCK], they offer an insightful analysis of brahminism and of the influence of Dravidian movement and they explain how Dalits buy into that rhetoric. Despite this, the VCK has allied itself with both main Dravidian parties rather than attempting to consolidate a Third Front. The pertinent question is whether the decision to ally with Dravidian parties is pragmatic or principled.

Initially it was a pragmatic move to escape persecution and establish the VCK as a political player, but increasingly they seem to be buying into the system. Yes, they have gained some concessions and have given a voice to marginalised people to some extent, but when leaders of resistance movements fall at the feet of Dravidian leaders, you see the transformation of figures of liberation to establishment figures.

There is an accusation that the inclusive rhetoric of the Dravidian movement bypassed Dalits only to empower the regionally dominant middle castes who oppress Dalits and commit atrocities against them? How far is this true?

The Dravidian movement was always anti-Brahmin but was never systematically anti-brahminical as a philosophy and never has campaigned for that. In fact they never challenged the structural hierarchy except in symbolic ways, meaning that we still have caste oppression both at village and urban areas by dominant castes who have supplanted the Brahmins as power holders but follow brahminical policies. Brahminism continues to hold sway.

The egalitarian ideology of Periyar has not come into fruition. Even Vanniyars and Thevars had to struggle for inclusion into Tamil politics. Indeed, the history of Tamil politics has been one of successive struggles by marginalised sections in society. The failure of Dravidian parties is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that political contestation is still articulated and carried out on caste lines.

Still the struggle continues?

Yes, after Vanniyars and Thevars, it was Pallars (Devendrars) and Paraiyars (Adi Dravidars) and now it is Arunthathiyars who are struggling for political inclusion. This happens precisely because caste continues to have symbolic and material substance and remains an important category of practice. This is not to say that social relations have been static. By and large, there is a widespread decline of dependency among Dalits. But the advancement of marginalised communities is largely incidental to, rather than a product of, Dravidian policies.

S. THANTHONI



Dr K. Krishnaswamy, founder, Puthiya Tamizhagam.

Even Dalit movements are mobilising on caste issues, and it is a paradox to see that anti-caste movements are reinforcing the social structures they want to eradicate. There are a number of reasons for that; firstly, Dravidian hegemony is so strong that whatever the leaders say and think, Dalits cling to a Tamilian identity. The failure of parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Communist Party of India and the CPI(M) testify to that.

Secondly, it reflects a lack of democracy among Dalit movements. The focus on big leaders, which reflects the dominant form of Tamil politics, itself leads to division and status competition. Thirdly, movements have tended to be particularly sensitive to atrocities, which is important in itself, but perhaps also entails a failure to work systematically against caste divisions. Even as the VCK recruits members from the backward castes, thus, they struggle to gain a foothold amongst Pallars and Arunthathiyars. The result is that now each caste has its own heroes and mass figures that are inimical to Dalit unity.

Talking about “heroes”, Dalit movements of late have been involved in reinventing their own caste histories and glorifying “heroes” from the past. Could this be seen as discourses of empowerment?



Thol. Thirumavalavan, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi leader, calling on Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi at his residence. M.K. Stalin, now Deputy Chief Minister, is also seen. A file picture. Dalit movements started off as autonomous political forces but have succumbed to Dravidian hegemony in the belief that they cannot stand alone.

Caste histories can well be seen as discourses of empowerment and we shouldn't belittle their importance because they provide at least symbolic forms of capital and have been instrumental in altering the aspirations and self-perceptions of the subaltern groups.

But do you not think that there is a danger of this form of symbolic capital not turning into social action?

Yes, there is a double-edged character for this as they detract the movements from any sense of common struggle and they can lead to status competition among Dalits as in the case of Devendra Kula Vellalars. From that perspective, campaign strategies which are formed on common issues such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1999, World Conference Against Racism facilitate cross caste mobilisation.

Perhaps, the best example of such awareness and mobilisation is Ambedkar's Birth Centenary, which made him a leader of pan-Indian stature and took him to the remotest corners as champion

of the oppressed. If Dalit movements can build on such platforms, or those of land rights, there is more hope for Dalit liberation than the advancement of particular communities.

Most Dalit scholars believe that the idea of resistance politics identified with the VCK has become a casualty after its entry into electoral politics.

The compulsions of electoral politics, which engender compromise and hinder spontaneity, are the reasons for that. Thirumavalavan could rush to villages during the 1990s and interact with people; now it's not happening and he cannot do that. Many are disillusioned with this professionalisation and bureaucratisation and the focus on Tamil nationalism. The seeming desire to become a general party rather than focussing on issues largely affecting Dalits is rather depressing for some cadres though others revel in the party's strength. But having said this, all the movements suffer from this malaise.

We have to ask whether the Dalit struggle can be advanced by espousing Tamil nationalism. The VCK has been able to gain some concessions and goodwill from its political partners through this strategy, but we must ask at what cost these gains have been won. The VCK mobilisation in Karnataka, for instance, is resented by other Dalit parties who see them as primarily a Tamil party. Dalit unity is thus undermined.

What are the significant areas where the VCK still wields a lot of influence?

In some key areas, the VCK continues to inspire people to follow them, and some shades of women's empowerment are also taking place. One notable thing is that in Madurai, R. Pandiammal – whom I mentioned in my book – has risen to become the district secretary from being a grass-roots worker. This move needs to be applauded as not many parties have elevated active women to positions of responsibility.

Secondly, they continue to carve out spaces in terms of book launches, art festivals and conferences. One VCK member told me that Thirumavalavan talks about Dalit issues in these platforms in a way that is no longer possible on political platforms. Finally, there is a suggestion by many people that the VCK is now engaged in the murkier forms of politics like *katta panchayats* (kangaroo courts). On the one hand this heralds the party's arrival as a significant political player – either because rumours are spread about them or because they are powerful enough to engage in such activities. On the other it raises questions about the party's ultimate objectives. If the aim is a share of political power then this is a step in the right direction, but if the aim is to transform politics and challenge caste hierarchies, then this is a retrograde step.

Your view on the question of compartmental reservation...

M. KARUNAKARAN



A rally led by Thirumavalavan in support of Sri Lankan Tamils in Chennai on May 5, 2009. Dalits feel that there are so many pressing issues that need to be addressed, but the VCK leaders have failed to address them in their pursuit of larger issues like the Sri Lankan conflict.

I am deeply sceptical about the Arunthathiyar reservation. For a start, if the State filled the 18 per cent available [to the Scheduled Castes] fully and properly there would be no need for compartmental reservation. Although it is true that the Arunthathiyars are the weakest of the main Dalit castes, this move can be seen as a form of 'divide and rule' that channels Dalit mobilisation into caste-based struggles rather than anti-caste struggles.

Furthermore, the issue of reservation is particularly important because the persistence of caste in contemporary Tamil Nadu, for me at least, rests less on 'purity and pollution' and more on the question of identity, honour and caste pride. Compartmental reservation feeds into this dynamic and fuels the logic of identity-based politics. It does not help to overcome the dialectic between honour and humiliation, whereas general schemes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme at least have the potential to transcend caste boundaries.

Is there any scope for Dalit parties to become politically self-autonomous?

Dalit movements here started off as autonomous political forces but have succumbed to Dravidian hegemony in the belief that they cannot stand alone. The Third Front in 1999 and actor Vijaykant's limited success signals that there is scope for non-Dravidian politics, but there have been no sustained attempts to build up such a campaign. This indicates that Dalit parties are caught up in the workings of everyday Tamil politics, with the result that the options open to them are limited to Tamil nationalism, idolisation of Periyar at a rhetorical level and the symbolic occupation of space. Only if Dalit movements stand apart from the Dravidian parties will we get a sense of their autonomy.

What are your current projects?

I am currently reading a lot of literature to think more theoretically about the underpinnings of caste and caste conflicts, thinking through workings of social power and the way in which everyday interactions form the basis of caste structures.

Such a bottom-up perspective offers an insight into why caste continues to inform everyday life even 60 years after Independence. I am also considering the possibility of carrying out a follow-up study on Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu that would chart the changes in Dalit mobilisation over the past decade. The vibrant Dalit movements that I studied in 1999 are now established political parties and I am keen to tease out the implications of this shift.

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