Dalit civil society activism

Luisa Steur

Of the many dilemmas thrown up by contemporary Dalit ‘civil society’ activism in India, the question of the connection between international advocacy on behalf of Dalit rights and grassroots Dalit action is one of the most troubling. It was a recurring topic of debate in the interviews I had with Dalit activists. It was a striking concern at the international conference on 24-25 June 2011 in Geneva, where some of the key actors in transnational Dalit activism came together to look back on the ten years that had passed since the Durban conference in 2001 where caste discrimination was first debated internationally as a human rights concern. One of the activists reminded those gathered that: ‘We are not people fresh from Harvard, Delhi School of Economics or whatever. We were born in the community, we are activists, not lobbyist or professional advocacy people...’ The disconnect was worrying since the objective of international advocacy, most Dalit activists seemed to agree, was to advance struggles at the ‘grassroots’. As another, senior activist said, ‘Our advocacy was primarily meant to move towards what was called "grassroots advocacy" as opposed to fly-by, you know, flying up there in the clouds, taking on behalf of Dalits. The whole internationalization effort was supposed to be linked with processes at the grassroots, remain a grassroots advocacy.’

In Dalit civil society circles – and beyond – the ‘international’ level is generally equated with ‘the global’, ‘professional lobbyists’, ‘up there in the clouds’ and is still seen as a largely ‘non-Dalit’ arena. The ‘grassroots’, in contrast, is seen as ‘the local’ and synonymous to ‘activists’, ‘the community’, and ultimately, ‘Dalits’. Stepping back from these common sense interpretations, we may well ask why a meeting room in Geneva is ‘global’ whereas the home of a Dalit family in rural Tamil Nadu is ‘local’. In fact, the popularity of the concept of Dalit rights as such did not simply emerge spontaneously from the experience of atrocities on Dalits in rural India. Rather, it emerged from their interpretation by activists who were either strongly connected to transnational communities of knowledge production or had extensive international training or work experience.

For the next generation of activists entering some of the major Dalit NGOs in India today as social work graduates, it is likewise their encounter with this (trans)national sphere of activism that permits a clearer interpretation of earlier personal experiences in the light of caste discrimination. Dalitness, far from being confined to village-level interactions, has become something even felt by activists in confrontations with the Indian government in UN sessions. Dalit activism and the articulation of Dalit-ness is not constituted at any particular ‘local’ level but emerged in a transnational social field. The issue of local-global disconnect, then, seems not to be one of an isolation of different levels of activist activity or articulation and probably needs to be conceptualized differently.

---

1 This article is part of the research project: Caste Out of Development? Civil Society Activism and Transnational Advocacy on Dalit Rights and Development. ESRC Grant Number RES-062-23-2227. The views expressed in this article are the author’s and are not representative of those of the research team as a whole or of the ESRC.
For a better theoretical grasp of the global versus the local and to throw a different light on the question of international-grassroots (dis)connect, we may draw on the critical methodology of World Systems Analysis. Here the concepts of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ are meant to help us think dialectically about the relationship between the particular versus the totality of social relations, between the concrete and the abstract, place and space.\(^2\) Such methodology can help organized resistance strategize according to what from this perspective would be considered the ‘real’ struggle that is always about the totality of social relations that gives meaning to particular places, events and interventions.

Through world systems lenses, the ‘local’ is a historically and geographically specific temporary crystallization of wider social processes that today are encompassed – in highly complex and ambiguous ways – in a capitalist world system. If we step back from the automatic assumption that Geneva presents the ‘global’ and Dalit colonies the ‘local’, we can start asking what it really means when activists signal a disconnect between the local and the global.

My argument is that the problem of disconnection should not only be seen in terms of distinct levels – the ‘international’ versus the ‘grassroots’ – but more in terms of the difficult challenge of Dalit civil society organizations of confronting the systems of oppression associated with caste and capitalism while operating in an ever changing and ambiguous social field where what seem the most effective tools to further a particular Dalit cause at one point in time often in the next moment threaten to dis-embed Dalit activism from the context in which it tries to intervene. This mechanism of disconnection – or ‘dis-embedding’ of the particular from its context – is intimately connected to the way this Dalit activism unfolds in ‘global civil society’.

In this increasingly specialized and professionalized realm, it seems difficult to retain a connection between the local and the global in terms of the relation of particular struggles to the totality of social relations that ultimately determines the fate of a majority of Dalits in India. Disconnect occurs as activism struggles to keep up with – and is at the same time itself affected by – the constant and rapid changes spurred by contemporary capitalism. The power of capital is that it is not merely an economic force but increasingly permeates social relations in India in general. This often increases – rather than diminishes – the role of ‘traditional’ institutions like caste.\(^3\) It moreover threatens to even enrol NGOs themselves in the effort of reproducing capital.\(^4\) The problem hence emerges of a polarization between the majority of Dalits whose livelihoods, because of the intertwining mechanisms of caste and capital, look ever more precarious and the few extremely well-connected, relatively more ‘successful’ activists who articulate the Dalit civil society agenda.

The risk of this type of local-global disconnect can be illustrated in the way Dalit activism has operated under the hegemony of the human rights framework from the 1980s onward. Following from a complex juncture in world history, the hegemony of human rights is certainly no longer merely an ‘international’ phenomenon. Rather, it figures large in negotiations with the Indian state and even in staking claims at the village level. International-grassroots disconnect is not the issue here. Dalit activists moreover tend to recount the entrance of the human rights framework as not just a functional move to adjust to shifting


international civil society frameworks but a progressive development in itself. Before the ‘rights’ framework came in, it is argued, people did not feel ‘empowered’ to lay claims on the government and instead were apparently just waiting for whatever it would provide as a sort of charity (the ‘welfarist’ model). Human rights, in contrast, allow one to claim resources from the government with dignity as a matter of right. It moreover provides a space for Dalit leadership that was lacking in the class-based struggles that Dalits were earlier involved in.

Regarding the more radical, extra-parliamentary of such earlier class struggles, their reframing under the rubric of human rights moreover allowed some respite from state oppression. The human rights model also provided a critique of ‘universalist’ development efforts. Earlier leftist critics had noticed the consistent marginalization of ‘the poorest of the poor’ in such development projects but had failed to identify this as a mechanism of caste discrimination that would exclude Dalits and increase the gap between Dalits and other caste groups. A human rights critique of violence on Dalits and practices of untouchability, which the government made a key agenda with the introduction in 1989 of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, moreover made it obvious even to an international audience why romantic, Orientalist interpretations of caste as a harmonious division of labour in India were wrong.

Despite its celebration at all levels of Dalit activism, the human rights framework did however come with problems of local-global disconnect. Though ‘Durban’ was a breakthrough in posing Dalit rights as human rights, some also recount it as the moment of the professionalization and institutionalization of Dalit activism. Implementation of the large-scale donor-funded Dalit Human Rights Monitoring Initiative that was set up after Durban made the then existing National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights take on the responsibilities of a more project oriented, office-based NGO and, in the economy of recognition characterizing NGO interactions, made it a competitor to other Dalit organizations.

Ideologically, conceptualizing instances of violence against Dalits as ‘human rights violations’ and ‘SC/ST atrocities’ linked them to powerful legal frameworks but often distracted from the relational context producing them. As several elderly Dalit activists remarked, the practice of ‘socio-economic analysis’ and the Freirian, Marxist-inspired training in linking one’s immediate experiences to wider structural processes was much stronger a generation ago than it became under the hegemony of human rights.

Combined with the professionalization of the field, many Dalit activists expressed a certain ambiguity or even alienation about the kind of work they now see their average working day fill up with – training cadre how to demonstrate their ‘impact’, accounting for their budget and searching for funding possibilities, booking humble victories in terms of ‘deliverables’, but meanwhile wishing for a leadership that could make a breakthrough in ‘the issues that really matter to the Dalit struggle.’

The human rights framework moreover signals a particular kind of international solidarity. The solidarity Dalit activists have received following the 1999 publication of Human Rights Watch’s Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s ‘Untouchables’, has centred on a common commitment to and emotional investment in human rights and on combating caste discrimination wherever it can be found. In this context, Dalit groups are now on the verge of achieving official recognition of – and legal measures against – caste discrimination in the UK itself. The international Dalit solidarity networks are not, however, based on an awareness of a shared strategic interest of non-caste affected countries or communities to support the Dalit movement as has been the case for movements allied to the alter globalization movement. Nor is there a foregrounding of the responsibility of western countries or companies in
creating the conditions for the perpetuation of abuses, as for instance was the case with the international solidarity against Apartheid.

When exploring the various Dalit solidarity networks existing in Europe, I was struck by the fact that almost all of them were led by – and often entirely confined to – persons working for one of the donor INGOs funding Dalit NGOs in South Asia. Despite active efforts to create more awareness of caste discrimination amongst the general public in Europe, members of Dalit support groups in most countries could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Clearly, despite creating unprecedented ‘visibility’ for the Dalit cause internationally, this type of solidarity network has not managed to break through – if not perhaps even added to – the Indian government’s stubborn refusal to accept international legal engagement with the problem of caste discrimination.

Apparently in reaction to some of these problems of disconnect that have characterized Dalit activism under the human rights framework so far, activists have recently started to engage more with ‘economic rights’. The shift also comes under influence from a changing landscape of donor funding and Indian state policy. As the Indian governing elite sees the country as a rising economic super power, it becomes ever more reluctant to accept foreign aid, especially when it comes attached with critical interference in its ‘internal affairs’. In 2010, changes were introduced in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act that make it more difficult for NGOs engaged in what may be considered ‘political’ activities to receive FCRA status. The Indian government moreover decided to accept aid only from certain major donor countries, and key donor organizations from smaller countries that used to fund Dalit NGOs in India are hence phasing out their projects. The major international donors that are left – such as UNICEF, the UNDP, the ILO, or DFID – work much more closely with the Indian government, staying away from the more controversial issues and rather supporting existing government programmes.

With the Indian government offering an extensive array of programmes potentially available to support Dalit livelihoods, many Dalit NGOs that used to focus more on ‘atrocities’ have now – often through interaction with the bigger international donors – become involved in promoting or implementing policies such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the Special Component Plan, and other policies related to the Indian government’s current self-proclaimed commitment to ‘inclusive growth’.

Many activists now proclaim the renewed emphasis on demanding ‘economic rights’ as a further advance in the Dalit struggle as it ‘extends the human rights framework beyond the earlier emphasis on political and civil rights to include social and economic rights.’ To take the example of the Special Component Plan, the turn towards ‘Dalit budget monitoring’ is often presented as one that can help Dalits ‘leave behind a discourse of victimhood’ and pose the more assertive slogan, ‘Where is my money?’ A key activist in the promotion of Dalit budgeting emphasized that the agenda was particularly suitable to the current times since it ‘refocused attention to the role of the government in a time of globalization.’ Rather than ‘giving up’ on the Dalit focus, the budget focus was retaining this emphasis even, I was told, to the point of potentially allowing Dalits to ‘not only catch up but leap-frog over others.’ Another activist argued that an emphasis on the SCP held the necessary balance between general Dalit empowerment and the need for concrete results that had become more pressing today than it was a generation ago: ‘Today the people have changed in their aspirations. They expect very tangible, direct results otherwise they won’t be with us.’ Hence, this activist argued, the Dalit movement now had to ‘closely combine the need for immediate fulfillment of needs with the long-term’ and this was precisely what Dalit budgeting allowed for.
Most important of all, perhaps, the Dalit budgeting/SCP agenda, I was told, might avoid many of the earlier problems of international-grassroots disconnect. Though drawing on international expertise and linking to movements for ‘participatory budgeting’ in other countries, the focus this time would lie squarely on ensuring that Dalits’ ‘fair share’ of the national budget would indeed end up tangibly in the hands of Dalit families.

Conceived as a problem of disconnected levels of activism, the main challenge for Dalit budgeting may be connecting the monitoring of national budgets to the complexities of concretely delivering development resources to Dalits and measuring to what extent this has been done. To some extent these are technical problems that can be dealt with ‘best practice sharing’ and other solution mechanisms in the NGO repertoire. If, however, the problem of disconnect is more fundamentally one of the local from the global in terms of concrete activist initiatives failing to confront the larger processes creating social polarization and precariousness, it is yet to be seen to what extent Dalit budgeting and other economic rights initiatives will solve this problem.

‘Participatory budgeting’, for example, is a heterogeneous agenda potentially leading in very different directions, including the neoliberal fragmentation and depoliticization of democratic decision-making characterizing alliances such as the ‘Global Initiative on Fiscal Transparency’ of the International Budget Partnership, World Bank, IMF, DfID, and the US Treasury. Divorced of a vision of how Dalit budgeting may challenge, rather than merely pacify, the gross inequalities the Indian state is allowing capital to create, such budget monitoring can unintentionally become enlisted in the populist neoliberal agenda of taking corruption rather than inequality as the main cause of social suffering.\(^5\) Budget monitoring, in that scenario, would function merely as an illusion of empowerment, taking for granted the general priorities of the national budget and the massive tax evasion of and subsidies to capital.\(^6\) There is obviously a great emancipatory potential to Dalit budgeting and other economic initiatives currently engaged in by Dalit NGOs. The challenge, however, is to realize that potential by organizing particular struggles with a strategic view to the necessary larger transformation of India’s development trajectory.

I hence see the problem signalled as ‘grassroots-international’ disconnect not so much as one of the inevitable frictions produced by social movements operating at different scales. I rather see it as more fundamentally about the tension of social, political and economic dis-embeddedness that is produced by the nature of the processes that contemporary Dalit civil society networks are part of at the same time that they seek to intervene in them. If such local-global disconnect comes to determine Dalit activism, it will have been successful only to the extent that its agenda ‘resonated or, at least, was not adverse to, the dominant (neo)liberal paradigm’ and will constitute another example of how ‘mainstream theory neutralizes challenges made to it.’\(^7\)

Overcoming such disconnect will depend crucially on the ability of Dalit activism to retain a broad relational definition of Dalitness as oppression not so much measurable in terms of particular symptoms but daily reproduced through the interweaving of caste-based hoarding and capitalist exploitation in India today. Whether such a more comprehensive and strategic path of Dalit emancipation can be found under current circumstances will be seen in how Dalit activism evolves in the years to come.

