Construction of Dalit consciousness: 
Irunjirai case study

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand and unravel the idea of consciousness as an arena for social protest and to establish that collective consciousness is a socially and culturally constructed reality which expresses, initiates, and engages social protest as a form of empowerment and emancipation discourse. Such social protests become a norm of social assertion for empowerment of the marginalised communities. This is especially the case in a society which is highly stratified in social, economic, political and cultural realms and where this stratification has been maintained through social and cultural engineering of domination and subordination for centuries. The Dalit community, which has been pushed to the bottom in the social ladder in the name of caste and untouchability, has inherently realised its sense of human dignity in recent times and started recapturing its lost identity in and through such protest movements.

Social protest as a form of constructing Dalit collective consciousness embodies other factors like education, exposure to multicultural and economic paradigms, and patterns of life as antecedent forces. This paper presents a case study of atrocities against Dalits in Irunjirai village in Tamil Nadu which unravels the draconian mechanisms that weave around the problem of untouchability and the aspiration of Dalits for empowerment. The success or failure of this aspiration depends very much upon how comprehensive and collective is the protest and also how concerted the movement is. The Irunjirai case study confirms this fact.

Irunjirai is an example of how different partners within the social network like civil society organisations (NGOs, community based organisations, human rights activists), the state (police, judiciary and executive bodies) and the press should play their own constructive, complementary roles hand in hand with the process of Dalit empowerment, and how when this fails it jeopardises the whole process. The mantra of development and social change must be reframed from the point of view of not only economic development but also of social, political and cultural parity between different, and even contending, parties.

INTRODUCTION

The consciousness of a subordinated community is constructed in and through its lived experience, sometimes called “the life world”, in its socio-political, economic and cultural

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2 Life-world, German Lebewelt, is in phenomenology, the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective “worlds” of sciences, which employ the methods of the mathematical sciences of nature; although these sciences originate in the life-world, they
contexts. The life world of the subordinated community is marked by subjection and exclusion in all aspects of life, whether it be social, economic, cultural, political or religious spheres. This is not only individual, but also a collective, shared experience. As a result, a dual social spectrum is created, dominant and subordinate within one social sphere. In this process, the subordinated community is depersonalised and dehumanised. In the Indian context this is engineered by dominant caste consciousness.

Dalits in India fall within the subordinated category which has been subjected to all forms of human miseries for centuries. Their feelings of negation, alienation, exclusion and oppression create an existential anger in the Dalits and at the same time a fear because this negation of being has been imposed upon them as a religiously sanctioned karma mindset of the dominant caste mindset. Hence Dalits, to realise their selfhood and dignity need to address such an oppressive social order through constructing an empowered collective Dalit consciousness.

Dalits have been resisting the dominant social order especially when it is imposed through overtly oppressive customs. This resistance has been at individual, community and even wider societal level. While exploitation and oppression of Dalits have become normalised, one should also take note of the anger and the assertion that is brewing up against such inhuman practices against Dalits today. My experience with the Dalits in Irunjirai has re-affirmed that Dalits are no longer ready to accept the status and function that have been imposed upon them by their oppressors.

2 IRUNJIRAI VILLAGE: CONSTRUCTING DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH A SOCIAL SETTING OF CONFLICT

I would like to explain the nature, the dynamics, and the various agents involved in the construction of Dalit consciousness through the case of the Irunjirai caste violence.

Irunjirai is a village in Thiruchuzhi Taluk, Virudunagar district, Tamil Nadu. About 500 families live in the village, belonging to at least 10 castes from the Shudra and Dalit communities. Within the Dalit community there are 30 Pallar families, living in two hamlets (Irunjirai and Chengamadai), 60 Paraiaar families, all of whom are Christian, and five Arunthathiar families. From the non-Dalit castes, which dominate, there are 200 Servai families, 100 Konar families, 50 Thevar families, 40 Nadar families, 10 Pujari families, and ten Vela families.

Dalits belonging to Pallar community in Irunjirai have brought into the open the atrocities imposed upon them. Their anger and assertive voices started echoing in many parts of Tamil Nadu as violence was let loose against the Dalit community on 25 August, 2007.

Mr Gurusamy, a Dalit from Irunjirai village in Virudunagar District, Tamil Nadu filed an FIR (First Information Report) in Narikudi police station on 25 August 2007. The words of

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3 The Pallar community is one of the three major Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu along with Paraiaars and Arunthathiaris. Pallars are considered more militant than the other two communities since they are economically stronger than the other two communities. Additionally they are mostly in southern Tamil Nadu, where there is a large Thevar populations, forming a politically powerful and in a way a violent community, and as a result Pallars have also learnt to be militant as a necessity of survival.

4 FIR report filed on 25 August 2007
Mr Gurusamy who is both the first victim of caste oppression and social ostracism and also the agent of social change and assertive voice from there speaks in his own words:

“We, the dalits, Pallar (about 30 families), Paraiar (about 60 families), and Sakkiliar (about 5 families) have been here in this village for ages. The services like dhobi [laundry], and barber were not extended to us which has been the practice here. We have to go to Narikudi, the neighboring town for such services. Even for a small kid, they wouldn’t do it. They would simply say, “We won’t do for you; we are here only for the dominant caste people; if we violate this practice they would beat us”. So we also wouldn’t go and disturb them. On that particular day, I had to go for some function to another place. I borrowed a dhoti from the neighbour’s house which I sent for ironing along with my shirt. The dhobi said that he would not do the service and kept the clothes aside. I said, “Why are you behaving like a stranger?” saying this I took my clothes and left it in my house and went for my work. He went to the village and informed some of the important people in the village. They called for a panchayat after three days. I gave my clothes on 22. 08. 2007 and they called me for the panchayat on 25. 08. 2007. I went there; there were about 50 people in the chavadi [common place]. When I reached there, the caste people said to me, “Hei, thambi, Periasamy has brought a complaint against you” they said. “What is it, Iyya”? I asked them. “Did you ask him to press your clothes?” I said, “Yes.” “How will you ask him to do it who does for us the upper caste people?” they demanded. “Iyya, I also belong to this village; I am also a human being. Should I not wear pants-shirt pressed? I also give money. You include us in everything like getting the village feast money. Why should you not allow us to get the service of the barber and the dhobi?” I responded. They were angry and said to me, “That is not possible. We have kept him for our need. You are speaking too much. If you speak like this you will get beatings. Be careful and run away”. I started to retrieve a few steps as I sensed that they would beat me. My son, my brother Muniasamy, my mother and father, my grandfather, all of us went there. I asked just those few words. Immediately they started beating me up. They caught hold of me and started beating. They also beat up my son and pushed him into the drainage. They beat up my grandfather, my father, my mother. I came running home; they chased me up to my home and immediately the police came”.

This is what happened as the victim himself narrated it.

A few days later Evidence, an NGO based in Madurai, sent a fact-finding team to the village on 30 August, 2007 and found that there was caste discrimination against Dalits. The NGO filed a case in the Chennai High Court Bench, Madurai stating that there was social ostracism and that overt forms of the practice of untouchability were imposed upon the Dalits of Irunjirai village. The collector of Virudunagar, Ms. Ciji Thomas, was summoned to study the problem and submit a report to the High Court. The collector submitted her report on 25 November 2009 confirming that the practice of untouchability existed in Irunjirai, and that Dalits were not allowed to use the services of the dhobi and barber.

The caste atrocity against the Dalit community in Irunjirai village is a typical example of the assertion of Dalits against unfair distribution of goods and services being legitimised in the name of caste. This often causes social unrest in the Dalit world. As A. K. Lal explains,

“inequality resulting from the legitimization of an unfair distribution of scarce goods and services may cause social unrest and upheavals and even over throw of the system... A threat to the persisting ‘social stock of knowledge’ through an advocacy of new cognitive
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categories and orientations is seen by the forces of the status quo as well as by the harbingers of new ideological moorings. …The new social language equips the aspiring groups of people with new beliefs, values and norms. A powerful conceptual tool is thus created for examining dominance in everyday life in all respects.\(^7\)

In this context, rural India it is characterised by scarcity, lacking the basic social and infrastructure services in healthcare, roads, education and drinking water. One can adduce that underlying much of the caste oppression and resultant atrocities in the rural area is a struggle over access to scarce resources and services which are not distributed equitably or made available to all communities and localities.

As a result of the incident, Mr Gurusamy has brought all his people together and instilled a new dictum that as long as they submit themselves to the mindset of caste supremacy, there would never be liberation for his community. Henceforth he began to speak out and was prepared to pay the price. His assertion forced the court to initiate the study on the ground to see if there was caste practice in the village, which would not otherwise have happened\(^8\). A person who was driven by submissive consciousness gradually understood that he had to assert himself, to show his just anger against his defaulters. His victim consciousness gradually transformed into assertive consciousness as the result of a long and heinous oppression.

The situation was not resolved however by the High Court case, which had little impact on the ground. The dominant caste reacted against the Dalits, seeking to impose an ostracism. This study seeks to unravel both the context out of which the events of 25 August 2007 occurred and their aftermath. However before we enter into these problem, it is worthwhile to have some understanding of consciousness and how it is constructed in and through history, social, economic and political situations.

3 UNDERSTANDING THE IDEA OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The study of consciousness is complex as it embodies many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, biology and physics. Nonetheless it is important to understand the concept of how consciousness plays a crucial role in determining the life, status, orientation and future discourse of a community, either dominant or subordinated.

Our interest is to understand how a subordinated community constructs its consciousness in its process of empowerment. The subordinated community is so weighed down by its subordination, and victim syndrome that its members do not dare nurture a self-consciousness as dignified, self-esteemed beings. Hence the natural and normal condition and mental makeup of a subordinated community is to be gripped by submissive consciousness. The individual and the community need to first and foremost become aware of their difficulty and develop an alternative consciousness so as to address their collective problems and find ways to encounter and engage with the dominant culture and agents of that culture in order to remove all such disabilities.

Before exploring the construction of different layers of consciousness in the particular context of Irunjirai, we need to get a clear idea of consciousness, collective consciousness and collective Dalit consciousness.

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\(^7\) Lal, A. K, 2003, p. 55

\(^8\) Kumudam Reporter, 24 Nov 2009, pp. 22-23
Rene Descartes, the French philosopher also known as the father of modern philosophy, is the first one to speak elaborately on consciousness in the context of mind-body duality. According to him, consciousness is the essence of the mind and any material entity is separable into distinct parts.9 The Danish philosopher and psychologist Jorgensen has discussed consciousness in some detail. He writes about "person-identification" which is identification with another person, and distinguishes between emotive and conative forms. The former refers to the catching effect of emotional states and expressions, and the latter refers to situations where persons act together to reach the same goal10. According to Lycan, “consciousness has to do with the internal or subjective character of experience, paradigmatically sense experience. It is also conceptual problem, not merely an empirical one”11.

The Study Week of Vatican Academy of Science gives a more amenable definition as, "‘consciousness’ intends that it strictly designates the psycho physiological concept of perceptual capacity, of awareness of perception, and the ability to act and react accordingly.”12

Susan J. Blackmore comes very close to our purpose as she connects the individual and the experience. She speaks of the experience which is conscious and at the same time personal and the external/physical world out there which gives rise to the experience13. According to Ornstein, “it is in consciousness that restructuring lies. Consciousness comes in late. Consciousness is involved when deliberate, rather than automatic, control or intervention is needed”14.

Karl Marx looks at consciousness as the production of social relations in the economic, social and political realms which determine the construction of consciousness,

“In the social production of their existence, people inevitably enter into definite relations… The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of a society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness”15.

From the above definitions, some of the salient characteristics of consciousness are worth deriving:

• Consciousness is a constructed reality formed out of human experience in the social world and cultural symbols with which each person engages in their life-world. It is a brain process and very much linked in association/disassociation with the functioning of the society in terms of social relations.

• Constructing consciousness is an ongoing process. It is an activity of perception, reflection and evaluation. It is also the awareness of that perception and the ability to act or react.

15 K. Marx “Preface” A Contribution to the critique of political economy.
• In the usual sense, it is the social existence that determines the consciousness of people, but as far as the subordinated people like Dalits are concerned, it is the consciousness of the people of their subordinated conditions that determines their existence. It is a kind of intense and continuous sensibility of resistance against their subjugated status that conditions their everyday life.

From the above descriptions the following understanding may be derived.
• Consciousness is a mental process of an experience or symbol or social construct (social norms, social values, way of behaviour) to understand, interpret and evaluate from the way an ego or collective ego would like to act or react upon events, practices and social ethos

3.1 Collective Consciousness

Kathy Oddonino, proponent of spiritual philosophy speaks at length on collective consciousness. According to her,

“Our collective consciousness is a reflection of who we are as a unified soul consciousness on earth. The largest or the most massive collective consciousness on earth has the power of motion to influence our soul toward evolution or devolution. Because of the power of our thought, emotions and feelings within our collective consciousness, we determine the physical experience of the masses. Our culture reflects the quality of social and intellectual language within the human mind that is responsible for transmitting behaviours, patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human endeavour and thought that characterise the community experience. The quality of our culture as collective consciousness creates our way of living as human beings and the quality of culture is then transmitted from one generation to another generation”.

She further reflects that our collective consciousness is created from the thought and emotional energy that we all share. The energy streams of our collective consciousness are as universal rivers of connected energy that are focused upon a single perception of thought and emotion, giving these rivers of energy the strength to change beliefs and behaviours within us, society, and the world.

Interestingly she also reflects upon the collective consciousness of the dominant self. She understands the dynamics that operate in the dominant self and bring about the status quo, establishment of which becomes the social ethos of a hierarchical society. According to her,

“we fear change because we are attached to our beliefs and our collective consciousness. Our beliefs have allowed us to repetitiously follow our perception of reality for billions of years. Our fear of change is also our ego fear of being wrong, which we perceive as our failure. These accumulated ego fears allow us to prefer ignorance over knowledge because if we maintain our ignorance as collective consciousness, no one will see that we have been ‘wrong’ and judge us as failure. In our ego-focused closed mind it is better to continue our repetitious thought beliefs rather than open our mind to new knowledge and understanding. Blind faith is our chaos of ignorance and it is the very foundation of the collective consciousness of inequality that permeates earth”.

18 op cit, pp. 423-424
19 op cit, p. 429.
In other words, collective consciousness as she understands is created over years, without being questioned, without being seen, without its merits or demerits being tested, but being totally accepted.

3.2 Collective Dalit Consciousness

A. K. Lal speaks clearly of the different layers of consciousness with reference to Dalit existence and experience,

“In the context of Dalits, consciousness is different from what one can see in the case of the scheduled Castes and Harijans. Consciousness is now being projected as a main instrument of assertion of the rights of the oppressed people through cultural objects and activities. The question is not simply bread and butter for the Scheduled Castes, izzat (social honour), “life-style” or “social standings” or “life chances” have become serious concerns of the Dalits. They may be referred to as a “consciousness community”. ….What is important to note is that a new “field of cultural production”, “symbolic goods”, “mental structures”; in other words what Bourdieu calls, “symbolic power”, “symbolic capital” and “cultural capital” are being created by the Dalits to enhance their economic and political empowerment” 20.

Bourdieu’s anthropological work was dominated by an analysis of the mechanisms of reproduction of social hierarchies. In opposition to Marxist analyses, Bourdieu criticised the primacy given to the economic factors, and stressed that the capacity of social actors to actively impose upon and engage with their cultural productions and symbolic systems plays an essential role in the reproduction of social structures of domination..

In the same line as A. K. Lal, I have enumerated, in one of my previous studies, three types/layers of consciousness that one can observe in the Dalit self and life world. They are:

- Untouchable Consciousness,
- Scheduled Caste (SC) Consciousness
- Dalit consciousness.

Untouchable Consciousness is otherwise known as Submissive Consciousness. In this state, Dalits have inherited a deep seated self hatred. To be, for them, is to be the other, because there is nothing worthwhile in the untouchable. Here the dominant caste person is personified as the saviour, the liberator of Dalits. Whatever the dominant caste person does is right. It is strongly driven by ‘I am no good; the dominant caste person is entirely good’ feelings.

The second type of consciousness is SC Consciousness. Here the state has replaced the dominant caste person as the saviour of Dalits. It is the state which has the key to Dalit liberation with the feeling that ‘I have to get from the state as much as possible.’ A welfare state is the ideal state which announces scores of benefits for Dalits. A Dalit in this mindset is still driven by Submissive Consciousness. It may elevate some Dalits to middle class status, but nothing changes his mind. His education, economic mobility and even intellectual capacity is completely useless in terms of enhancing his self esteem and self-image.

The third type is called Dalit Consciousness. People with Dalit Consciousness are those who develop critical consciousness and have a drive for liberation. They are the people who affirm their own self-dignity and fight for the dignity for the community. It also gives them the

confirmation that they are like anybody else and will fight if anything unjust is inflicted upon their people.

3.3 Prison cell called “Irunjirai”

I invite you all to look at the Irunjirai incident from the point of the above analysis of construction of Dalit consciousness.

Irunjirai is a medium size village about 7 kilometres from the main road. Though there is a road leading to this village from Narikudi, a small neighbouring town, the bus service to the village is very infrequent. As a result, people find it very difficult to move around freely. If they want to get their day-to-day needs fulfilled in the town they have to spend the whole day. Otherwise people have to be satisfied with the few provisional stores which supply their basic needs.

This is much more burdensome for Dalits as they are forbidden to use any of the services. They are treated as aliens in their own village – in the provisional stores, in the milk booth, and in other public places whenever the dominant caste people want to punish them by denying their entry into these places. Access to community services like washing and ironing, and hairdressing are permanently denied for Dalits. Hence they have to go to the neighbouring “caste blind” towns to reach these services.

Irunjirai is a typical multi-caste villages in Tamil Nadu, with specific physical separation of one caste from another and defined specific social functions both in day to day life and during the village festivals. Nobody who breaks this ‘caste safety vault’ or crosses the ‘caste border’ is tolerated.

Although there are currently around 30 Pallar families, in the past there were about 60. Many left the village to neighbouring urban centres, both to escape the caste atrocities and in search of better job and education for their children.

The two majority castes are Konars and Servai. These communities wield a lot of power and influence and decide many things in the village. They were the people who were responsible for much of the imposition of ostracism according to Gurusamy.

4 THE PROBLEM OF BEING DALIT – IDENTITY FORMATION

Dalit identity has always been very problematic as Dalits are caught between their own drive to be identified as dignified human beings and the dominant caste people’s fear to see them as dignified and their need instead to configure Dalits as sub-human. Gurusamy shared with me a telling example about his name. Dominant caste people never used to call him Gurusamy because his name contains “Samy” meaning “God”, but only as “runner” since he was the mail man. Likewise they would not call his mother “Solaianmal” since part of her name contains “Ammal” meaning “mother”. She was called only as “Solai”. Dominant caste discourse does not credit any respect or reverence to Dalits. That would be against the dominant caste’s interest and superiority complex. According to them Dalit identity is one of a depersonalised mass of physical and biological matter.

21 Selvaraj Arulnathan, 2010, pp. 57-59
Subjectively speaking, identity is something that one constructs for oneself. It is not that others say what I am but what I say about I am and more particularly what I want others to say about me that is my identity. This is what Cosimo Zene articulates in the following words, “I realized that they were projecting a vision of themselves in the future, not just as they were seen by others but most of all as they “wanted to be” seen. I was re-reading Heidegger at that point and had in front of me the clearest example of the ‘futurity of being’”.

Hence identity is continuously projecting oneself to one’s future vision, future goal and future identification with one’s life world. Fernando Franco considers that, “Identity formation is a universal and historical process, which is based on the experience about oneself and the experience in relation to others. This experience does not take place in a vacuum but in the existing socio-economic, political and cultural milieu. It can thus be stated that identity formation is an interactional process”.

He again says that it is both symbolic-ideological and material productive, “there are two interrelated components in this process of identity formation. The first one is the ideological-symbolic component. This refers to the system of beliefs and practices which flow from the understanding of the position of oneself and one’s own group vis-à-vis others. This set of beliefs and its various cultural expressions provide the group with a shared meaning and understanding about who they are and what their role is in a given social context. The second is the material productive component, which refers to the material, ecological and economic conditions shaping and determining the primary livelihood activities of the group and its productive relations with others. In other words, it includes the factors which determine the economic life of the group and consequently the relationships its members enter into with each other and with other groups in the course of earning their livelihood”.

In the same direction Prakash Louis clarifies that “the identity of the Dalits was truly formed in relation to the dominant castes”. But it has not altered the ground reality very much as the dominant castes use all their force and means to retain the status quo. They even go one step further to intimidate the Dalits by physical assault to make sure that social control is always in the hands of the dominant caste people. What happened in Irunjirai is just to keep up the age old social order intact. This is what Praksh Louis again confirms, “One of the most commonly employed methods by the upper castes to terrorize the Dalits is to physically assault them. The upper castes are well aware of the fact that the Dalits do not dare to complain about the attack. Even if they did, the administrative machinery will not take notice of it”.

It is exactly what happened and is happening in the event. To this day, Dalits have not been rendered justice. Gurusamy and other elders of the village said that there was not any concrete solution to their problem.

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24 ibid
26 op cit, p. 163
Dalit consciousness was constructed in this village as a result of the desire of the Dalits to change the social discourse between the dominant caste people and the anti-caste people (Dalits). This brought forth all the dimensions of caste relations and the impact of Dalit claims of their unique but equal identity not as a member of any caste, but a member of the human family. This is very objectionable to those people who base their identity on caste. Dalits of Irunjirai in general and Gurusamy in particular exercised their liberty as human beings in their legitimate aspiration to have what others have and to use what others have access to, like the specialised services such as washing and hairdressing. These were not looked at as a legitimate human need but as an excess of freedom of the un-free people and so objectionable. For the dominant caste person, caste, oppression, inequality, is all part of our culture. Prof. Ramiah pictures the Indian psyche in contrast to the western psyche thus;

“There is a different type of national conscience operating between the western world and India. When something against human rights and human dignity happens in the west it becomes a big problem. But it is not at all a problem here; it becomes part of our culture. It is not at all an issue. The dominant discourse made it simply a culture. Even untouchability also has become part of our culture. They made it a cultural element. That a dalit should not wear slippers when he/she walks in the public street is considered as a cultural practice here” 28.

Dalit aspirations to economic and social mobility as the new syntax of Dalit assertion and empowerment is often looked at as a threat to social stability by the dominant caste forces. This sudden spur for equality and legitimacy and the claim for equal access to services in the village are very objectionable to the caste identity. Construction of Dalit consciousness usually happens in such situations of conflict, hostility and tension. The outcome depends upon many elements and the level of Dalit consciousness.

### CONTEXT: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RELATIONS

Several factors prepared the ground for the event of 25 August 2007, which was only the last straw on the camel’s back. It brought to the fore the full blown ideological currents of caste and Dalit social and cultural discourse. However symptoms of Dalit consciousness had been very much present in Irunjirai for many years, and this had created tension between the Dalits and the dominant caste community.

The Dalits of Irunjirai village were becoming increasingly aware of their rights and were claiming social space in the public domain to become independent from the dominant caste people. They had been forced to do the traditional service jobs like digging the burial ground for the dead in the village, to run on errands for caste people on important occasions, or to hold the light in the village festivals. The Dalits of the village, especially the Pallars, were growing restless about these practices. People like Gurusamy were waiting for an occasion to challenge the caste superiority of the people29.

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27 Interview, Gurusamy and Marimuthu.
28 Interview, Prof. Ramiah.
29 Interview, Prof. Ramiah.
5.1 Caste discourse vs. Dalit discourse: a contestation

Dalits were initiating a new process of social equality not only by demanding equal rights, but also by withdrawing from those occasions and places where caste discrimination is overtly practiced. The first step towards challenging caste based treatment was that Dalits no longer accepted some of the practices like the dual tumbler in the tea shops. Most of them stopped going to the public tea shops for drinking tea. Secondly, their dwindling number by way of migration to neighbouring towns and cities to escape caste discrimination and enter into social and economic progress made a great challenge to the caste supremacy of the dominant caste people. Both these phenomena posed a great challenge to the dominant caste pride.

Dalits wanted to completely come out of these relations of caste superiority of the dominant caste people and embark upon new mode of social relations by way of empowering themselves politically and otherwise. This gradually made the dominant caste people become inimical towards Dalits.

5.2 Challenging the dominant political discourse

In the wake of the new felt Dalit identity, entrenched in equality and self-dignity, Dalits wanted to realign themselves politically and economically. The first step towards this is to form their own political faction. They wanted to make use of the political space to reclaim other public domains. The customary practice had been that the Dalits would vote for any party that the dominant caste people pointed out to them. But in the last few years, Dalits did not want to abide by the customary rule of the village as they also wanted to take independent decisions. As a result, in the last Assembly election, Dalits galvanised other small and lower caste communities like the Asaries and Pujaries and supported the new DMDK party (Vijayakanth) defying the expectations of the caste people. This infuriated the dominant communities in the village and they were looking for a chance to ‘teach a lesson’ to the Dalits.

The dominant caste community is supports the DMK party as many of the people in the village are relatives of Thangam Thennarasu, the MLA and Minister for Education. The actions of the Dalits infuriated the dominant discourse and they saw this as the clear sign of deviating from caste control and authority. The Pallars took lead in galvanizing other subordinated communities like Paraiars, Nadars, Asaries, Pujaris, Arunthathiars, etc. This greatly angered the dominant caste people and they were expecting a chance to take revenge upon the Pallars.

5.3 Educational Background

Education plays a crucial role in constructing social consciousness among the Dalits. Though there is no good education in the village, Gurusamy managed to study up to Class X, and this achievement played a very important role in the whole episode. He was appointed as the postman in the village. This has made him think about the condition of his people and felt that he should not allow this to continue.

Though the agrarian Shudra community did not feel the importance of the formal education, Gurusamy places great stress upon the need for it. He looks at education as a positive thing and questions the established social structure and attempts to change the situation. According to him, Dalit children should study at least up to class X.

The whole caste atrocity against Dalits in the village is the effect of his attempt to change the social stereotyping that Dalits should not use the services rendered to other dominant castes. His access to education, his work as the postman in the village, his social intercourse with
people outside the village and in the neighbouring towns, and his change of occupation from the usual agricultural and caste based works, all gave him the courage to demand equal rights and space to those accorded to any dominant caste person in the village.

In the words that all the people I interviewed for my thesis stressed, ‘education is the master key’ to Dalit mobility and constructing assertive consciousness.

5.4 Issues involved

The Irunjirai case is a good example to bring to light the many issues that are involved in caste violence. It illustrates a full blown ‘casteist’ society, far from the imagination of constitution based social order. In this we have serious issues which cry for resolution.

5.4.1 “Iyya, I also belong to this village; I am also a human being”

“The question of ‘humanity’ seems to take the centre stage is the struggle of marginalized communities for their empowerment, even in Gramscian terms, when summing up all other concerns that affect the life of Dalits. This is the issue taken up by Baratta in his reflection on the subaltern when, combining Gramscian enquiry with a Heideggerian slant on the “sense of being,” he asks, “what is a human being?” (Baratta 2004, 128). If Dalits in South Asia experience a negation of their being as “humans”/not just as a social practice but from an ontological perspective (“the ontological hurt endured by untouchables,” as Gheeta [2009, 107] puts it), then we must conclude that they have been placed at the lowest degree of subalternity. Furthermore if, once they have reached the far end of “nonbeing,” they continue to tell us, “I am a human being, too,” then it becomes a duty for the integral historian to retrace their journey, perhaps together with them, so as to discover the “traces of resistance” that their history offers”30.

This is the sum and substance of the cry of Gurusamy towards the dominant caste leaders arrayed in the kaap (village council) panchayat. His assertion that “I am also a human being belonging to the same village” is the crux of the issue. He puts two established ontological positions of the caste discourse into question: that “I belong to the same village” and that “I am also a human being”. First of all, for the dominant caste people, the Dalit hamlet “cherry” is not part of the village and so he does not belong to the village. Secondly, he is not a human being according to the dominant caste standards. A Dalit is less than an animal with some rational power, no more. Hence he has no right to the services of the barber and the dhobi. His claim, according to them, would demolish all their faith in the graded social structure and all the advantages they have been enjoying so long as a result of belonging to dominant castes. This is why his act was so offensive to them. That is why they beat him up and insulted him, his family and the entire Dalit community.

This is the process of social exclusion. According to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, social exclusion means,

“the institutionalized attempt to keep out a segment of the population from social order. It is a way of segregating a group of people from the social, political, economic and cultural domains of social life. Segregation is an institutionalised form of social distancing expressed in physical separation. It signifies the convergence of physical and social space

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and is to be distinguished from other social forms which also structure social distance in spatial terms.”

Prakash Louis puts the same idea in the same line as,

“the form of social exclusion we are dealing basically denotes an uncompromising framework of social stratification.”

He again argues that,

“social positioning of a person has a direct bearing upon the economic wellbeing of that person… the upper caste enjoyed all the privileges while the lower castes were burdened with responsibilities.”

Cosimo Zene speaks of the boundaries between groups which defines social exclusion. According to him social exclusion,

“in principle defines boundaries between groups, locates the different groups in a hierarchy and regulates and guides their interaction. There are also strict injunctions against those who do not adhere to those laws. The punishment is stricter and more severe as one goes down the caste ladder.”

We can understand from Zene’s language how the rules have been strict and what would be the result if one violates the rule. Gurusamy case has been a live illustration of all that is said in the caste relationship between the Dalits and the caste people. Zene further points out the fact that,

“in South Asia today, Dalits represent the quintessence of this reality, not only from an economic and social point of view, but also from an ontological perspective, touching the order of being and of human personhood. Our main concern is that at the basis of their subalternity there lies an ideology defining them as less than human, which is then translated and ramified in very concrete terms in the daily life of Dalits. For them subalternity becomes a spatial/territorial, economic, social, educational, and, above all, religious/ontological segregation.”

5.4.2 Multiple suffering as against judicial justice

Guruswamy narrates the story after his encounter with the village council which instead of establishing justice to him and his family, brought only wrath to his family and the whole Dalit community:

“The police asked me to go to the station to lodge a complaint. Before I could go there more than fifty people from their group went and through Periasamy they lodged complaint against me. I did not want to go to Narikudi as they would beat me there also. Hence I went to DSP office in Thiruchuzhi and gave the statement about 7 pm and then I went to the hospital and got admitted. Once they came to know that I gave the statement, they immediately imposed a village order (ooru kattupadu) against our people. They instructed all the shop owners not to give us anything until and unless I withdrew the cases. They did not give anything, not even to the small kids for four months. We

33 op cit, p.167.
35 op cit, p. 88
went and complained to the DSP, SP, Collector, but nobody took any action. Then only we went to the high court and sued a PIL. Only after that the collector came and demanded the shop owners to give us ration from the shops; but they did not allow us to draw water from the wells for irrigation till today.

“Then we filed FIR after many protests. We had four meetings. We had to come through their streets only after the meeting. Once they caught hold of us and beat up thoroughly and denied the way to come into the village through that road. Our people filed four cases against them for which nobody was even called for interrogation till now. But for the case they complained against me, I had to go to the court for the last three years and finally acquitted only recently. On the contrary two of the accused from their side have even gone abroad without any problem.”

Thus our suffering and oppression is multi-pronged.

6 IMPACT

6.1 No social intercourse with Pallars

After the incident and the filing of the case a village order (oor kattupadu) was given, imposing social and economic sanctions upon the Pallar community. Accordingly, they were not allowed to buy, sell, and or transact anything with the rest of the village. Nobody would employ them in their fields for agricultural work; nobody would call them for any other work like masonry, small errands, or tasks at village festivals. Nor could there be any social and cultural intercourse whatsoever. According to Gurusamy,

“the collector came and ordered to give us ration. But they still continue to discriminate us and even today use double glass system in the tea shops. We again petitioned to the collector and took this matter to her notice about the practice of double glass, denial of the service of barber, dhobi, etc. She came and again asked them to treat us equally. Now if we go to these shops they will give us tea in the plastic tumbler. There is not much change; they don’t relate with us”.

6.2 Other Dalit communities were made to distance themselves by intimidation

The other Dalit communities were also prevented from having any social contact with Pallar community. When I asked the people if other Dalit communities in the village came in support of them, their answer was,

“no, sir, because they are all slaves to the dominant caste people; they are afraid of the caste people; because they don’t have anything except the house they have. They have no other source like fields”36.

The poverty and ignorance of Dalits is not only used to keep them in their servitude, more often than not are they used to keep Dalits themselves apart from one another.

6.3 The role of NGOs

When I asked about the role of NGOs only two civil society organisations seemed to have gone there. Thiagi Immanuel Peravai and Evidence; the former a social movement and the

36 Interview, village elders of Dalits in Irunjirai.
latter an NGO. This is the version the people gave about the NGOs involvement in the case. According to them,

“Evidence came here. They came just for formality. They did not do anything. They would just come, take some photos and then would leave. They did not do anything for us.”

I contacted Evidence and spoke to Mr Kathir, the director of Evidence, about his involvement. His attitude is one of scepticism, considering that the people are demanding too much and also that there is no cooperation among them. According to Kathir,

“when there are activities and projects being done, they don’t inform the NGO; but when there is problem they approach Evidence for help. They also look at Evidence as the NGO of Pariahs and not as Dalit NGO. Evidence has spent more than one lakh rupees. The success is that the government officials like the District collector accepted the practice of caste system in the village and the shops that practices untouchability has been abolished.”

When I was talking to one of the staff there his opinion is this:

“What Mr Kathir says is very important. The Pallar community wants the practice of caste system and the existence of people like barber, washer men which is also the expression of caste system.”

He is very sceptical about the Pallar community there.

7 DEMANDS OF THE DALITS FOR THEIR FUTURE

Frustration and hopelessness seem to looming large for the Dalit people in Irunjirai as nothing noteworthy has taken place even after three years. These were the sentiments they expressed initially. Gurusamy himself was in a state of despair when he said,

“I don’t know what to do, sir. I even feel at times to pack up things and leave the village.”

But after a while, he took courage and spoke boldly. When I asked about the future, as to what future action he had decided, he immediately spoke out and said,

“If we have some money, we would take up these cases again and force the court to call for hearing. If these people go at least for two hearings, they will have some fear and come to us for compromise. Otherwise they will be the same; because I have gone for all the hearings without any fail and finally was relieved from the cases. If the court does the same thing for them also, they will come down and apologise for what they did. They also have no money. They have also spent a lot of money. They have auctioned the common tank in the village and spent the money in advance. So if only these cases are taken, there will be big changes here.”

This is the sort of faith and courage that many of the Pallars have against all odds.

There is another dimension which surprised me, which was his confidence in the state machinery. He believes that only the state intervention can really bring about change in the social set up. When I asked him, “Do you think, if the state decides, things will change?” his answer was a very strong yes. He said, “Yes, of course”. But after a while, he seemed to be more pragmatic saying that he did not expect great things from the state. To the question, “Why do you place so much trust on the state, they are also the same dominant caste people?” he answered,
“We still hope that they can do. We don’t expect very big things; we only think that they will get us a bore well; get some of our rights; that is all. Even that they don’t do; they also cheat us”.

Their expectation and experience don’t match.

From the above conversation, it appears that the Dalits of Irunjirai have expectations for their future life at two levels: one is at the identity level as people with equal rights and equal opportunities. They want equal rights in the village in accessing public space and public services which are accorded to other communities. However they also look at their life at the practical economic level. They want the state to fulfil its long pending dues to the people, including housing in the government pattas (land plots) which they had been promised years before. They also want the state to provide them with a pump set motor so that their irrigation can be taken care of.

As Cosimo Zene puts it,

“during the past few years a major change has been taking place: the emphasis seems to have shifted from Dalits’ mere awareness of their “oppression” toward the mobilisation of consciousness as a “transforming agent” of subalternity, and hence a new path taking them from “desperate cries” to liberating action.”

8 CONCLUSION

From the Irunjirai incident, it appears that construction of Dalit consciousness is the need of the hour for the Dalits to establish their Dalit identity as empowering collective self. It has also given new dimensions to Dalit discourse. The incident has developed some ideological grounds on which Dalit activism can be taken up for forward thinking. It has problematised the given. It has questioned the space for Dalits defined and determined by others. People like Gurusamy contested the dominant discourse as having monopoly over the Dalit’s domain. As a result, Dalit suffering has been accelerated to disproportionate heights, but at the same time injustice to Dalits has been exposed. Usually Dalits when threatened and intimidated, withdraw to safer zones and lapse into their wailing mode. But in this case the Dalits of Irunjirai, with the help of the NGO Evidence, have highlighted the injustice meted out to them and demanded justice from the law. This has in turn exposed the government machinery, judicial impasse and the apathy of the dominant caste world. Thus the Irunjirai caste atrocity is a challenge to all those Dalits, movements and community organisations to look at it and assert their public domain. In this process, it is very important that civil society organisations partner with other like minded groups and institutions to foster this task.

To conclude, the real concern of the Dalits in general and the Dalits in Irunchirai in particular is the shift from social awakening to social empowerment. This is the way the marginalised community will become self-sustainable. This is possible in the civil society through the intervention of the civil society activism and also the intervention of the state as the state apparatuses to engineer public awakening and public interest. Today there needs to be more focus on social sustainability than on social awakening.

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