Use of a discourse of empowerment in developing Dalit agency:
A study of the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF) and Dalit development in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT
This study looks at how the discourse of Dalit empowerment that was developed by AICUF empowered the Dalit youth in Tamil Nadu. In doing so, the study explores the relationship between discourse and action of empowerment. Informed by the theories of Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek, the study first makes an attempt to analyse the ways in which AICUF’s discourses of empowerment helped the Dalit youth come out of disempowering alienation that they had internalised in their childhood days. Second, the study moves on to understand the ways by which the Dalit youth, who were ‘empowered’ by the AICUF discourses, replicated the same process of empowerment in their life after their time at AICUF. In a larger sense, this study draws links between Christian activism and Dalit empowerment.

INTRODUCTION
This study looks at the ways by which All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF) contributed to empowerment of Dalits, particularly the Dalit youth. In doing so, it discusses the kind of discourses that AICUF constructed and how they are disseminated in and through the training programmes, workshops, and exposure programmes organised by AICUF. Second, it makes an attempt to study the ways in which the individual members of AICUF in Tamil Nadu replicate their learning in their own lives after leaving AICUF. The study uses the term Aicufers for these individual members, which is the name they use themselves. In general, the paper will try to gain some idea about the contribution AICUF made to Christian activism, which in turn contributed to Dalit empowerment and development.

This paper will begin with a brief history of AICUF. From there it will move on to present the theoretical framework that informs this study. Then the paper looks at the kind of discourse that AICUF has constructed from the beginning. More specially, it focuses more on discursive formulations used to empower Dalit youth in the AICUF movement, emphasising the impact that the discourse of Dalit empowerment on the lives of Dalit youth in Tamil Nadu, mainly Aicufers, and how they implement what they learnt in their lives after their course of studies. Put sharply, the paper will aim to look at the ways in which the discourses of Dalit empowerment formulated by AICUF are realised in actions.
2 ON SOURCES OF DATA

The study focused only on the Aicufers who were trained, and the advisors and other resource persons who trained them, at the National Secretariat in Chennai. Most of the field work was done at Loyola College. Before starting interviews, the researcher spent two-months at AICUF documentation centre in Chennai studying AICUF’s own archives on their programmes and published articles and booklets on Dalit empowerment. Of all the documents the book Paradigm Growth,¹ which records the history of AICUF from 1924 until 2009, helped as a guide to search for material that threw light different dimensions of the discourse of empowerment formulated by AICUF.

Altogether 284 people were interviewed, including both previous and present Aicufers. An in-depth interview with seven AICUF advisors was conducted. Twenty-four non-Aicufers (both students and faculty) were asked to comment on AICUF’s Dalit activism. Everyone interviewed was asked three questions:

a) What is the discourse of Dalit empowerment by AICUF?
b) How did the Aicufers get empowered by the discourse?
c) What are the ways by which they replicated their learning in their personal lives after they left AICUF?

These questions were administered first to three groups: AICUF advisors/leaders, past Aicufers, and the present Aicufers. The first group helped to formulate discourses of Dalit empowerment. From this we learnt the type of discourses they as leaders/advisors helped to evolve during the time in AICUF and how they instilled this in the minds of Aicufers. Speaking with the past Aicufers has been very helpful for our understanding the ways in which the Aicufers replicated their learning from AICUF in their own lives.

The documents in AICUF Documentation Centre, Chennai, were helpful, particularly issues of Rally magazine and AICUF’s annual reports. The material helped gaining a grasp of the evolution of the AICUF discourse of Dalit empowerment. In all the sources, I focused on the type of discourse of Dalit empowerment that AICUF constructed and disseminated, what impact the discourse had on the Aicufer’s lives in terms of empowering them, and how the Aicufers transferred their learning to other Dalits after they left AICUF.

3 SEE, JUDGE, ACT: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AICUF²

3.1 1920s-1950s: founding and growth

AICUF started as a small group of students that was interested in being socially active. Jesuit priests provided guidance to the group. In a sense it is difficult to locate an individual founder – the youth wished to develop their human agency, and the Jesuit priests were just advisors. What started as a small group of socially concerned students became an influential youth movement that shaped the identity of many students. Delving deep into the trajectories of AICUF history it is apparent that the fundamental reasons for this lie in the ways in which the movement responded to social situations. From the beginning of AICUF, the members were guided to look at reality with a critical eye and make an informed decision leading to action. Nicholas, a senior ex-Aicufer, said that it was in AICUF he learnt to look reality very

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differently, and to respond to it. Started as a Catholic organisation, AICUF has now become a secular organisation. Yet the core of AICUF remained as Catholic in its adherence to values and its style of functioning.

The first avatar of AICUF was the Catholic Young Men Guild (CYMG). In early 1920s the Catholic church sought to start a catholic movement in promoting the idea of Catholic action, and as a result many association and clubs were formed. In this context, the CYMG was initiated as an association specifically for male university students. It was started by a group of students in 1924 at St. Joseph’s College in Trichy with the guidance of Fr. P. Carty SJ. The Guild a motto of ‘doing the truth in charity’ and had the following principal aims:

- the spirit of Christian Brotherhood
- the informed catholic mind
- the application of catholic principles to social problems.

The CYMG functioned mainly through study clubs as the means to turn the Guild’s aims in reality. A student magazine, originally called the King’s Rally, later the Rally, was also part of the Guild from its inception.

CYMG then merged with the Malabar Catholic Youth League (MCYL) which had been founded by Fr. Honore SJ in 1915. The merged organisation was renamed as the Catholic Young Men Federation (CYMF).

The 30s in India was a time of solidarity with the civil disobedience movement, particularly the famous Dandi March in which students, youth, peasants and workers took part. The papal encyclical Quadragesimo Anno was issued, marking the 40th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum. Quadragesimo Anno emphasised the need to reconstruct the social order and inspired a new generation of Catholic students in the universities to work for the new social order. Throughout the decade CYMF grew far and wide in the southern part of India. In 1937 it was re-christened as the South Indian Catholic University Federation (SICUF) and the new federation joined the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) which later became part of Pax Romana.

In the 40’s, new challenges emerged in the form of wars, fascism, and Nazism. At the end of the war there was a great determination to build a new world arising from the suffering. Unions and associations were started, Indian universities woke up and SICUF stood tall and great, making a significant impact on the lives of thousands of Catholic students. In 1944-46 the Catholic Students’ Union and Newman Association were formed. The former was exclusively for university students and the latter was open to catholic graduates, professionals and intelligentsia. At the close of the decade, in 1949, SICUF became a national level student movement, renamed the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF). AICUF was recognised by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) and continued to be affiliated to the IMCS. It is as AICUF that the movement continues today, active in 14 states.

The movement continued to grow. In 1955 the National Secretariat of AICUF was shifted from Trichy to Madras in 1955 and a formal constitution was adopted.

Through these decades from AICUF’s birth the experience that students had in AICUF of exposure to social reality had gradually changed the focus of the movement itself from spirituality to social development. The character of AICUF went through a metamorphosis from pious Catholic ideation and action to a real sense of catholic that is universal. As AICUF reached the close of the 50s, its activities were directed towards the welfare of the state.

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3.2 1960s-1970s: from development to liberation

In the 60s and 70s the orientation of AICUF shifted from ‘development’ to a ‘liberation’ approach – the programme changed from mere ‘social service’ to ‘social action’. Over these decades the movement ‘grew up’ by allowing itself to be open to what happened in the realms of politics in India and beyond. AICUF’s motto was changed to:

“We are born into an unjust society and we are determined not to leave it as we have found it”

In the 60s the Second Vatican Council took place. This changed everything. Reading the documents from the Council, the students and others started to question the church. The emergence of Liberation Theology in Latin America was a great support to the Aicufers. The French students’ demonstrations were also influential. In India the decade saw many changes including the emergence of the Communist Party in West Bengal and Kerala and the response of Naxalite-Maoist parties, student revolution in Assam and change in the Gujarat Government.

While in the fifties and early sixties students worked in AICUF with enormous enthusiasm along the line of socialist policies of Nehru, the late sixties marked a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration at the ‘achievement of the Government’. The economic reforms and reconstruction of the country was not entirely successful. Mass poverty was on the increase and the gap between the rich and the poor was widening at an alarming pace. AICUF wanted to respond to the situation by creating a new awareness among the students, and thus witnessed a remarkable change in the texture and the fabric of the movement from ‘development’ to ‘liberation’.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, which talks about the plight of oppressed people in the world and their liberation, was published at the end of the decade and was hugely influential. Aicufers made use of the book in mobilising students to work for the welfare of the downtrodden. In all AICUF programmes, such as summer camps, village visits, summer programmes, conferences and workshops, the Aicufers preached using this book.

In the 1970s AICUF concentrated on development issues and mobilised people to work for social causes, helping the poor. AICUF students were trained to work for the poor and needy. If there is a fight or strike or protest you can find AICUF students fighting for the deserving, whether it is a natural or man-made hazard. The emphasis was on ‘village reconstruction’. In 1970 Fr Claud SJ initiated ‘Project Know India’ through which every AICUF unit was encouraged to adopt one village and support its development. Aicufers were taken to villages for exposure visits. Active involvement in the villages changed the lives of many students, and it was in 1971 that the ‘Poonamallee Declaration’ was made that “We are born into an unjust society and we are determined not to leave it as we have found it”.

In 1971, the particular case of caste conflict in Udiyathoor village, Thiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu, exposed many Aicufers to Dalit issues. They realised that in a situation of conflict Dalits could become conscious of their marginalised identity. The incident in fact gave enormous popularity to the Dalit youth and more sharply this gave certain respect to Dalits of the area. This also led many Dalit youth from Villupuram and Chengalpattu area to join AICUF.

AICUF at this time became a pillar supporting the establishment of NGOs in many areas, including:

• Rural Education And Action For Liberation (REAL) in Dindigul
• Peoples Watch in Madurai, led by Henry Tiphagne
• Human Rights Advocacy and Research Foundation (HRF) in Chennai, led by Ossie Fernandes;
• Rural Education for Development Society (REDS) in Coimbatore, led by Jyothi and M.C. Raj
• Dalit Land Rights Federation in Villipuram, led by C Nicholas
• Society for Community Organisation (SOCO) Trust in Madurai
• CEDA Trust in Dindugul, led by V. Anthonysamy
• Peace Trust, led by J. Paul Baskar

REAL in Dindugul district is an excellent example and the ‘mother’ NGO that inspired the birth of so many NGOs set up in different districts. Many of these NGOs were established by ex-Aicufers, and the NGOs from REAL branched to various areas of society.

The 70s for AICUF were a time when Aicufers became visibly a group of change makers. AICUF was revolutionary in its outlook and its discourse moved very sharply in the direction of Marxist ideology.

3.3 1980s-1990s: subalternity and Dalit empowerment

In the 80s and 90s AICUF shifted its ideology to subalternity, and this paved the way for the movement to focus on Dalit empowerment.

Fr Manu Alphonse, who became an advisor to AICUF in the late 80s, perceives in AICUF dynamics of a twenty-year-cycle through stages of search, orientation, articulation, period of vitality, slow down/meaninglessness, then search and so on. The 70s were a period of vitality. However the 80s were a time of disinterest, when AICUF lost members and the students ceased their active involvement in society.

In order to stem this a AICUF’s third National Convention was held in 1989, with 300 participants. The Convention gave a new thrust to the movement – Fr Manu Alphonse said that AICUF should be “a constantly burning bush.” Students framed a new constitution for the movement and declared the need for a preferential option for the empowerment of Dalits, women and Adivasis, as the most marginalised in society. These became crosscutting issues for AICUF and this was the point at which AICUF first came to focus explicitly on Dalits.

New ways of working on the cross-cutting issues were developed alongside the ongoing AICUF state structures of programmes and activities. For Dalits, this included making a conscious effort to appoint only Dalits as advisors for the state and college units of AICUF. In the training programmes and workshops Dalit youth were given prominent space to articulate their views and every discourse became Dalit-sensitive. Increasingly Dalit art became an official organ. Dalit Aicufers determined the dynamics of the process that AICUF followed, including space for the concerns of Dalit women.

The federal structure was important to AICUF, with a National Council, but strong state autonomy.

Under the advisorship of Fr Manu, AICUF shifted its ideology to subalternity. The link between the discourse of subalternity and of Dalit empowerment is crucial paradigm shift in the history of AICUF. AICUF sought to ensure that all Aicufers, Dalits or non-Dalit alike, should be aware of the atrocities faced by the oppressed and marginalised Dalit communities. To do this, various exposure camps at various locations were organised to educate students about the ground realities of the caste discrimination faced by the Dalits in villages.
The first ever Dalit camp within AICUF was held on 8-14 May 1990 in Chikkavaram village, Andhra Pradesh. This introduced a large number of Dalit students into AICUF and also led to the establishment of three Dalit groups: Dalita Vidyarthi Sabha (Dalit Students Union); Yuva Dalita Shabha (Dalit Youth Union); Stree Shabha (Women’s Union).

At the level of Christian community, caste problems in the Church and the struggle for power sharing among different groups including Dalit Christian movements started to make an impact. Aicufers slowly moved away from the mainstream of church practices. In the larger reality, globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation started to effect changes in every realm of idea and action. Communalism and fundamentalism became powerful tools in the hands of the dominant caste or class elites. AICUF held three major national workshops on communalism, in 1993 in Madras, and in 1994 and 1997 in Bangalore. These aimed at making Aicufers aware of communalism, and showing them how it divides people on the basis of religion and caste. Participants were exposed to the present day reality in which religion is being used as a political weapon in the hands of the rulers. The seminars led to the students to initiate small groups in their campus on ‘Students for Secularism’.

AICUF has always been an organisation that made connections between the past and the present, individual and society. Thus AICUF in Tamil Nadu invited the former Aicufers to come back to tell their stories of what change they saw in their lives and what impact AICUF made in the ways in which they lead their lives at an ex-Aicufers convention on the theme ‘Our Response to the Emerging Scene’. The convention also honoured two veterans of AICUF, Fr. Pierre Ceyrac and Fr. Paul Gueriviere, while AICUF in West Bengal similarly honoured Fr. Gerard Beckers fondly known as Babu.

Five years after the 1989 Convention and new constitution for AICUF, a national consultation was held to reflect on AICUF’s journey so far along its new path. The new AICUF experiences were affirmed and summed up in five major themes:

1) Rediscovering the federation
2) States as primary focal points
3) Birth of local autonomous movements
4) Emergence of new cultural realities – Dalits, Adivasis and women
5) AICUF national centre as supportive powerhouse

A new National Adviser, Fr. K. Amal was appointed in 1996. In that year also, the issue of refugees also emerged as another crosscutting issue.

In 1999 a national convention was held in Chennai on the theme ‘Marching with the Marginalized’, re-emphasising the concerns of Dalit empowerment. This theme became almost the second motto of AICUF then on, and AICUF’s discourse from then on became more emphatically the discourse of Dalit empowerment. The Aicufers were asked to develop a perspective of empowerment that is centered on Dalits. Empowerment of the most oppressed community, the Dalits, would bring total or integral empowerment: through antyodya we could achieve sarvodya. The convention was a remarkable milestone in the history of AICUF, where the Dalits felt that they were for the first time given ‘respectable space’ (mathiyppukuriya idam).

3.4 2000 to the present: Dalit humanism

In the year 2000, on 4-5 March the first AICUF Dalit Commission meeting was held, which developed a vision statement on Dalit empowerment. This led to a Dalit exposure camp from 24-29 May 2000 at Ashadeep, Gujarat. The following year in Tamil Nadu, in Karur, a
similar camp was organised from 1-8 June 2001. Bihar held its first Dalit Convention in October 2004 with a focus on recovering and reconstructing Dalit identity. The discussions persuaded the Dalit students to own their state of Dalitness and feel proud about being a Dalit.

In June 2006 the first AICUF National Dalit Students’ Convention was held. The Aicufers spent four days discussing how to empower themselves by looking at their past and building up a future. Dalit humanism became AICUF’s discourse of Dalit empowerment. The students realised that Dalit was power. The documentary called “SHIT” by Amudhan was shown and had a huge impact on the Dalit students, inspiring them to go out and fight to assert their identity. Sessions looked at empowerment of Dalits education and employment, encouraging the students to enter technical fields and empower themselves by getting employed in companies.

AICUF’s discourse of Dalit empowerment has been sharpened in conventions in 2007, 2008 and 2009. In 2009 the Aicufers talked about “marching towards egalitarian society by breaking barriers and asserting Dalit identity”.

4 EVOLUTION OF DISCOURSE OF DALIT EMPOWERMENT BY AICUF

Through their experience of AICUF, Aicufers recovered their agency. Every programme they attended gave them self-confidence to assert themselves – to own their past and envision a future for their community. Aicufers learnt to speak about what they learnt in AICUF and were asked to use the discourses of empowerment. Discourse became a powerful tool to self-expression and self-assertion for the Aicufers. Before we move on to discuss the ways by which AICUF’s discourse of Dalit empowerment evolved, I want to define the concept of discourse.

Discourse is defined as a relational or differential ensemble of signifying sequences in which meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated, with a tacit assumption that every discursive formulation has an implicit power to structure or de-structure a society, or to construct or deconstruct an identity.3 According to Laclau the concept of discourse has its roots in classical transcendentalism from which theory of discourse he asserts,

“the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field which pre-exists any factual immediacy”45

The discourse, understood as the relational totality of signifying sequences that determine identity, leads to either the construction or the de-construction of meaning. It is often understood as an identity of an object or a person or a community.

Foucault6 in his analysis of the archaeology of knowledge, for the first time demonstrated that formulation of discourse and ‘episteme’ carries within it the implicit thoughts and rules about...

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5 Torfing refers to Western Philosophy, in which Immanuel Kant who inquired into the synthetic a priori categories of cause, substance, etc., which, for Kant, were the very condition for the constitution of phenomena and later the line of thought was furthered by Husserl who placed emphasis on intuition which is basic to all acts of experience, which are anchored in a transcendental ego giving historical possibility very little space, what is called ahistorical, cf. Torfing (1999: 84).
a social reality. To uncover the thoughts and rules that help to construct the identity of the present, Foucault suggests, we must go back to the past to find the discontinuities between past and present and to uncover the conditions of discursive formulations. For Foucault, discourse is a political commodity and the articulation of discourse adds power, that is, a phenomenon of exclusion, limitation, and prohibition. Particularly, power, for Foucault, is not simply an entity that can be ‘held, taken’ or ‘alienated’ but also a problematic of circulation within various channels and networks governed by discursive formulations and relations of power that constitute a social body and “can not themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of discourse.”

Advancing this argument a little further, in a post-modern theoretical background, Laclau and Mouffe focus their discourse theory on the construction of identity. By studying different discursive formulations, they argue, we can disclose the discursive construction of meaning and the ideological configurations that lay beneath the discourses. From this we will get a lead to understand the effects that the application of such discourses has upon the workings of society. In brief, every discursive formulation, by giving fixity to meaning, exercises power through a set of symbols and words “that delimits a field and legitimises a sense”.

From this, it must be noted here that the development of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse is predicated on the idea of Althusser’s critique of ideology and furthers the line of Foucault’s argument of discourse and power that intersect with systems of domination. In a sense Laclau and Mouffe’s theory emerges as a development from the intellectual trajectories of Althusser and Foucault. For Laclau and Mouffe, “all objects are discursively constituted by articulatory practices such that the determinants and limits of discursive formations are not an extra-discursive ‘reality’ but ‘other discourses’ and the practice of articulation fixes meaning to a social relation or to an object and thereby provides an identity.

Drawing on Foucault, Butler focuses on what is excluded and how by formation discs. The powerful (sexists, racists, and imperialists) make ‘normalising’ discourses by which they create the ‘abnormal other’. In this sense, the discourses help create subordinate identities that are to be excluded from the society. Since the dominant groups give such identities they are made to look natural; people talk about them as if they are facts of nature and internalise

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them through repeated practices for a long time without realising that they were constructions. Once people realise this 'episteme' strengthened by the conscientisation of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as AICUF, they begin to see the possibility of change.

Central to discursive or articulatory practice is its nature of openness allowing it to be deconstructed and thereby replaced by another discursive practice or formulation. The social ontology of Laclau and Mouffe is based on the open texture of discourse allowing possibilities for re-constructing a social identity and gives primacy to politics and formulates an idea that "systems of social relations-or-discourse- are always political constructions, and, as such, involve the exercise of power in their formation".17

In the same breath, the social system is viewed as having a fundamentally political character, in which conflict, what they call ‘antagonism’, occurs when a group tries to assert its identity against a group that prevents this. One group sees the impossibility of a possibility of an identity from its social position in the system and the opposing group asserts the possibility of the construction of its identity. Each group insists on its agency and power to construct and protect its identity. Finally, the discursive analysis is placed within the hermeneutical tradition of social enquiry rather than the naturalistic methods of enquiry meaning that discursive formulations have socially produced meanings that have to be interpreted and understood.

This discursive formulation, as seen in the interviews with Aicufers, relates mainly with power and dominance. Therefore, we need to tidy up our concepts of power and dominance.

1) Power is a property of relations between social groups, institutions or organisations. Hence, only social power, and not individual power, is considered here.

2) Social power is defined in terms of the control exercised by one group or organisation (or its members) over the actions and/or the minds of (the members of) another group, thus limiting the freedom of action of the others, or influencing their knowledge, attitudes or ideologies.

3) Power of a specific group or institution may be 'distributed', and may be restricted to a specific social domain or scope, such as that of politics, the media, law and order, education or corporate business, thus resulting in different 'centres' of power and elite groups that control such centres.

4) Dominance is here understood as a form of social power abuse, that is, as a legally or morally illegitimate exercise of control over others in one's own interests, often resulting in social inequality.

5) Power is based on privileged access to valued social resources, such as wealth, jobs, status, or indeed, a preferential access to public discourse and communication.

6) Social power and dominance are often organised and institutionalised, so as to allow more effective control, and to enable routine forms of power reproduction.

7) Dominance is seldom absolute; it is often gradual, and may be met by more or less resistance or counter-power by dominated groups.

The discourse that AICUF developed gave power and dominance to Aicufers. The self-confidence the Aicufers received through the training enabled them to ‘delearn’ what they learnt in their villages and ‘relearn’ to become agents of social change. The exposure to social

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reality through rural camps helped them gain knowledge about the ways in which the caste system worked and how power and dominance was understood and used for social interaction. AICUF’s discourse of liberation and empowerment of Dalits gave the Aicufers power to recover their agency and assert their social space. Though born in an oppressive society, every Aicufer resolved, not to leave it like that but to transform it into a just society.

The discourse of Dalit activism/Dalit empowerment by AICUF has evolved gradually from 1925 until now, in response to social reality and by being sensitive to Dalit students in university colleges in India. Trends in politics, culture, economics, and in Christianity have had great influence in the discursive formulation of Dalit activism. To a certain extent, the intellectual trends and activities in the Church and in the secular world have helped shape the ideology that AICUF was evolving for the empowerment of Dalits. The rationalism of Periyar, Latin American liberation theology, Tamil nationalism, Dalit party politics and Dalit literature have all contributed to perspectives through which AICUF has approached Dalit empowerment.

Some would argue that AICUF had no intention of taking up Dalit empowerment in the beginning. In the interviews, a few Aicufers from the colleges in the Northern states of India said that AICUF was meant only to promote Christian and Catholic values among college students. Some in Jesuit circles have strong complaints that after the 1990s, AICUF lost its Christian identity by involving itself in social issues. All this, I think, is born out of taking things only on face value and insufficient interpretation has gone into making such remarks. If one goes through every word and action that went out from AICUF from 1920s, one would realise that although there was no specific mentioning of the word ‘Dalit’ in the beginning in AICUF’s activities, nonetheless the main focus was on Dalit concerns. This could be seen invariably in the ways AICUF chose villages for exposure programmes and the themes taken for discussion in seminars and workshops.

As seen earlier, AICUF was indeed initially a Catholic study club. But it was not just a study group. Instead, it nurtured Aicufers in the tradition of ‘Catholic action’. It was meant originally train the minds of Catholic students but this included guiding students to see the link between religion and politics. A major focus in the issues taken for discussion in the study clubs was ‘Catholics and politics’. In this sense, AICUF helped students move beyond pious rituals and transcend narrow walls of religion. In the study clubs, the students were asked to look at Catholicism critically. Their attention was drawn to the effects of the caste system even in 1930s – the first article on untouchability appeared in The King’s Rally, in 1932. This was enormously influenced by Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu. The entire article echoes in letter and spirit what E.V.R. Periyar expoused in his crusade against religion and untouchability and I think Periyar’s rationalism has been a major influence in the development of the type of discourse of Dalit empowerment by AICUF. This is the seed that sprouted to become a big tree in the later years of AICUF movement when it clearly pronounced on Dalit empowerment.

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18 In this sense, the discourse of empowerment that AICUF developed was not just cerebral thinking but it was always intended as an action. To put it clearly, it has been a discourse in action. From the beginning, AICUF persuaded Aicufers to get into actions. Exposure programmes, seminars, village camps and rallies etc. were not treated as merely mental exercise. Instead, Aicufers should engage these in physical activities. In the 1920s, emphasis was on physical labour aimed at understanding the poor and the marginalised. From this one could gauge strongly AICUF’s discourse of empowerment has been a discourse of action. See more in Paradigm of Growth, (Chennai: AICUF publication, 2010), pp.3ff.

19 The King’s Rally, Vol.IX, No.3, 17th February 1932.
In 1940s, the Catholic church made a powerful impact on the discourse of Dalit empowerment. The introduction of *Rerum Novarum* by the then Pope Leo XIII provided a paradigmatic shift in Catholicism. It spoke about ‘restructuring unjust society’. AICUF quickly internalised this and implemented it in the form of rural camps and training programmes. The activities of AICUF centered on critique of social structure both inside and outside the Church. Courses on the caste system raised the awareness of Aicufers of a new world of understanding about the society around and their life. The need to work for systemic change was imprinted in their minds. However at this stage this realisation still did not specifically focus on Dalits.

In the 1950s, student movements in India, including AICUF, were inspired by Jeyaprapakash Narayan’s concept of Total Revolution. The National Congress of AICUF held in Kerala in November 1952 articulated it clearly in the theme: ‘We are India, We are the Revolution’. This sense of revolutionary spirit permeated into university campuses all over India and was strengthened in the years between 1950 and 1969. In this period, AICUF’s programmes instructed the students to realise how important to understand social reality, not by reading documents, but by living with the people in villages, laying roads, building houses and eating with the poor. The AICUF students quickly realised the link between physical labour and oppression. This drew on the idea that, in subtle ways, untouchability has its roots in labour as the marginalised were meant to labour in the field for higher castes. Nicholas, an Aicufer in this period, and who runs a NGO said,

“in AICUF, we were told to feel the pain of the people by living with them. We went to Villupuram and lived among the Dalits who were victims of attacks by Vanniyars [a higher caste]. I talked to the Dalit women there and it was so heartrending to listen to their suffering.”

In the 1970s, AICUF developed a discourse of Marxist Christianity. The contribution that Marxism could make to understanding of the Bible was discussed in most of the AICUF programmes and the political emancipation of the oppressed from unjust system was echoed in all its forums. Then in 1970, the Poonamallee Declaration formalised the resolve of AICUF to enter into the project of effecting change in society. The project, called ‘Know India’, was one of the concrete ways in which AICUF saw future social change. Even the Emergency in India in 1971 did not tame the fire in AICUF for change in social structures. In fact, Aicufers quietly organised discussions and meetings to keep their course of direction alive. For instance, a group of Aicufers went on an exposure programme in Aniladi village in the northern Tamil Nadu at this time. In 1974-5, in the AICUF advisors’ sessions, Aicufers were asked to involve in concrete social situations. Mass mobilisation and mass education were insisted and Aicufers went on to organise rallies and processions on social issues. In addition, Aicufers were directed to look at their personal life style while they make efforts to change the oppressive society.

In 1989, AICUF made a deliberate effort to help Aicufers to understand Dalit reality. The focus in seminars, workshops, conventions was on history of Dalit oppression and how they could liberate themselves. At this time, Aicufers verbalised openly the discourse of Dalit empowerment and in this period of AICUF history discussion on Dalit leadership appeared in many forums. Dr G John, an Aicufer who went on to become an animator in St Joseph’s College, Trichirappalli, said,

“in training programmes conducted by AICUF, we were made to realise that Dalit leadership was different from general leadership. The general leadership came from caste system and imposed by Hinduism but Dalit leadership had foundations on a history of oppression. Every Dalit leader is and must be guided by the cry of the Dalits who suffer everyday in the hands of higher castes.”
All this led AICUF to take a preferential option for Dalit students and from this time onwards AICUF was seen as a movement for Dalits. Consequently, this attracted more Dalit students from colleges to AICUF. More and more Dalit students who were otherwise felt lost in the college campuses found AICUF as a source of support. Naturally, non-Dalit students became increasingly hesitant to join AICUF.

All these influences led to the first Dalit camp in 1990 in Chikkavaram village in the Indian state of Andhrapradesh. The Tsundur massacre of Dalits the following years increasingly convinced Aicufers that they should be deeply involved in their march with the marginalised. From 2000 onwards, AICUF openly demonstrated alongside Dalits. This had many consequences for the organisation to the extent that AICUF was banned in Andhra Pradesh by the Catholic Church.

In 1996, in a Dalit Students’ Consultation (26–28 January) at Don Bosco Youth Centre, Ennore, Chennai, for the first time, Aicufers discussed ‘Dalitness’. The debate was concerned with why Dalit students must accept or own their identity as Dalits, and how important it was to rediscover their history and culture. This is seen in AICUF’s motto, “we were born into the unjust world but we will not leave without changing it”. In every AICUF National Council declaration from that point on, from the 12th National Council the until 21st, the discourse of Dalit empowerment went through a series of changes that sharpened the focus and strengthened the resolve.

The ways in which AICUF evolved its discourse of Dalit empowerment amply illustrates how many outside influence contributed to the process. What happened in the society at large has had been reflected in AICUF’s formulation of a discourse of empowerment from 1969 onwards.20 As said earlier, AICUF has consistently reorganised itself according to socio-political trends in society at large, both in terms the design of training programmes, and more importantly in its perspective towards the ways in which the movement must function. In this sense, AICUF kept up its true character of ‘movement’ by not succumbing to temptations of institutionalisation. Anthony Cruz of Villupuram said that AICUF never told them what to do and how to do, instead in meetings the Aicufers were asked to propose different ways of responding to issues. This he feels has given Aicufers facility of independent thinking. For the first time in his life he made to feel that he could decide a course of his life – “en mudhu ennaal edukkapattadhu”. The discourse of Dalit empowerment by AICUF helped Aicufers go through a process of change within themselves and they replicated that change in their lives.

What the Aicufers learnt in their experience in AICUF was later expressed concretely in their lives. Aicufers had an enormous influence on, and made a large contribution to, Dalit activism by replicating what they learnt in their time at AICUF after they left it. The discourse of AICUF was not just an idea. Instead, it was discourse in action. In the programmes the Aicufers attended in AICUF they learnt about empowerment in and through their concrete involvement in society. The discourse that AICUF evolved for empowering Dalit students was seen in the concrete changes in the lives of Dalit students. They changed their idea of society in India. Their involvement in AICUF programmes created a need to work for a social change and they were motivated to become agents of social change.

In working for social change, the Dalit Aicufers realised that they needed to accept their history and culture. The discourse of Dalit empowerment that AICUF evolved from 1989 placed the cultural realities of the Dalits, Adivasis, and women as the locus for Dalit

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development. I see the empowerment the Dalit Aicufers realised in three phases: disclosure, recovery, and replication. From the interviews with Aicufers, one could realise that involvement of Dalit students in programmes helped them disclose their false self-consciousness, which portrayed them as polluted people. This identity, they gradually realised, was given to them by the higher castes; they were made powerless. The empowering discourses used in programmes – seminars, rallies, village camps, conventions – that they organised and attended gave them self-confidence. And quickly they came to awareness that they should recover their agency. The Aicufers before they left their college studies became assertive and self-confident to go back to their homes and replicate what they learnt from their AICUF experience. Christu Raj captures this vividly when he shared about the change that his experience in AICUF made:

‘I came to Loyola College with an idea that I was a Dalit and I will die as a Dalit; my father’s job with Reddies would remain till he died. But in the first meeting in AICUF house I realised that I could change the situation. The professor who gave introduction told us all that we should change the ways we thought and acted. He told us that the lower status we had as Dalits should be changed and all of us should work for the change. Importantly, in AICUF I learnt to speak against the caste system and higher castes. This made me feel good. I am unable to explain the feeling very well. You have to go through the experience if you want to understand the feeling I had. After I completed my college I got a job in a cycle company, TI Cycles. During holidays I spent time with youth in my village. We started an iyyakkam [movement]. Whatever I learnt from my AICUF days I shared with the members of the movement. In the last ten years I see lot of change among the Dalit boys and girls in my village. We have a plan to start a training centre in Chennai for the Dalit youth.’

This is typical of the impact that the AICUF experience made on Aicufers’ personality and the ways they viewed life. The discourses developed by AICUF for empowerment of Dalits opened a new world to the Dalit Aicufers. The AICUF’s discourses of empowerment, from 1990 in which the first Dalit camp was conducted, focused on bringing the Dalit Aicufers to become critical of the system in which they lived and training them to evolve alternate ways to empower themselves. In this AICUF way of empowerment by discursive formulation, the most crucial element has been that the Aicufers opened up unconscious assumptions of the Dalit psyche and helped them to develop critical orientations about their life. This I call ‘disclosure’ of new reality. This disclosure immediately guided them to assert themselves and thus gain agency to chart a course in their lives. In the colleges where they studied, they experimented with how to assert themselves. This is a moment of ‘recovery of agency’. Once they recovered their agency, they went back to their villages to realise changes in the lives of Dalits.

5 DISCLOSURE, RECOVERY, REALISATION: AN AICUF WAY OF EMPOWERMENT

Dalit activism by AICUF has worked within a framework that had a triadic movement: disclosure, recovery, and realisation. There is in this framework a three level process that I call Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. This three-phase Dalit activism propagated ways in which AICUF’s discourse of empowerment helped the Dalit students transform their persons
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and in the ways they went out in their lives later replicated the same process of empowerment.21

The Firstness refers to disclosure of reality that Aicufers experienced in the programmes they took part. Most of the ex-Aicufers said that first thing they learned in AICUF was to see society from a different worldview: puthiya paarvai. Aileen Marques, a well-informed and articulate ex-Aicufer, says,

“in every programme I attended I learnt a new way of seeing the world. Afterwards whenever I talked about something people could smell the difference. This I think is possible only when the experience in AICUF uncovers so many layers that hide the really real.”

The discourses of AICUF focused on two levels of self-making: identity and identification. The Dalit youth were asked to realise that their identity as marginalised people was given by the higher castes. And they now could decide either to identify with that identity or negate it. And in every programme they attended they realised that they should negate the given identity and reconstruct their own identity. In this sense, as Laclau22 the discursive formulations by AICUF helped them create a conflict within every Aicufer in which they realise a ‘constitutive split’ between identity and identification. In this constructive moment, the Aicufers become conscious of what they are as Dalits. In the locus of conflict the Aicufers became conscious of their marginalised identity, and they decide to deconstruct it. More sharply, moment of conflict creates a certain kind of mood for consciousness. In 1971, as Manu puts it, “self-consciousness is the first tangible impact of the use of discourse constructed by AICUF.”

The Aicufers first are asked to become conscious of what they are and what type of society they live in, more sharply, what ideology that drives social behaviour. This makes them delearn what they have learnt so far. And what was closed away from them is opened to them in their experience in AICUF. This disclosure of reality created a sort of selfconsciousness that made the Aicufers review their life as marginalised people in their villages. They became aware of history of their oppression:

“After coming to AICUF I was asked to relive my life in my village. And in common I shared about my life with other Aicufers. After the sharings I was made to realise that I led a life of oppression. I became terribly upset that I was a polluted being. Spontaneously, I started crying in anger (kopathil aluthuvitten). After that meeting it became clear to me that my identity was in my village was polluted one. I decided to change my identity.” (Chinnappan, ex-Aicufer, 1973-1977).

By and large, Aicufers felt that the programmes in AICUF made them become conscious of the social reality of marginalisation. The AICUF experience for many Aicufers helped disclose the state of being oppressed. What was a normal ‘given’ life was questioned in AICUF and they were asked to realise their personhood. It was an act of realising ‘personhood’ from the ways they lived as objects (saathikkararkalin kaipawangala iruthom, annaai indru manithargala vaalgiron).

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21 This draws on Charles Peirce’s ideas, used by Valentine Daniel (1996) in his attempt to explain violence in Sri Lanka. The idea of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness is explained in another triadic movement of Mood, Moment and Mind. I do not follow them in the ways they used to explain different cases. For the present purpose, I borrow Daniel’s idea of progress from the first phase until the third phase. In this study, the training that the Aicufers receive helps them see a disclosure of a new world and recover their identity and they go on to realise their self-hood in the activities of empowerment.

In this way, the Aicufers help themselves in and through programmes and training in AICUF to realise ‘Dalitness’ by learning to accept that they are Dalits. The state of pollutedness, earlier, was one that they should be ashamed of. But now the AICUF experience teaches them to accept the polluted state. This further persuades them to open the hidden structures of society that are oppressive. Maria Edward Raj says:

‘in AICUF one ushers into a new reality. And every Aicufer goes through a new birth in the programmes conducted by AICUF. Personally, I went through an experience of being conceived in a womb and delivered as a newborn baby. After one year of AICUF life when I went home in Villupuram, I saw things from a new spectacle. And I feel honestly that I should have had this way of seeing my village long time ago’.

AICUF evolved discourses of Dalit empowerment and disseminated them among the Aicufers from the beginning and especially from 1990s. AICUF believed all along that Dalit students from rural areas of India must be helped to express themselves and gain a sense of self. AICUF made them realise that the life they led in their village was oppressive and must learn to unlearn what they learnt in their homes. What they were used to see as ‘normal reality’ was, in AICUF, questioned and in fact, the Aicufers said that they were asked to question the status quo and look at society critically. As Mano put it,

“first time in my life, I was asked to look at society critically. I learnt how the caste system works. As I was learning I could reread the entire life I led in my village and came to realise how I have lived a low life [thaalntha vazhvu] and who were our oppressors.”

In AICUF’s discourse of the project of Dalit empowerment, one could easily decipher a triadic movement: disclosure, recovery, and realisation. Aicufers who have gone through the programmes in AICUF first empowered and secondly they replicate the same empowerment process in their lives. The first movement of disclosure provided Aicufers a sense of self in which they became conscious of themselves. This sense of self is conceptually formed

\[\text{5.1 Disclosure: Critical Look at Reality}\]

AICUF’s discourse of Dalit empowerment has not been just an abstract act, but a discourse in action. AICUF from its inception developed discourses of empowerment that gave primacy to praxis. This discourse in action helped the young Aicufers to gain a sense of self.

Immersion into social reality, AICUF believed, would help the Aicufers develop perceptions about reality. In all the programmes by AICUF from the beginning, practical experience received major emphasis. Aicufers were encouraged to engage in physical labour at early stages of AICUF history and in active participation in rallies and protests later after the 1990s. In the initial period of AICUF, ‘study of social questions’ in 1925 laid the foundation for the kind of discourses of Dalit empowerment developed later in 1990s. Programme such as ‘Village Reconstruction’ and “Know India” helped the Aicufers to gain critical awareness about society by ‘studying social questions’ in AICUF meetings.\(^{23}\) AICUF has had a steady progress in the focus of its discourse, from studying social questions to questioning caste discrimination in Christianity. In my view, this planted the seed for the discourse of and action for Dalit empowerment.

\(^{23}\) In the first conference of Catholic Young Men’s Guild (CYMG) in Trichinopoly on 25th January 1925, Mr M.R.A.Jeganathan, In his president’s speech he stressed that one of the main objects of CYMG ‘to promote the study of social questions’ to inculcate, in public and in private, the brotherhood of all classes and of all individuals, as members of one social body.
On 17th February 1932 in an ordinary meeting of the AICUF Study Club, Mr. Pascal Theodore discussed untouchability which, he said,

“is becoming every day a practical issue of the first magnitude, and as such deserved the careful study of every true catholic who might thereby be induced to help in removing this social blot, when and where possible.”

It is helpful to see what kind of discursive formulation on that day the then AICUF formed towards developing Dalit empowerment later. That meeting resolved:

“That this association expresses its deep sympathy with the legitimate aspirations and demands of the depressed class Christians. At the same time they proceeded to point out in a friendly manner, one or two features of the social uplift movement, started by the depressed class Christians themselves which tended to place it under a should of reasonable suspicion from catholic point of view. The depressed class Christians fraternised more and more with the ‘self respect’ movement; and though they might justify their association with it on the ground of the latter’s promises for the amelioration of their social conditions, yet they could not for long trust themselves to the leadership of avowed atheists and anti clericals without imperialising the faith that was in them. They would be well advised therefore to choose hereafter their champions with greater prudence and discrimination. It was in deep realisation of the possible perils to their faith that the meeting resolved: ‘That this association deprecates the tendency on the part of some of the leaders to make common cause with prominent ‘Self-respect.’’

As discussed elsewhere, the discourse of Dalit empowerment was sharpened constantly in the course of last two decades by taking into consideration the sociopolitical trends in Tamil Nadu and beyond. Every time there was a social upheaval and change in the intellectual trends, AICUF developed its opinion and expressed it in the form of seminars and programmes. Thinking and action had been taken hand in hand. In a sense, we could term it ‘discursive action’. In the 1950s, the whole theme of ‘social work’ gained currency that AICUF applied by organising work camps. This created huge impact among the Aicufers. They said boldly, “we are the revolution” on 22nd December in 1952. Constantly, AICUF programmes guided the Aicufers to disclosure of social reality in vilages. In 1970, the Poonamalee Conference, as seen elsewhere, embellished the discourse to give liberative emphasis. In the 1990s, the liberative focus took a sharp turn as Dalit empowerment from the time of the first Dalit camp in Andhra Pradesh.

The AICUF discourse all along held together the two dimensions of empowerment: ‘social awareness’ and ‘self-awareness’. Disclosure, as we discuss in this section, has three elements – self-consciousness, self-acceptance, and self-assertion – which are bound together. This I call ‘triptych’. It refers to a set of three elements united to each other, often in a style that the three could be folded one on top of the other. These three elements contain a kind of reciprocity in that the unity should be understood only when all the elements are present.

From the conversations, I had from the Aicufers I was told that in their time at AICUF they became conscious of how they were oppressed as polluted beings. Immediately, they were asked to realise that they should accept their state of oppression, what often they were told was ‘you are a broken being.’ Ramu, an Aicuer of the 1990s, says,

“In the seminars at AICUF I became conscious that I was not a human being. I was treated just like a dust. The higher castes saw me just a wooden plank (marakattai). Prof Packiaraj told me that I had to go back in time and asked myself what kind of life I led in

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24 *Rally* (March 1932, Vol. IX. NO. 3)
25 *Rally* (March 1932, Vol. IX. NO. 3)
my village. He told me that reliving my past would give me an idea of what I was and what I intend to become. That helped me a lot in becoming aware of my state as a Dalit.”

More profoundly, Aicufers were told to believe that they were creators of culture, lords of the earth, and militant people. Meena Kumari narrates,

“one foreign lady from Tamil Nadu Theological Centre in Madurai gave a talk on Dalit belief. 26 It was an eye opener for me. She made us realise that we were once upon a time owners of lands and creators of good music. All these were snatched away from us by the Brahmins. It was very hard to believe for me. I was totally confused. But other AICUF students accepted it and spoke about it in the meeting convincingly. Then only I began to accept that we, the Dalits, had our own culture and history. This I think is the contribution of AICUF in my life.”

Nicholas, an ex-Aicufer says,

“it was my association with AICUF which oriented me to work for the Dalits. The sharing of my father’s experiences while he was a bonded labourers with the local landlord also strengthened this. It was at that time when I was an eye witness to a horrible attack on the Dalits in Villupuram town on 26th July 1978, which resulted in the brutal killing of 12 Dalits and burning down of 2000 Dalit houses. All this made me work for the Dalits.”

In all the programmes from 1990s, the discourse that AICUF disseminated was on more than self-awareness in which the Aicufers were asked to look into the state of being: Who are you? What is your history? (Nee yaar? Unathu varalaaru enna?). In every programme designed by AICUF, awareness as a Dalit was the major emphasis. This self-consciousness is considered as way to enter to the world of oppression and marginalisation that the whole Dalit community had experienced. To achieve this end, most of the exposure programmes were organised.

Aicufers say that the AICUF training did not stop at the level of self-consciousness. They were asked to move on to accept their state of Dalithood. 27 This speaks of the past in which they were treated as objects for maintaining purity of the higher castes. Dalit Aicufers were told to realise and accept their Dalithood. Only by accepting, they were persuaded in camps and seminars, what they were they could construct a future and an identity of their own. Saleth, an Aicufer puts it sharply,

“I was told that I should get angry with the ways I have lived as Paraiyan. For that in a seminar held in Villupuram we were asked to share about how we were treated by higher caste people in our villages. The more I heard about the stories clearer in my mind to fight against the injustice. And the people who gave talks in that camp invited us to accept boldly our selves by saying, ‘I am proud to say that I am a Dalit’. This gave me confidence and I became courageous even to confront higher caste people in my village”.

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26 This I think is Eleanor Zelliot who wrote later on ‘The Folklore of Pride: Three Components of Contemporary Dalit Belief’.

27 I use the term, ‘Dalithood’, deliberately to refer to state of being oppressed and treated as polluted. There is a state of psychopathological character of oppressed Dalit born of material and ideational conditions imposed by higher castes. In the efforts of AICUF in empowering the Dalit Aicufers there has been an attempt to invent a new manhood that demonstrates the oppression of the past and the yearning for a free state. In similar terms, Marnia Lazreg (2007), following Frantz Fanon, talks about slaves who try to invent a new man from the ways they were treated as sub-humans. It is instructive to realise the discursive method the postcolonialists used to reconstruct an identity for the oppressed Algerians. In my opinion, writings such as Fanon’s have been liberally used in AICUF workshops. Especially, from 1989, the time of Fr Manu as National Advisor, such intellectual orientation started permeating the AICUF avenues. This definitely must have had an impact in the process of construction of discourse of Dalit empowerment by AICUF.
AICUF constructed a discourse of Dalit empowerment by keeping the Dalit students in focus. The first concern was to guide Dalit Aicufer to accept their identity as Dalits. Self-acceptance was seen as the first step in the process of empowerment of the Dalits. Even in this the identity they had only been given to them by higher castes, not of their own making.

“What I am as a polluted person is told to me by my father. But I should not accept it. This is what I am taught in the workshop I attended”, said Arul Sundaram, Thirupunalvasal. The Aicufer were trained to look at their selves and identity as given by some others.

Accepting the stigmatised identity does not mean that they would be content with what they are. The intention was to rise above that and assert themselves. The Aicufer went on to the next stage of self-assertion. They began to realise that they should change the ways they would live. AICUF put it more clearly:

“We were born in an unjust society, but we are determined not to leave it as we have found it.”

In 1999, the Aicufer stated this in their motto, *Marching with the Marginalised*. AICUF evolved four commissions for Dalits, Adivasis, women and refugees at this time.

Although there are two strands of thinking among the Dalit intelligentsia, accepting them as Dalits is seen by Dalit Aicufer as an important way to empower them. In some way, few Aicufer feel that their identity as polluted people should be done away with. Instead, they should own up their cultural identity as paraiyars, pallars, and arunthathiyars. This ownership has a potency to gain self-esteem. For this, the polluted identity has to be de-polluted by reconstructing their identity. For this, the Aicufer were given classes on personality development and English language.

It is interesting to realise that Dalit Aicufer felt that being an Aicufer means becoming someone of respectable status. Similarly, in AICUF camps, the Dalit Aicufer were helped to feel that they were equals: comrades (*Thozhar*). An Aicufer in their first year of undergraduate studies could call another Aicufer in their third year of studies, a comrade. This sense of equality was insisted in AICUF. In our in depth interviews most of the Dalit Aicufer felt that they experienced an atmosphere of equality in AICUF. In the college, Elango Stanislaus said,

“other class mates of mine were afraid to see me as an Aicufer. This helped to get rid of the stigma I had in my village.”

The third dimension of the discourse of Dalit empowerment by AICUF is self-assertion. Many Dalit Aicufer remember to recite the fundamental assertion around which the entire project of empowerment is planned: “We were born into an unjust society. We are determined not to leave it as we found it.” This, they think, inspired them first in their efforts to assert themselves. While they were in AICUF they had opportunity to join many Dalit movements in their protests and rallies. One such movement was the *Vidudhalai Siruthaigal* (Liberation Tigers) which organised violent protests all over Tamil Nadu. This Dalit political party has made a significant impact on Aicufer ability to assert themselves. Mathew, an ex-Aicufer from Vilupuram, says,

“while I was in AICUF I had a chance to take part in a rally in Chennai organised by *Vidudhalai Siruthaigal*. During the rally, police lathi-charged us and many were injured. But I was greatly inspired by the ways *siruthaigal* [the party cadre] faced that conflict situation. They were bold and they behaved as if they had already expected beating from the police. This gave me *thairiyam* [courage] to fight against oppression.”

Mathew said that such exposures not only gave him self-confidence to assert himself but also devote his life for the betterment of Dalits. The discourse used by the party such as *adanga*
Use of a discourse of empowerment in developing Dalit agency

The training the Aicufers received in AICUF to assert themselves had also produced by-products. The Dalit Aicufers developed their communication skills. Battu Anil Kumar, from Andhra Pradesh said that in the seminars and conventions gave him opportunity to develop his communication skills. At the end of every meeting, he says, the Aicufers were asked to write down their perceptions about Dalit reality. The very act of communicating their perceptions about the Dalit reality helped them to reconstruct their identity gradually.

In the conversations, the Aicufers said that they had self-consciousness before they joined AICUF. That was changed by the discourse of Dalit empowerment they were exposed to. Dalit empowerment begins with becoming deeply conscious of the past in which they had a low identity. Re-reading of the past was the first act they went through in AICUF. Their past was reviewed critically by them in the classes they had on social analysis and caste system. For the first time in their lives, they began to verbalise that their past life was one of oppression (Dalit makkalin varalaaru oru annethiyaana varalaaru). This led to making them realise that their low identity was an identity given by others. In this identity, they felt that they were objects for use in the hands of higher castes. The AICUF experience made them erase the old self-consciousness and develop another consciousness in which they realised their self-worth and gained a sense of pride about their ‘Dalitness’. Battu, an Aicuer from Gujarat puts it sharply,

“before my entry into AICUF I had a false consciousness about myself and about my community. AICUF helped me all that.”

In this, there has been a double consciousness in that one given by others and another which has been developed by them. The former was dependent on others and the latter is independent of others. Their experience in AICUF gave them a sense of self, that is, they recovered their past and their true identity.

### 5.2 Recovery: Developing Dalit Agency

This disclosure led to the Secondness in the process of Dalit activism and empowerment of Dalit Aicufers. The Secondness refers to recovery and development of Dalit agency. The disclosure the Aicufers gain in the Firstness has made the Aicufers become persons who have the ability and free will to choose their course of life and determine their actions. The Aicufers recovered their human agency in and through the use of the discourses of Dalit empowerment evolved by AICUF.

Human agency, in this case, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. A detailed discussion on human agency discussed by Archer (2000) helps us understand what the Aicufers have gone through in the project of self-empowerment. More sharply, the author talks about the sense of self that is formed from

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Hegelian conceptualisation of self-consciousness is instructive at this point. Self-consciousness exists for itself and at the same time it has to be recognised by others, both independent and dependent. See Alcoff and Mendieta (2003: 11-16).
practical activity, or practical experience that AICUF insisted on in its programmes. Prof Packiaraj says,
“physical labour formed as an axis for self-awareness in the initial stages of AICUF. The Aicuferers were asked to lay roads and build houses in Dalit villages. Later this experience was seen in our students taking part in rallies”.

Prof James Sundar who has accompanied the Aicuferers said that becoming really a human through the AICUF programmes was one of the achievements of AICUF.

In the in-depth interviews I had with some ex-Aicuferers confirmed this. “The first realisation we come to in AICUF is that we are human beings”, said Marisasosai, an ex-Aicufer. This realisation helped them to gain freedom to decide their own course of life and they chose career paths heavily influenced by their experience in AICUF. Chinnappan, an ex-Aicufer from Gingee town in the northern Tamil Nadu, said,

“What I am today was literally given by AICUF. Before I went to college, I wanted to go out and live in Madras and earn a lot of money. But my AICUF experience changed all that.”

He became full-time social worker spending his time for the development of his village. He says that AICUF in 1970s did not take up Dalit issues but taught him to work for the Dalits. He says,

“I was trained to fight against injustice in church, government sectors, private places etc. In the year 1978 a communal violence occurred in Villupuram in which 12 harijians were murdered, 250 houses were burnt and many of their possessions were lost. I was involved in the rehabilitation works; I also filed a complaint and followed it up. I was able to file a case only because of the learning I gained from AICUF. To me personally, self determination and will power too were important contribution of AICUF.”

The Aicuferers in Loyola College hostel confirmed it by saying that becoming human, being human and work for eradicating inhuman treatment of Dalits has been the major emphasis of AICUF. They felt that society and oppressive structures stand in their ways of becoming human or recovering their agency. The hostel Aicuferers recount an incident in 2007 in which a higher caste boy beat a Dalit boy. What they highlight in this incident is that the Aicuferers (Dalit) were able to retaliate against the non-Dalit students. Mathi, an Aicufer in the hostel said,

“the non-Dalit boys here in this hostel think we are low to them (thaalnthavan). We showed them in that incident that we are equal to them”.

This self-assertion they think comes from the training they have had from AICUF. This incident plays an important source for the Aicuferers in their efforts towards empowering themselves. The Aicuferers feel that the system they are in is oppressive and they feel sometime frustrated that although they take efforts to transform their lives the oppressive structures prevent them from realising empowerment. This takes us to the very old issue of structure versus agency.

The Aicuferers recover their agency in the ways by which they are trained in AICUF but when they go back to their village only to feel the constraints of social situation. The whole question of pre-instituted social structure, argued by Bourdieu, is compared to the continuous creation model of Foucault. Structure refers to the recurrent patterned arrangements, which seem to influence or limit the choices and opportunities that individuals possess. The structure versus agency debate may therefore be understood simply as the issue socialisation against

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29 See a detailed discussion on this by Hugo Gorringe (2007).
Use of a discourse of empowerment in developing Dalit agency

autonomy. What Aicufer have gained in the training in AICUF was ‘freedom within’ from their ‘lowness’ of being a Dalit and ‘freedom from the social structure’ they were socialised and habitualised and how they formed their identity.

Before their exposure to AICUF they felt that human agency was held by their masters (higher castes). Salomi, an ex-Aicufer, from Madurai, explained that AICUF helped her to become an agent of her life:

“as a Dalit woman I had to fight for my space. The energy and wisdom for the fight, my experience in AICUF gave me. In all the programmes I attended in AICUF I realised that I should fight against any inequality.”

This is also related to what Aicufer in Loyola College even today experience. Learning to speak in English in AICUF has given them self-confidence. The programmes brought together Aicufer from different parts of India, and the local Tamil Aicufer were forced to speak in English. For this, they were trained by AICUF. Professor Packiaraj who organised many such classes says that the Dalit students who joined AICUF gained self-confidence through the English speaking classes. That self-confidence, he says, provided strength to question the system they lived. Speaking in common, writing articles and reports, leading a team in group discussions, and organising a camp or convention gave the Aicufer a sense of self that was not there before they came into AICUF. They were given such opportunities in AICUF. The ex-Aicufer who became later founders of different organisations and NGOs remember their training in AICUF that has made what they are now.

Elango Stanislaus, an ex-Aicufer working in an NGO in Bangalore and a national full-timer at AICUF, explains how the learning to speak in English helped him to go Asian Social Forum in 2003. He says,

“AICUF taught me to feel proud that I was a Dalit and being a Dalit is a shame. I became aware of my identity as a Dalit. And I chose my career. Nobody dictated me to choose this social service.”

In the same line, John Shanth Kumar Joseph from Karnataka says,

“we the Dalit Aicufer learnt from AICUF that we needed to decide for ourselves. The training we received from AICUF helped us become leaders. We were just objects used by high castes and from the training we realised that we were subjects who could decide for ourselves. When I went back home my family members noticed the change in me. My uncle told me that I had become bold and mature.”

Radha from Cunoor in Tamil Nadu said that I have become a lecturer purely by the training she received from AICUF. She says,

“What I learnt in AICUF was that we should bring a change in the ways we think about ourselves and that would change everything.”

The Dalit agency that the Aicufer recovered broke open the seal of objecthood and recovered a subjecthood. Prabhakaran, who was in AICUF from 2001-2004, says,

“In AICUF, I learnt to reject the ways in which my community was portrayed as untouchables. I came to realise that the caste system was oppressive. I told myself that the world I was born into was oppressive and I would do everything to make it a just world.”

Taking up the project of recovery of agency has been a central idea that every Aicufer mentioned when they explain about what they learnt from AICUF.
5.3 Realisation: Replicating Empowering Dalit Strategies

In this section, I discuss the ways that the former Aicufer replicated what they learnt in AICUF in their daily lives after they left AICUF. As Fr Henry Jerome, former AICUF National Advisor, said, AICUF in all its training focused on making Aicufer to work for the marginalised after their exposure to AICUF life. He argues that the training they receive in AICUF is not for the development of their own personal lives; it should ultimately lead to social empowerment of the Dalits at large. I intend this discussion should help us to learn whether the empowerment moves from individual selves to society in the lives of Dalit youth. In that sense, the Dalit activism that AICUF has been engaged has contributed substantively to the development of Dalits.

Mathew, from Vilupuram says,

“Today I can boldly tell you that I am able to fight the high castes in my village [Iraiyur]. My NGO works for the empowerment of Dalits. I was in AICUF both as an ordinary Aicufer and later as one of the full-time Aicufer. I had a real exposure to many awareness programmes that changed my outlook. That helped me hugely to organise many programmes for the Dalits and work as a full time social worker.”

He is one of the Aicufer who devoted his life for the Dalit empowerment.

Veerappan, from Nilgris, is a Hindu Dalit who spent three years as an Aicufer. He says,

“the training AICUF gave me an orientation in my life. Although my family wanted me to get a job after my M.A and settle down in life, I told myself that I would devote myself for the betterment of my Dalit community.”

He has worked with many groups and he was instrumental in liberating Advasi from bonded labour. He insisted that every Aicufer had created a great impact on society by contributing to social change. He adds,

“Aicufer changed within [personal change] by their participation in the programmes organised by AICUF.”

That ‘change within’ did not stop at that level. Instead, the Aicufer went on to make ripples of change in society.

“What I learnt from AICUF changed not only myself but also made me work for the Dalits”, said Dr G John. He founded an organisation called, FAY (Food, Agriculture and Youth) and spent so many years working for the Dalits. He said,

“many people think that the AICUF’s training only gave social awareness but not useful for economic development of the Dalits. It is not true. Any awareness should help us develop ourselves in all respects. The awareness I gained from AICUF is now helping me to guide the Dalits as how to improve their lives by improving their economic standard.”

The Aicufer became, in a sense, entrepreneurs who founded NGOs which worked for the development of Dalits while also giving them a living. The founding of NGOs have provided them with an avenue to influence the ways social policies were made in India. Equally, the Aicufer who were employed in different institutions were able to have a huge influence on framing the policies of their employers. A lecturer, an ex-Aicufer, who works in Loyola College, Chennai at present explains this clearly,

“from the time I joined the college I was part of a team of Dalit lecturers who influenced the education policy of the college to be sensitive to Dalits. When the college management failed to serve the purpose of the Dalits, we questioned the management and organised protests in many forms. Our influence in the policy making has given employment to
many Dalit candidates. Thanks to the training I received in AICUF, if there are many who have got jobs in many Christian institutions it is largely due to the influence of Aicufers who were trained by AICUF.”

Nicholas, an ex-Aicufer, originally from Ayandur village puts this well:
“the basic orientation I received from AICUF was that I should go back to my village to develop the people there.”

One major issue he faced was the resistance from the Vanniyars of his village. But he says,
“when I began organising the youth of my village, the Vanniyar leaders, threatened me not to go ahead with my plan. I refused to obey them. I learnt all my skills from AICUF. Because of my boldness, the Vanniyars shared with us funds received from the government. Whenever the government officials come to our village they came to consult us. This was not the case before. Now everybody respects us. We have never allowed to decide any developmental activities for the village without consulting us.”

Many Aicufers translated their ideas gained from AICUF into concrete actions after their college studies. Mathi, an ex-Aicufer, says,
“once Aicufer you are forever Aicufer. There is something of ‘aicufness’ gets into our blood and we continue to live out that all our life. Twenty years ago I was an Aicufer, but even today I speak the language of AICUF.”

The discourses they learnt from the AICUF programmes were put into action. Anthony Cruz, who runs a trust called Trust for Social Justice Shanthi Nilayam, decided to work for the Dalits of his area although he holds a postgraduate degree in commerce. He said that whatever he wrote about Dalit empowerment in the magazine, Thenmazhai, is now actualised in the lives of Dalits. He focuses on developing Dalit children, who, according to Anthony Cruz, should be trained to become future Dalit leaders in order to increase the living standard of Dalits.

The Aicufers have also made huge impact on many companies in the ways in which labourers are treated and the ways by which companies are managed. Some Aicufers have been instrumental in forming labour unions in many companies and service industries, which have greatly benefited the Dalits in terms of getting jobs in hotels and companies. In the long stretch of Sriperumpudur road, most of the companies have labour unions that are heavily influenced by exAicufers. Mamallan, an ex-Aicufer, who works in one of the reputed transnational companies, says,
“the formation I received from AICUF helps me in my meetings. In many weekly review meetings, the way I look at issues is different from others. I always speak for the Dalits in the company. Recently, a Dalit who worked as a line manager was laid off and the reason was financial crisis. But I fought in the meetings and got him back to work.”

There are four ex-Aicufers in the company and they work together in such issues.

AICUF’s Dalit activism in many ways has contributed not only to the development of Aicufers individually but also the to the development of Dalit community to a large extent. Aicufers after their training in college campuses went back to the reality where they had once lived as powerless Dalits and changed lives of Dalits.

According to the college records, Dalits form 70 per cent of the lecturers in the college and similar numerical strength also is found in the non-teaching staff. In the selection for the jobs in the college and in all the Jesuit colleges in Tamil nadu state, being a Dalit will fetch ten marks that gives an edge to Dalit candidates.
6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

AICUF’s Dalit activism is ‘discursively constituted’ and is focused on self-awareness and self-assertion leading to recovery of Dalit agency. A discourse of critical analysis of society by AICUFers was seen as a strategy of power that attributed a set of essential characteristics of empowerment to the powerless Dalit youth in college campuses. This reified the identity the AICUFers had traditionally had, deconstructed objectification of Dalithood and reinforced Dalit subjectivities. The AICUFers used their training in AICUF to replicate the empowering strategies, and have had enormous influence in the formation of policies for the development of Dalits. AICUF’s contribution to Dalit development is that it produced many leaders, social workers, activists, corporates and intellectuals who went on to make the social system to become much more sensitive to the concerns of Dalits.

In this paper, we focused on the type of discourse that AICUF developed for the project of Dalit empowerment. For this, reading through the history of AICUF was greatly helpful. This showed us that there was a gradual progress in the articulation of the empowerment discourse. In this evolutionary process, there were many outside influences that contributed to the kind and nature of discourse that AICUF developed from 1924 onwards until today. Later in the paper we delved deep into the ways in which the discourse transformed the AICUFers in their experience of AICUF. As we explained, empowerment of the AICUFers consisted a triadic movement from disclosure to recovery to realisation.

The experiences they had in AICUF helped them to see the world differently and began to open up the hidden underpinnings in society. This disclosure led to recovery of their past ‘dalitness’ which they learnt to accept. Acceptance of what they are is crucial to change the way they want to be. In this they began to recover their human agency, seeing that only Dalits can liberate Dalits – Dalit agency. Finally, we discussed the ways by which the AICUFers replicated their learnings in actions after they have left AICUF. In this way, the contribution of AICUF in the project of Dalit activism is significant and phenomenal.

What started as a movement that was sensitive to Catholic men became later an organisation that evolved a systematic project of Dalit empowerment. The drum (Paraí) music has become now the anthem of AICUF. AICUF explicitly evolved a discourse of Dalit empowerment from the 1990s which has been disseminated among AICUFers for more than two decades. That discourse focused on causing the AICUFers to reconstruct their personal identity through a critical awareness, mostly born out of the Marxist perspective of the 1970s. It helped the AICUFers to re-read their oppressed history (adimalpattra varalaari) and re-write a history of their own. Asserting their sense of self led the AICUFers to go back to their villages and work for the empowerment of their Dalit community. As Fr Manu Alphonse, former National Advisor of AICUF, said in his address in 1989, ‘every AICUFer became the voice of the voiceless’ and replicated the strategies of empowerment they learnt in their training in AICUF.31 In every college campus, wherever AICUF was present and active it remained outside the institutionalised atmosphere in order to question the social system and voice its protest against injustice. It invited every AICUFer to stand away from the society and critique the system. That it made them learn to become empowered to work for their community. To do that, AICUF chose three loci: college campuses, Christian community and Indian society at large. Put clearly, AICUF trained Dalit students in campuses to become self-empowered and sent them into the society to generate the spirit of freedom and empowerment that has had a huge impact in the larger project of Dalit empowerment by influencing the ways policy frameworks were developed. In that way, AICUF’s Dalit activism remained a catalyst in Dalit development.

31 See p.73, in Paradigm of Growth.
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