

Notes on a Literary Death

V GEETHA

Vol. 50, Issue No. 3, 17 Jan, 2015

V Geetha (geethv@gmail.com) is a writer and publisher, and her interests include feminism, caste and education

The vicious campaign by local Hindu and caste groups in Tamil Nadu against the prolific Tamil writer Perumal Murugan's book *Mathorupagan* is rooted in the perverse politics of caste honour. Also, this strategy of bullying him into silence affords the Hindu right an opportunity to secure a foothold amongst the intermediate castes in the state.

Tamil fiction writer and essayist Perumal Murugan's decision to not write anymore has shocked and saddened his readers and critics alike. Some of us who had sat with him in a press conference two days earlier knew that he was veering between dejection and resolution. The campaign against his book *Mathorupagan* had emerged out of nowhere: it targeted sections of a novel published four years ago, which features the story of a childless woman who, rather reluctantly, opts to sleep with a stranger-pilgrim to get pregnant. Those who counsel her to this end argue that this is a time-worn custom sanctioned by the presiding deity of the Tiruchengode temple, Shiva as Arthanariswara. Several prominent Hindutva ideologues, including a local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) functionary, were initially vociferous in their opposition to this "insult" to Hinduism; eventually, the campaign was taken forward by a set of caste groups owing allegiance to the intermediate Kongu Vellala or Gounder caste. These men came up with their own reason for feeling hurt: they proclaimed the book dishonoured Gounder women.

Vested Interests

Murugan was completely surprised by this outburst, and shocked by the venomous turn it took on social media, where he and his spouse were subjected to sexist and misogynist abuse. As matters got worse, he began to wonder if some vested interests were not behind the whole business. Some time ago, he had written a set of essays on what are known as "broiler" schools (a possible reference to how these schools are run like poultry-breeder farms), which literally shut up children writing their class XII exams in schoolrooms for two years and goad them into a marks-based meritocracy irrespective of whether these children can handle the mechanical and punitive regime imposed on them. Many of these schools are run by men of the Gounder caste. Murugan had also written in praise of a conscientious collector of his district, who put firm systems in place for running a transparent administration and therefore earned the ill-will of those who felt threatened by his policies.

However this may be, the Gounder caste organisations that rallied against him remain in the shadows: their fliers, posters and pamphlets do not bear their names. Except for one known casteist leader, no one has come out in the open. On the other hand, these organisations obviously enjoy clout and possess resources: they claim to have printed over 10,000 copies of the “offending” pages from Murugan’s book to be burned in public. They managed to impose a hartal in Tiruchengode town and most importantly they succeeded in browbeating the district administration into heeding their so-called hurt sentiments. Meanwhile, as is their wont, the book's original critics have chosen to speak in a variety of tongues: the RSS and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claim that they are not about to ask for books to be banned; another caste Hindu group – the Sengunthars – however insists that it wants the book banned because it offends Hindu sentiment.

At the “peace” meeting called for by the district revenue officer to resolve the tension, Murugan apparently came close to breaking point. This is not surprising – the terms of the peace meeting were set by those who broke it in the first place, and they literally dictated the nature of the “settlement” they wanted, which government officials were all too happy to parrot and repeat, their argument being that they wished to avoid a law-and-order situation. Local bureaucracy – and the police who could not be unaware of the caste groups involved – were clearly complicit in what followed. They did not and would not protect Murugan's fundamental rights – for them Article 19 did not exist nor for that matter any of the other freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of India.

It is unlikely that all those arraigned against Murugan at the police station had read what he had written, though some clearly had. However, the rallying cry of “Gounder women's honour at stake” proved an opportune, cynical and emotive slogan to bind them into a caste brotherhood that would brook no insult to “their” women and by implication their caste honour. In the event, Murugan decided to submit to their viciousness, as if he was soiled by what until recently had been a loved vocation – so scorned and abused it was. Eyewitness accounts of the so-called peace meeting point fingers at the revenue officer whose harangue targeted the writer in harsh and unrelenting terms.

Complex Oeuvre

While Perumal Murugan’s *Mathorupagan* has pushed him into the national limelight, this novel is but an element in a complex oeuvre devoted to the creation and dissection of life-worlds sustained by caste. Caste emerged as a legitimate subject of contemporary Tamil literature with dalit writing. Literature produced by dalit writers set new standards for representation – devoted as it was to describing and damning the sham, hypocrisy, cruelty and violence of our social order, in the context of the everyday, labour relations, sexual cultures. This literature proved unsettling, and challenged the implicit caste imagination at work in most texts and thus rendered “caste” as much an aesthetic category as a social one.

Perumal Murugan has been writing for over two decades now, and his fiction may be viewed

in the context of the challenges posed by dalit literature. His fictional world is populated with the underclass, both poor dryland farmers (Gounder peasants) and dalit (Chakkiliar) agricultural labourers. An acute social critic, his creations occupy a defined geography, the Tiruchengode landscape, with its tough and unyielding soil and live, love and work in a far from idyllic village universe. *Koolla Madari* (translated as Seasons of the Palm) features tales of childhood spent in the harsh glare of caste hierarchy, where tender and unequal friendships barely survive their unjust social context. *Kanganam* is about the inability of a Gounder peasant to find a bride: The hapless peasant remains tied to his land and a regimen of harsh labour that he is part of and which he regulates, while his childhood dalit friend, freed from the bind of agricultural labour and open to new work opportunities, is more mobile and a man of the world in a way he is not. In addition, the latter is happily married and the father of three children!

Murugan's peasants are hard-working, dour and harsh on themselves, and as is evident in *Koolla Madari* and *Nizhal Muttram* (translated as Current Show), they practice untouchability and maintain social hierarchy with determined toughness, notwithstanding the fact that Gounder men are not averse to illicit sexual liaisons with women from the Chakkiliar community. Their aggression is at once intimate and violent, making for a society from which dalits are all too glad to flee. While Murugan is unrelenting in his criticism of the Gounders, he is sensitive to what sustains them: their love of the land, their willingness to labour, the inner strength and independence of Gounder peasant women. Such women are present in all his novels, in turn, strong and rigid, compassionate and hateful, irreverent and custom-bound.

Mathorupagan's female protagonist Ponna is not a victim-wife who is taunted by society at large on account of her childlessness. She is a hard working peasant herself, and her desire to get pregnant is as much on account of her labour as it is of her sense of fertility. If she can make her field bloom, she reasons why can't she get pregnant - productive and reproductive labour are seamlessly linked in a manner that maps sexual and caste worlds onto each other in an almost perfect fit.

Loyalty and Criticism

Murugan's careful and sensitive treatment of small peasant life, in all its harshness, violence and beauty has earned him a faithful literary readership and also criticism, particularly from dalit writers from the region, who regard his writing as sentimental and negative, especially with regard to his portrayals of dalit lives. This is debatable: Murugan's dalits are not fighters, rather they are survivors and keenly creative men, and in this sense, are not as feisty as they could be. The point though is that his fiction is not about dalits, but rather peasant existence. It may be read as a chronicle of small peasant life, and one that follows the small peasant as he moved from a situation of dependence - on rain, the state - and towards a life of unpredictable ruin.

However Murugan is no mere chronicler. He is interested in the inner lives of his characters, and the social relationships that separate and connect them. Critical of the caste context and casteism rife in the peasant world, he is yet sensitive to the intimacies that survive this harshness: between dalit and Gounder caste children, a friendship, at once poignant and fraught; amongst young and dirt-poor dalit men, who exchange their life in the village for an uncertain yet exciting life in a small town; between a Gounder caste young man and a young dalit woman.

In this sense, his position on caste is neither strident nor programmatic, rather it is subtly critical and attentive to what caste does in an everyday sense - to the lives of those who control and those on whom power is imposed. His interest in the phenomenological details of caste everyday-ness is evident in another set of writings as well: a rather remarkable collection of short stories, published some years ago, which feature tales of defecation, shit, those who clean it, those who shit but will not clean their own dirt. Titled *Pee Kathaigal*, (Tales of Shit) this startling text is an indictment of how stigma and humiliation are built into bodily lives, and shape caste behaviour.

More recently, he has edited a volume of essays titled *Saathiyum Naanum*, (Caste and I). Comprising essays by students and members of a reading circle he convenes every month, the book speaks with pained dignity of how men and women from different caste groups, encounter caste in their lives and home and work environments. Of great sociological value, the writing is remarkably uncynical and even hopeful - responsible, tough and yet wondering of what it has set out to unearth, it sets standards for talking about caste that are neither romantic nor denunciatory about identity but which instead show how caste relations work, and what does that mean for those of us who want to reimagine social relations.

It is possible that at least some amongst the Hindu right are aware of what Murugan's work represents as are some amongst the Gounder caste networks. His position on caste is not what either group would like to countenance. A perverse politics of caste honour that mocks at everything he has attempted to do so far is calculated to both disarm and humiliate him - and meanwhile, this strategy affords the Hindu right an opportunity to secure a foothold amongst the intermediate castes in Tamil Nadu .

Gounder Politics

For nearly a decade and more, peasant castes such as the Gounders, especially the small and middle peasantry amongst them, have had to reckon with the crisis in agriculture. Already a shrinking lot, they find themselves at the far end of a class divide that separates them from the entrepreneurial amongst them. The latter meanwhile have sought to advance a politics of caste fraternity. As M Vijayabaskar, well known social scientist who has studied the region extensively, notes, this assertive politics works along two distinct axes: it demands state attention through a rhetoric of neglect; and strengthens caste boundaries

through a rhetoric of protection, control and aggression, directed at caste Hindu women and dalit men.

On the one hand, peasants, along with others, mobilise around “secular” demands, for better remunerative prices for their crop, increased reservation, adequate political representation for their kind, widening of livelihood prospects so that they can opt out of a hopelessly unprofitable agricultural economy. On the other hand, they seek to overcome internal class divides through a renewable appeal to caste solidarity, and what better way to forge the latter than invoke a sense of threatened caste honour? Thus a politics of gender and sexuality informs and shapes peasant caste assertion. This in turn expends itself in disciplining caste Hindu women and punishing those who – ostensibly – sin against them, be they dalits who dare fall in love with them or progressive writers or activists who address caste and gender concerns in tandem and critically.

Not so long ago, we were witness to how the Vanniyars another peasant caste, whose marginal segments are affected by the slow ruination of agriculture, responded to deeply felt frustration: In 2013, the Paataali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Vanniyar-based party torched the homes of upwardly mobile dalits in Dharmapuri – a punishment meted out to an entire community, because one amongst them married a Vanniyar woman, and this in a landscape known for cross-caste marriages, going back to the 1970s, when the radical left held sway here. This was “predictable” politics of the worst kind, falling into the pattern of violence against dalits who have lifted themselves out of a life of economic dependence and into autonomy, and which we witnessed in Kodiyankulam in southern Tamil Nadu two decades earlier. This entirely predictable action was followed by a larger campaign against “love” marriages that transgressed caste norms, which proved to be a sign of things to come. And sure enough, now we have the Gounders seeking to revenge “caste honour” and “women honour”.

Vulnerable Target

With the BJP’s electoral victory, caste organisations no doubt feel emboldened to draw on their ideological resources, and the Hindu right finds these organisations a constituency worth nurturing. In Murugan’s case, the Hindu right chose a victim that was unusual. Neither a minority person nor a left radical, he was a vulnerable target. Murugan wrote for a radical left magazine when younger, and he is open and consistent in his anti-caste politics, but he is not part of a recognisable “progressive” political constituency. Neither does he deploy a language of protest that identifies him as this or that sort of politicised individual. Besides, he had angered vested interests, in business and in local administration and that meant there would be implicit support – and resources made available – for a campaign directed at his work. As we know from the example of what transpired at Muzzafarnagar, the Hindu right works with local history and circumstance, and its fascism in the last instance is not merely ideological but opportune and cynical as well.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

As for the caste organisations, their rump comprises disgruntled peasants and aspirational small town men, employed in an amorphous service sector, whose discontent and frustration find vent in a politics of identity that is vacuous but compensatory in an immediate sense. In this sense, these organisations provide a sense of “home” and illusive belonging in a political economy that is competitive, divisive and extractive. Unless anti-caste and left activists work out a viable and imaginative political strategy to address the very real vulnerability of the marginal amongst intermediate caste groups while remaining critical of their caste sensibility, we may have to only constantly fire-fight battles whose terms are not set by us.