the bell faded away suggesting the end of everything. Was it an accident or a murder? The explanation is being given that the boiler became cold as there was no cover or shade over it (why not?) and the steam pressure was inadequate to operate the lift. But the rain was continuing from 5 pm; why was there a need to ensure that the boiler did not become cold? Moreover, bringing a boiler to the normal position of raising steam did not take more than 45 minutes, and here more than four hours time had been available.

A shift consists not only of the workers but the supervisors and officers, including the assistant manager, manager and engineers. Why were they not beside the trapped miners? Where were the general manager, the directors and the chairman for whom it would have taken hardly half an hour to reach the spot from their bungalows. There is a deep-rooted feeling among the workers that had any big boss been trapped inside, the boiler would have been ready within half an hour and the lift would have been operated. Everyone from the chairman to the general manager would have remained present at the pit-mouth to direct the safety operations and bag the president’s award.

The Gaslitand episode, whether an accident or a murder, would go down as the darkest spot in mining history. A heinous crime was perpetrated, maybe unintentionally, but the outcome of a long-practised callous attitude towards miners’ lives. It is as if the miners are not human beings and their deaths do not matter, except in the form of payment of a paltry compensation. So the crimes continue and the unrepentant officers’ association has been issuing provocative statements to prevent any punitive action against those guilty of gross dereliction of duty, presumably with the blessings of the top management. The first crime of negligence was compounded by that of delaying the rescue operation. It took more than 72 hours to stop the flow of the Katri river into the mines, something which could have been done within the 24 hours by mobilising the BCCL’s huge fleet of earth-moving machines. The third and worst crime is being committed in the form of the slow rate of dewatering, with the water level being lowered by no more than 3 ft per day. In other words, with the depth of water in the mine being more than 300 ft, it would take more than 100 days. In the process extinguishing all hope of some of the trapped miners – those saved by air-pockets – being rescued. In the Burra Dhemo colliery in September 1956, 11 workers were rescued after 19 days due to the presence of air-pockets. In the sprawling Gaslitand mine there are expected to be many air-pockets.

It is difficult to guess the effect, both moral and material, of the Gaslitand disaster on BCCL’s future business. BCCL had been losing money at the rate of Rs 1 crore per day even before Gaslitand. Already a section of the top officers have been spreading the word that BCCL could not survive and so should be closed or privatised. With this attitude the officers have failed to give the leadership in every crisis, whether in Dugdha (August 21) or Gaslitand (September 26). Another section of officers have been advocating reckless use of Article 28 of the Standing Orders which gives arbitrary powers to dismiss workers without any enquiry with a view to teaching duty and discipline to the workers by terror.

But now when Gaslitand has shown who are dutiful and disciplined and who are not, there should be a new start, resurrecting the good ‘half-pants culture’ of the collieries with the workers and officers, believing in one another and in the future of BCCL, move hand in hand in a new spirit of solidarity washing away the dead past.

Dalit Women Talk Differently

Gopal Guru

The independent and autonomous organisation of dalit women has the potential to counter dalit patriarchy from within and state-sponsored globalisation from without.

OVER the last several decades women’s issues have become a part of global public agenda. While it is due to their ceaseless struggles that women have acquired visibility at the global level, women’s assertion assumes particular expression by operating on a particular terrain shaped by forces of a particular country. The scenario of the women’s movement in India, particularly in the context of the Beijing conference, is characterised by simultaneous mobilisation of women by different autonomous feminist groups and by groups affiliated to formal political formations. In a situation, where the organisation of politics around difference has become a major feature of feminist politics, the organisation of dalit women around the notion of difference is bound to be a logical outcome. An independent and autonomous assertion of dalit women’s identity found its first expression in the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NDFW) at Delhi on August 11.

In order to understand the dalit women’s need to talk differently it is necessary to delineate both the internal and external factors that have bearing on this phenomenon. Some women activists apprehend that contingent factors like the upcoming Beijing conference were responsible for the national level meet at Delhi. It may be true that the all India mobilisation of dalit women, which is a culmination of such conferences previously held at Bangalore, Delhi and Pune during the last couple of years, was visualised by the dalit women activists keeping in view the representation of dalit women to Beijing conference. However, the issue of representing dalit women, both at the level of theory and politics, has erupted time and again in the discourse on dalit women. Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits).

Social location which determines the perception of reality is a major factor (as we shall see in the context of argument made by dalit women) make the representation of dalit women’s issues by non-dalit women less valid and less authentic. But this claim of dalit woman activist does not mean a celebration of plural practices of feminism. However, there are feminists who seek to understand the need to talk differently, keeping in mind certain external factors. For example, Gail Omvedt would link the dalit need to talk differently vis-a-vis the left forces to the betrayal of the promises given to the dalits by the latter. Ranjith Kohli shares the same opinion but rather differently. He says, “With the erosion of institutions, the unsettled controversies over public policies, and the growing uncertainty over ideological issues, as well as the decline of democratic functioning of the political process, faith in the capacity of the modern nation-state to provide a framework of both order and equity has declined, and so too the reliance on mainstream governmental and party political process. The result has been the rise of a series of movements as distinct from the earlier gainers of more specific economic movements such as trade union or cooperative movements.” Kohli calls this phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ a ‘discourse of descent’.

But focusing on certain external factors does not provide access to the complex reality of dalit women. For example the question of rape cannot be grasped merely in terms of class, criminality, or as a physiological aberration or an illustration of male violence. The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude. This differential experience was expressed by dalit women activists at the Delhi meet and also previously at a conclave organised by Satyashodhak Mahila Aghadi in Maharashtra. However, these activists lament that the caste factor does not get adequate recognition in the analysis done by non-dalit, middle-class, urbanised women activists.

Dalit women did appreciate feminist radicalism in the early phase of new peasant movements in Maharashtra. Yet, they did not approve of the ultimate subordination of the dalit voice to the dominant voice of the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra and the
Rayat Sangha in Karnataka. They questioned the populism of these peasant movements, who, representing the interests of rich farmers, entered into direct contradiction with the interests of dalit agricultural labourers over the issue of minimum wages.

Secondly, dalit women would not make common cause with the ‘moral economy’ advocated by the Shekari Sanghatana and its feminist supporters. They are of the opinion that the moral economy of the Sanghatana offered no solution to their poverty, instead it sought to naturalise their poor living conditions. Dalit women are also not well disposed to the eco-feminist call for development of environmental consciousness. In fact, dalit men and women from Kannad taluka of Aurangabad district upbraided the colonial worldview that was maintained by the social forestry department. Now, some environmentalists might remark that these dalit women lack ecological understanding. But the fact of the matter is that these dalits have been denied legitimate piece of land from the ceiling land which the village landlords still control. Further, the dalits do not have equal access to common property resources of the village. In fact, the experience of gram panchayats in Uttar Pradesh shows that an egalitarian distribution of landholding is a precondition for tension-free management of forest resources.

Thirdly, the claim for women’s solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and dalit women. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve subtle forms of caste discrimination as practised by upper caste upper class women against dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of dalit women in rural areas. The contradictions also take a violent form as when the Shiv Sena women attacked dalit women in Sawali village of Chandrapur district in 1988. Thus, beneath the call for women’s solidarity the dalit women make the terrain of nation-state more contested. Also the Indian state is keen on projecting itself as well-intentioned on gender issues and has sponsored the delegation of Indian women to Beijing. The state by incorporating women’s movement within the jurisdiction of its apparatus intends to ‘domesticate’ the movement. Hence, the crucial question which arises with regard to the NFDW is whether it will succeed in evading this trap of domestication. On the basis of available evidence it is possible to argue that dalit women can challenge the state and state-mediated dalit patriarchy. This was proved when dalit women of Bodha Gaya in Bihar who opposed the state’s decision to hand over land in the names of dalit men since their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in dalit literary conferences and institutions. This dissent brings to fore three things: (1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one’s gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (3) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently.

Firstly, defended independent assertion of dalit women should not be viewed by dalit men as divisive; instead, it ought to be seen as carrying positive emancipatory potential. It can lead to a meaningful engagement of their creative energies. Secondly, the autonomous mobilisation of dalit women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others. It has to be noted that though there are some non-dalit women activists sensitive to the caste dimensions of women’s exploitation, their stand has remained ambivalent regarding the critique of caste.

Dalit women’s claim to ‘talk differently’ assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, ‘talking differently’ can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of dalit woman to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ foregrounds the identity of dalit women.

Though it is difficult at this stage to make any definitive comments on the dalit women’s movement, one can question the validity of the above assumptions. There is a notable shift taking place in the location of dalit women. Dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated and employed than their counterparts from Karnataka. And it would be the former who would represent dalit women at Beijing. Thus, here too, a certain section of dalit women will be rendered anonymous. That is why the second point in the agenda of NFDW mentions the need to associate with grass roots dalit women. Further, for challenging male dominance in politics, dalit women are dependent on the state to create a space for them. This exposes them to the danger of co-option as was the case with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the process of empowerment of dalit women makes the terrain of nation-state more contested.

Besides these external factors, there are certain internal factors that have prompted dalit women to organise separately vis-a-vis the dalit men. In the post-Ambedkar period, dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed, an independent political expression of dalit women. This political marginalisation has been openly condemned by dalit women at the regional conferences of dalit women and at the Delhi meet.

It is not only in the political arena that dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, dalit women have criticised their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in dalit literary conferences and institutions. This dissent brings to fore three things: (1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (3) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently.

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THE electoral politics in Kerala has always been a topic of special interest for political scientists all over the globe. This is the fifth time since independence that polls to the local bodies in Kerala have been held. The first poll was in 1953, under the provisions of the then Travancore-Cochin Panchayat Act, 1950. The second election was held in 1963, after the formation of the state, in 1956 and the passing of Kerala Panchayath Act, 1960. The third time the people of Kerala exercised their franchise was after a long break of 16 years, in 1979. The fourth election to the local bodies was held in 1988.

The year 1994 witnessed the passing of two historic legislations for revamping the panchayats and municipalities in the state, following the footsteps of the 73rd and the 74th constitutional amendment acts passed by the centre. The Kerala Panchayati Raj Act, 1994 officially came into force on April 30, 1994 while the Kerala Municipalities Act, 1994 came into force on May 30, 1994. The basis of these two acts elections to the local bodies in 'Kerala have been held. The first phase, over 70 per cent voters in the rural areas exercised their franchise, due to the strict restrictions of the election commission on expenses, mass rallies and the use of electronic media were in a low profile.

Elections were held in two phases. In the first phase; over 70 per cent voters in Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Idukki, Ernakulam, Palakkad, Kasargod and Kozhikode districts exercised their franchise. On September 23, 1995. The remaining districts of Malappuram, Kollam, Wayanadu, Alappuzha, Kannur, Kottayam and Trissur went to the poll on September 25. In this phase, 72-75 per cent voters exercised their right to vote. Table 2 clearly illustrates the details of the districtwise polling percentage.

Janathipathya Samrakshana Samiti (JSS) extended their support to the UDF, while the Indian National League (INL) had some sort of electoral adjustment with the LDF, particularly in the northern Kerala. BJP, too, put up its candidates in a number of constituencies. The elections noticed an unprecedented increase in the number of independent candidates. Table 1 shows the number of candidates, fielded by major political parties.

The announcement of the poll stirred the people and political parties alike because, these were the first elections after vesting the PRIs, and Nagarapalikas with enormous powers. Both the parties resorted to street corner meetings and door-to-door canvassing in preference to public meetings. Due to the strict restrictions of the election commission on expenses, mass rallies and the use of electronic media were in a low profile.

The electoral statistics reveal that the ruling UDF could establish its dominance in 342 gram panchayats (34.54 per cent) and 45 block panchayats (29.6 per cent). It could win only 3 of the 14 district panchayats and 18 of the 54 municipalities. The district