

International workshop

Dalit Politics at the Crossroads

29 June 2022

Academic Conference Centre, Czech Academy of Sciences

Husova 4a, Prague

The results of the recent elections to the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly raise several questions concerning the Dalit politics in India. Does the unprecedented defeat of the Bahujan Samaj Party indicate a failure of the Dalit electoral politics? Or has the idea of upliftment of the unprivileged entered the political mainstream by being effectively dissolved and co-opted by the mainstream political parties, especially by the BJP? How do the traditional caste hierarchies transform themselves, how do they manifest themselves in politics and how are they being accepted by various disadvantaged groups? And finally, what are the future prospects and opportunities of the movements aiming at the emancipation of the marginalized castes and classes in India, be it through politics or through social change?

8:30–9:00 registration

9:00–10:30 opening session

Opening address

Táňa Dluhošová

Director of the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Keynote lecture: Introduction to Dalit Movement and Politics

Badri Narayan

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

10:40–12:00 Crisis of Dalit-Bahujan Movement

Badri Narayan

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

Issues, Agendas, Dictions, Language: Multiple Crises of the Dalit-Bahujan Movement

The recent Legislative Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh has proved that the Dalit-Bahujan movement in its organised form has not been able to do effective impact on electoral democratic politics. Why is this happening? Our observation suggests that the Dalit-Bahujan movement is on the verge of decline both as a social movement and as a political movement, and it is unable to address the changing desires of Dalit communities, especially Dalit youths and middle class. In my lecture I will try to explore deeper socio-political causes of organised Dalit-Bahujan movement in India and analyze the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election in the context of major epistemological and ontological questions.

Archana Singh

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

Lauh Virangana Mayawati: A Critical Analysis of the Trajectory of Image Making

The story of Mayawati (the leader of Bahujan Samaj Party) is the story of Dalit woman (gendered subaltern) with persistent determinations who ultimately become one of the most powerful leaders of India. This presentation is an exhaustive analysis of the dialogical relationship between a leader and the communities, in the context of his/her image construction, as a powerful leader to empower, awaken and consolidate the community members as a strong base on which his or her leadership will emerge.

This construction of image and discourses around it is a parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate a counter-discourse to formulate an oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests and needs. This is the creation of alternative histories and literature to deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of the upper caste, where they simultaneously struggle, resists and subverts the mainstream discourse of the world.

The presentation will examine the counter-narratives of marginality of Dalit women in these “contesting discourses” which came into existence as counter-discourse with “bhoga hua yatharth” (experiential reality), to deconstruct the notion of hegemonic mainstream discourse.

12:00–13:00 lunch break

13:00–14:00 Contemporary Challenges

Pavel Hons

Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences

From Mallar to Pallar and Back: Ideology of Devendrakula Velalars

Dalits are not a homogenous group as they differ in many respects, be it language, religion, traditional occupation, or their eating habits. They may also differ in their emancipation strategies and arguments they have gradually developed during their struggle. While all of them fight against untouchability and discrimination, their argumentation may differ on other questions. Most of them have espoused ideas of Dalit leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar, for whom the utmost objective was eradication of caste. Moreover he openly rejected Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Millions of Dalits followed his example and venerate him as a supreme leader till this day.

Devendrakula Velalars are an exception to the rule. Instead of eradication of caste they seem to prefer to strengthen their caste identity and to move up the social ladder. They try to embed history of their community in the history of South India and to prove that the three famous Tamil dynasties, i.e., Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras, originated from amongst them. It was only after ascendancy of the Telugu speaking Nayaks that their proud name Mallar was changed into derogatory Pallar, they were bereft of their land and turned into untouchables. Within the religious sphere they argue for their strong relationship with Shiva and several important temples, most importantly the Murugan temple at Palani.

In short they are trying to prove that they used to be an important dignified community for which they are trying to find evidence in old manuscripts, temple inscriptions and other sources. The aim of the paper is to follow the intellectual journey of the main ideologues and intellectuals of this caste and to match their arguments with recent steps taken by their political representation.

Alexandra de Heering

Université de Namur

The "Shadows" in the Archives: an Investigation into Dalit Portrait Photography

As a scholar in Dalit studies, I have always had two major concerns: to understand the circumstances enabling effective steps for social mobilisation and emancipation; and to identify the (best) possible first-hand sources to document it. Initially, I have chosen to work at the micro level – in two cakkiliyar/arunthaiyar communities of Western Tamil Nadu –, in the spirit of micro history, using the tools of oral history. The oral narratives I gathered enabled me to reach an understanding of the slow process of social change and its intricacies within the two communities. It also urged me to venture into the exploration of self-narration and memory, be it individual or collective.

Later, in the process of building up a visual archive of Tamil vernacular portrait photography, I started considering photography as a potential source for documenting the dalit political engagement and emancipation process, and its visual expressions. Photographs – either subjected or chosen – of Dalits are plenty, and yet they remain largely invisible, or in the shadow, in the institutional archives. While they have so far been deemed insignificant by most scholars, they are charged with intentions and meanings that ought to be explored.

Drawing from a sample of old photographs and interviews collected during several fieldwork sessions in the Coimbatore region in 2018 and 2019, I aim at studying the progressive negotiation of a space for Dalits' self-representation – giving them the capacity to see and to be seen – within a medium that was initially solely captured by, and affordable for, the powerful. For communities enduring long-lasting inequalities and underrepresentation, bringing an understanding to the boom of self-representation, facilitated by modern digital tools and social networks as well as by much older visual processes, is, I believe, a major issue for the social sciences.

In many places around the world, when its access got democratized, photography has been used, by "invisible" individuals or communities, as a proof or a mirror of the undergoing transformations in their history and identities. As much as it can contribute to amplifying the power of those producing these images, photographic portraits can also serve as sites of resistance or of symbolic reparation or even as agents of change, by acting on the social representations of the world and of oneself. In the Tamil context which I am focusing on, this has translated into the development of a singular visuality that, even when recalling the visual rhetoric of the dominants, can in some cases be interpreted as the expression of an emerging dissident (sub)culture, or even as acts of social, cultural, and political resistance to the dominant order. To this end, the notions of public and private texts developed by James Scott (2019), distinguishing the attitudes of the powerless/lower caste in the public and in the private space, can, when applied to the photographic portrait, help understanding what is at play in Dalits' photographic portraits.

14:10–15:00 discussion

Moderator: Jiří Krejčík, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Please register at jiri.krejcik@soc.cas.cz by 27 June 2022.

The workshop is organized jointly by the Institute of Sociology and the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences within the Research Programme "Global Conflicts and Local Interactions", Strategy AV21.