

# Dalit Identities and The Dialectics of Oppression and Emancipation in a Changing India: The Tamil Case and Beyond

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Among the many changes that have occurred in India during the last two decades, the social dynamics of self-assertion of the so-called lower castes is one of the most significant. The new economic policy that has opened India to global market forces, to a degree unprecedented since 1947, the rise of the Hindu nationalism that has brought the BJP to power, not to mention the open nuclearization of the subcontinent are, of course, major events transforming India in decisive ways. But, there are more profound social changes taking place that affect the very core of Indian society. Its most fundamental and specific character, the caste system, is under tremendous pressure, which can be ascertained in two different ways. Firstly, the caste system of regulated hierarchized relationships — the old *jajmani* system — has been virtually destroyed by a series of far-reaching developments: the family/caste relationships which ordered status and professional occupations, the mode of production and the ideological basis on which it has developed for long are now strongly affected by the widespread market relations and by the political maneuvering nurtured by fifty years of universal franchise. Secondly, the decline of caste boundaries — as a system governing and ordering the patterns of relations between the dominant and the dominated, between high status and low status groups, between patrons and clients — has not necessarily weakened the caste *per se*, revealing a specifically Indian social paradox: to a large extent the struggle against the ideological and material hierarchies of the caste system attacks the system, not caste. To dismantle the prevalent order of power, the so-called low castes — the OBCs, Other Backward Classes in administrative terminology — have fought for caste-based reservations of college seats and

government jobs. The OBCs have also used castes as vote banks favoring either national parties dedicated to their cause (such as the Janata Dal led by Prime Minister V.P. Singh who launched the Mandal crusade for extended reservations in 1990), or political formations which address OBCs' interests in specific states, such as the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh, or the Bihar Unit of the Janata Dal (now Rashtriya Janata Dal) run by Laloo Prasad Yadav.

In this context, the changes could not but affect the worst endowed Indians, those traditionally called the Untouchables, whom Mahatma Gandhi called Harijans (the sons — and daughters — of Hari, one of Vishnu's names), and whom the Administration calls the Scheduled Castes. They may also be labeled in metaphoric and generic regional denominations, as the First Dravidians — Adi Dravidar — in Tamilnadu. They are the Dalits in today parlance. Dalits was first a self-coined militant denomination which appeared in Maharashtra in 1972,<sup>1</sup> and means, in the Marathi language, the trampled down, the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> It is now the acknowledged and politically correct form all over India and emphasizes the most dominant characteristic of their social and political existence.

The key question is simple to formulate but very difficult to answer: how could those who have been for millenia placed beyond the pale of the *varnas* which order the "touchable" majority castes of the Hindu society emancipate themselves? They have been oppressed not just economically or even physically, but also ideologically. Presumed to be impure by the twice-born castes who believe that they pay in their present reincarnation for the bad *karma* of their previous lives, the Dalits have traditionally

been relegated to the extreme margins of society, not only socially but also geographically, in much of rural India they have to live in separate hamlets, away from the main villages whose temples they cannot enter.

In this paper, we shall address the issue of oppression and emancipation by paying attention to the Dalits from Tamilnadu, the southeastern Indian state known for its vigorous identity politics articulated by the Dravidian movement. We shall begin at the grassroots level by exploring the legacies of the past through the life-story of a female agricultural laborer, Viramma; she expresses perfectly, yet without extraordinary drama or cheap self-pity, the perceptions of those who have internalized the logic of caste oppression and hope for an improvement in their life through the largesse of the upper castes. We shall thereafter provide a larger perspective, on the dynamics of change which pervade, from a Dalit standpoint, their position in society. These changes raise an intricate but decisive question: which new identity will sustain the emancipation process? Must it evolve through integration into the mainstream, or must it acknowledge a very specific and traumatic experience, untouchability and its stigma, which calls for a struggle against the mainstream? The issues at stake are not only social and economic, but also cultural and political.

Certainly, we do not pretend to provide a comprehensive picture of Tamil Dalits. Our purpose is to call attention to a few noticeable patterns and to raise a few significant questions relevant to an all-India perspective.

### I. Strength and Submission: Viramma's Life-Story

Before considering the Dalit movement in Tamilnadu in the 1990s, it would be useful to draw from the narrative of an humble illiterate Tamil woman — let us call her Viramma — who, through the 1980s, once mutual trust was established, narrated her life story and philosophy in great detail using the most vivid and simple words.<sup>3</sup> Her story is of great interest not only for its vividness and frankness, but also for its gusto. It certainly provides a first-hand account of what was and still is, to a large extent, the daily life, the joys and sorrow, beliefs and the psyche of millions who share the life and the views of this mother of twelve children — only three of whom have survived — residing in a village amongst paddy fields, in an enclave of former French Pondicherry territory hemmed in by Tamilnadu, a four-hour coach drive from Chennai (formerly Madras). But Viramma's story also sheds light on what is discussed here: the dialectics of oppression and emancipation of those who for ages have been subjected to the scourge of untouchability. She conveys the views of the older generation, and offers an image of those sometimes labeled "the Subalterns," not always in line with the "subaltern" school of historians of India — who emphasize that behind the established history, there is another history to decipher: the mute or the open struggles of the dominated classes. They are right: there is a mute history to discover and recover, but it is not always a history of protest. Like Viramma, most of the "subalterns" have probably had to balance an aspiration for

a better life with the strong consciousness of what their *dharma* of submission is supposed to be, all the while experiencing the full force of the dominant classes and the state power machinery eager to crush even the most incipient forms of protest. This does not prevent struggles, but it does reduce their occurrence.

Let us forget for a moment the new vocabulary — in 1996 Viramma was still ignoring the word "dalit" — and call Viramma by the caste name she uses for herself: Paraiyar, the caste of funeral drummers who play the *parai* drum and whose name, in a slightly altered form, was diffused throughout the world by the French and the British during the time of the East India Companies. From the most numerous local "untouchable" caste name, Paraiyar, they coined a generic word: pariah.

Viramma is a Paraiyar whose daily life revolves around her family, hard work and caste culture. But as "one has to fill one's belly," Viramma's life also centers on the patronage of the main local landlord to whom she has become attached under the traditional bondage link between the master and his *adimai*. Viramma sees this status as one combining dependence and a degree of protection, for the master is her usual recourse in case of necessity, particularly when money has to be borrowed to meet the costs of important social occasions: funerals, weddings or other ceremonies in the family. This pattern of personal relations between the dominant and the dominated is extremely important, for it acts as a considerable obstacle preventing Viramma and others like her from joining a caste or class line of struggle to better their situation. Like many older Untouchables, Viramma appreciates the few improvements she has seen in her lifetime. Still she clings to the traditional perception of what the Pariah's *dharma* is: a sense of submission combined with a sense of duty. The internalization of the dominant paradigm of submission does not, however, prevent her from either joking about Brahmins (for she depends on Reddiars landlords, not on Brahmin masters) or from identifying herself completely with the Paraiyar culture, which distinguishes itself from upper caste norms in numerous ways, including a much freer speech, a much greater non-religious inspiration, and a strong sense of humor. Though not blind to the domination she faces, lamenting and complaining occasionally, she does not dwell on her misery. Her strength, her capacity to face terrible hardships, the way her culture sustains her moorings — she is a singer with a large repertoire and a born storyteller — are impressive.

Few of the theoretical interpretations by foreign scholars on Dalits in Tamilnadu fully highlight the complexity of Viramma's life. She shares, as Michael Moffatt underlines,<sup>4</sup> the consensus that places the Dalits at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and accepts the rationale of a system based on "purity," a system that orders the hierarchy among the different Dalit castes as much as it does between them and the rest of Hindu society. However, Viramma also illustrates the view of Katherine Gough, who stressed the distinctive features of the Dalit sociocultural world, freer than the inhibited brahminical model, and based on an admixture of

less authoritarian family structure and a greater caste solidarity.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Mencher's analysis,<sup>6</sup> Viramma does not basically challenge the dominant values. She accepts the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. Mencher's finding is, however, much more prevalent amongst the younger generation, which Viramma finds disturbing. She thus tries to calm her son who questions the rationality of God's discriminations, and condemns the exploitation of Dalits by the dominant castes. Believing that things are better "when everyone is in his own place," Viramma, like many elders, is afraid of the militancy of the younger generation, which dismisses the legitimacy of the ritual duties of the Paraiyars and which silently asserts itself in such aspects of daily life as the way to dress after fieldwork, the way to walk in the main village street, or the manner in which to speak. While Viramma takes pride in adhering to the Pariah's *dharma*, her son, exposed to the modern reformist political discourses, wishes to uphold his self-respect. Viramma fears this aspiration to full emancipation and believes that controversy and protest are risky because power remains in the hands of the dominant castes.

## II. A Twin Legacy: Dominance and Protest

Bare statistics might underline the size of the problem of untouchability. Scheduled Castes accounted for almost 11 million people in Tamilnadu — 19 percent of the state's population — and in several districts these castes account for as much as 25 percent, higher than the all-India average of 16.5 percent (in 1991, there were 138 million Dalits in India). Such figures, however, give no indication of the extent to which untouchability is still practiced. While some change is noticeable in this regard, traditional patterns of contempt and submission have not disappeared. In Tamilnadu, the old *paraceri* where the Paraiyars have to live has always been built away from the *ur*, the main quarter of the village where high castes as well as "backward castes" (another denomination for OBCs) reside. Worse, even the new "colonies" (the local modern euphemism for Dalit quarters) built up by the government for Scheduled Castes are still generally erected apart. Temple entry is still prohibited in the *ur* for the *ceri* dwellers, and the age-old compulsions concerning funerals and rituals calling for the *paraimelam* (the "Pariah orchestra") are still expected to be fulfilled. Tea stalls and arak shops do serve Dalit patrons, but usually keep two sets of glasses so that Untouchables may not "pollute" the glasses used by others. Despite recent changes, the usual perception of Dalits amongst high castes and even backward classes remains derogatory: village Paraiyars continue to be stereotyped as ritually impure, "uncivilized," uncultured, unsophisticated and quarrelsome. Mixed marriages of Dalits with other castes are rare in town. They would not be accepted in the villages.

The socioeconomic status of most Dalits is still very depressed. Most of them (72 percent) are landless agricultural laborers. Dalits account for 23 percent of the rural population in Tamilnadu, but own only seven percent of the land, and even those who do own land have, for the most

part, very small plots. In terms of access to amenities, they are well below the state average. Ninety percent of rural Dalits are still illiterate; the figure for non-Dalits is 10 percent.<sup>7</sup> With the diffusion of capitalism in rural India, agricultural laborers are progressively less attached to the landlord families as *adimai*, and try to make a living as day wage laborers or contract for a specific operation such as the peanut harvest, paddy transplantation, cutting sugarcane and so on. That does not necessarily signify a total break with landlord families. But this emerging proletariat has to pay for its relative freedom by losing whatever protection the master previously bestowed on his attached laborers. The extent of this "protection" varied according to the master's benevolence, but was also, for the most part, a result of two non-competing rationales: on the one hand the "established wisdom" ruled by the *swadharna* paradigm, defining the duty of everyone according to his/her caste (the dharmic landlord thus has a duty vis-à-vis his *adimai*); and on the other hand, what there is has been called the iron law of wages, such as granting the workers only just enough to reproduce the workforce or making loans to impoverished laborers thereby strengthening the bond of dependancy on their creditor.

Dalits are not only experiencing poverty; they are also victims of violence. The official registries of violence do not tell the whole story, for all acts of violence are not reported to the courts. If murders are somewhat difficult to conceal, rapes and beatings (including in police stations) are clearly underestimated.<sup>8</sup> The press covers and comments on big events, but not all acts of violence are reported. On the other hand, the increased number of reports and registrations does not necessarily express an aggravation of the situation: they may testify to the fact that more and more victims, or more and more concerned militants and support groups, make public what was previously concealed. For each tragedy that draws national attention, such as the burning alive in 1969 in Kilvenmani (Thanjavur district) of 42 Dalits, including children, as a response to a strike for better wages, how many cases are forgotten, or ignored? Besides raw brutality and open murders, one must not forget the silent violence of everyday life, the violence of poverty, debt and bondage, the violence of discrimination, the humiliation Dalit men, women, and children experience. Even if practices associated with untouchability recede to some extent, the "change of hearts" that Gandhi called for is still largely unrealized.

Must we conclude that radical thought and social reform movements have had no impact on the traditional mindset? Such a question does not have an easy and definite answer. The *bhakti* movement launched in South India around the VIIIth century A.D. personalized the relationship between God and the devotee, beyond the hierarchy of castes and without the esoteric knowledge and the ritualistic intercession of Brahmin priests. However, the movement quickly became part of mainstream Hinduism, and did not result in the disappearance of untouchability. In the ranks of the Saivite Nayanmar saints we find an "untouchable,"

Nandanar, just as we find Tiruppanalvar in the ranks of the Vaishnava Alvars. Both could approach God, but only after a purifying ordeal: the *bhakti* movement, after all, gave everyone an avenue to approach God personally, whatever his or her rank in the caste hierarchy. Its goal was not to dismantle the caste system.

From the 19th century onwards, a number of social reformers emerged in Tamilnadu, as in other parts of India, with a discourse against caste prejudices. Different trends can be noted in this connection: the *siddhar* mystico-ascetic tradition as rejuvenated by Ramalingaswami (1823-1874), the nationalist humanism represented by Subramanian Bharati (1882-1921) and Bharatidasan (1891-1964), and the Marxist approaches of novelists such as Jayakanthan or Pavannan.

Tamilnadu, like other parts of India, has a neglected history of petitioning by the most oppressed, starting with a petition sent to the British in 1799 by Untouchables facing eviction from their huts close to Fort Saint George in Madras. More significant was the creation of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1857. Petitions for using the term Adi-dravida and prohibiting the word "paraiyah," for reservations in scholarships, government jobs, seats in village panchayats and municipal councils started in the last decades of the 19th century. Journals and magazines multiplied, including *Tamilan* in 1907, whose editor, Ayoti Das, converted to Buddhism in 1898 and founded the Indian Buddhist Association in Madras two years later.<sup>9</sup>

But much larger moves against the impact of a rigid caste system were brewing at that time. They were launched not by the Panchamas, but by those who would call themselves the non-Brahmins, a designation which could well have been complemented by an additional attribute: non-Dalits. The Non-Brahmin Movement, founded in 1916, fought against the disproportionate Brahmin hegemony in administrative services and professional circles. Soon after, its political arm, the Justice Party, gained provincial power in the Madras Presidency under British rule. But this awakening of the well-off Non-Brahmins was mainly the surge of a bourgeois group of rich entrepreneurs, lawyers, bankers and *zamindars*, most of them from castes of "fair" status, for the expansion of their economic interests, better social recognition and a due share in political power. The fate of the "depressed classes" in general, and of the "Untouchables" in particular, was not their concern. On the other hand, the Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925 by E.V. Ramaswami Naicker, had a much stronger impact. Periyar ("The Great One" as Naicker was later named) explicitly combined his struggle for the Dravidians (an ethnic concept excluding the Brahmins supposedly from the Aryan North from the rest of the South Indian population) with a frontal attack against Hinduism and its ideological justification for the caste system and gender inequality. To a large extent, the Self-Respect Movement was an immediate consequence of the 1924 Vaikom agitation in Travancore that Naicker had been drawn into.<sup>10</sup> Naicker was by then a prominent Congress leader, but had become utterly disappointed by the

response of the Congress to the Vaikom agitation. Naicker left the Congress Party, presaging a radicalization of his sociopolitical views, which discarded the viability of a democratic electoral process in fighting either untouchability or, more generally, "the evil of caste."

To summarize, the 1920s and the 1930s saw three distinct trends in the ideological attack on untouchability: the first embodied in Gandhi, a Hindu not opposed to caste, but actively condemning untouchability as a shameful perversion of Hinduism; the second in Ambedkar, a Dalit struggling for political rights of the Untouchables through reservation and already thinking about taking the Dalits away from the clutches of Hinduism through conversion to Buddhism; and the third in Periyar, who simultaneously attacked caste and religion, linking the liberation of man — and woman — with a militant atheism. In the 1940s Periyar assumed the mantle of the ailing Justice Party, and transformed it into the Dravidar Kajagam (the Association of Dravidians). His aim was to use the D.K. as a platform for waging an ideological struggle against brahminical views and for mobilizing thinkers and agitators who opposed in the stultifying effects of religion and brahminical paradigms on the otherwise great Tamil culture and society.

In 1949 the D.K. experienced a split when C.N. Annadurai broke away to launch the Dravida Munnetra Kajagam (Association for the Emancipation of the Dravidians). Annadurai's main point of departure from Periyar was his acceptance of the electoral process. He thus discarded the extremist atheist militancy of the D.K. while keeping many of its goals. The Dravidian movement cannot thus be reduced to a mere chauvinist anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin, anti-North regionalism, driven by ethnic secessionism. In its early years the DMK, under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, had a strong social reformist dimension. It is precisely this combination of a social agenda with an ethnic card which pushed the DMK to power in 1967. Since then, the Dravidian parties, either the DMK, which split in 1972 or its AnnaDMK rival, have been continually in power in Tamilnadu.

Dravidian parties have consistently implemented a strong reservation policy in favor of the Scheduled Castes. In addition to positive discrimination, they have strongly contributed (particularly the DMK in its pre-electoral speeches) to the dissemination of an anti-caste discourse calling for equality down to the remotest village. We must not underestimate the impact of what some might discard as mere rhetoric: words, even if not always followed by acts, are not innocuous, and help to change the mindset, particularly of the young generations born under the DMK or the AnnaDMK rules. But this rhetoric was neither adequate for improving dramatically the socio-economic status of most of the Dalits, nor did it prevent the Dravidian parties from using the caste labels for gaining electoral constituencies. Despite Periyar and the atheist Dravida Kajagam, religion is as alive in Tamilnadu as it is in the rest of India.

This does not mean, however, that nothing has

changed in the life of the Dalits since the 1940s. As in other states, a set of policies has slightly improved the fate of the Scheduled Castes, especially through the distribution of housing sites, street water taps and electricity, access to schools, specific subsidies or benefits in the implementation of rural development programs. However, land reforms and poverty alleviation programs have not made a breakthrough, which perhaps explains why there was no radical change in the status of most of the rural Scheduled Castes landless agricultural laborers who constitute most of the Tamil Dalits.

Dalits today are certainly more aware of their rights than before. But the weight of the Dravidian parties whose resilience was founded on a large sociopolitical base encompassing the Scheduled Castes and the Backward Classes (all supposed to benefit from the 69 percent reservation of seats in colleges, universities and government jobs) did not leave much space for an autonomous Dalit political party until recently. One has also to appreciate how, after the ADMK assumed power in 1977, the Dravidian movement came to be linked with the extraordinary charisma of the two successive film stars turned chief ministers, M.G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalitha, whose politics banked on populism to win elections and foreclosed any radical move.

Limited emancipation was therefore perceived by many Dalits — and by Viramma — as the result of two processes, quite often linked together: the benevolence of the masters on one hand and, on the other, the result of decisions taken at the State level and implemented within the existing structure of political power relations from the top to the bottom through the dual network of the bureaucracy and party representatives.

### III. Beyond Improvement: The Need for Emancipation

The emancipation of Dalits of course requires much more than their material progress, no matter how necessary this first step may be. The social and developmental policies of the central or state governments, despite their limitations and shortcomings, have brought changes in the Dalit “colonies,” and quite a number of higher castes people are apprehensive about the implications. Such resentful villagers can be both high caste landlords who think that decidedly too much is being given to those “Untouchables,” as well as people of modest means and status who feel aggrieved that the Scheduled Castes can receive government loans at better rates than themselves or stipends for going to college. Rural Dalits now also have access to symbolic and practical sites, although village temples where other castes go are still barred to them. They can, however, enter the village school, a decisive change, notwithstanding the continuing prejudice of some teachers and a high dropout rate. For some OBCs living a difficult life, those below them, though stigmatized, are still seen as unwanted competitors. We must therefore distinguish two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, types of reactions inside and outside the Dalit fold. On the one hand, attention is simply directed towards the material improvement of Dalit life. On the other,

physical destitution and ideological submission have been so linked together for so long that any material improvement is interpreted as triggering a new emancipative thinking amongst the Dalit. In a world where everything is a sign, to wear a fashionable nylon sari, to smoke a cigarette in the village street, to take a request to the bureaucracy is to testify to changing attitudes.

This is a key issue. For the Virammas, any sign of material improvement confirms their views that positive changes can be obtained from within the existing social structure. Maintaining the traditional humility while accepting whatever benefits come from the government is thus seen as the best path to follow, since it does not directly oppose the powerful and thus reduces the risk of reprisal. Many Dalits from the younger generation, however, assert themselves and object, even publicly, to the rationale behind the discrimination. They are better aware of their rights, and keener to use their vote and the political process for articulating their aspirations, their sense of self-respect and their dignity.

Emancipation is thus firstly an internal process. It involves a process of liberation of the self from the old internalized prejudices. But what are the goals? Generally, the model for emancipation is set (even if unwillingly) by the upper castes themselves. For many Dalits, emancipation is tantamount to an adoption of mainstream behavior. The ultimate goal, in this process, is a dissolution of the “pariahhood” or “dalitness.” To free oneself from the traditional bonds and enter a free labor market is just a first step. To speak and wear clothes as others do, to have access to what they enjoy, whether in the village space, in the sphere of power, in the professions, or in the religious world — these are the many tests of the real possibilities of not just improving one’s material life but more generally, and as importantly, breaking the old discrimination barriers enclosing Dalits in their multi-faceted submissive status. Such a model of successful emancipation implies integration of at least some Dalits in the mainstream society. Confirmation of emancipation through assimilation comes when honors are bestowed upon a Dalit by members of upper castes themselves. This is true all over India when a Dalit is elected or nominated at a post of high responsibility. The most significant case in this regard was the almost unanimous election in 1997 of the first Dalit Indian President, K.R. Narayanan.<sup>11</sup>

In Tamil Nadu, where, as in other states, no government is formed without at least one or two Dalit ministers.<sup>12</sup> One case, at least, illustrates that such recognition is not limited to politics but can also occur in the mainstream cultural sphere: Ilayaraja, the music composer, is enjoying success not only in the film world but is also donating money for the renovation of the prestigious Ranganathaswami temple at Srirangam, one of the most sacred of Hindu sites in South India, and has even won the blessings of the senior *jagad-guru* of Kanchipuram, the most eminent Brahmin pontif of Tamil Nadu.

This is only one side of the picture. To enjoy the same rights of justice and equality — concepts embodied in the preamble of the Indian Constitution<sup>13</sup> — is of paramount importance. But the question remains for the Dalits: are they just ideally free to do as others do, or do they have other ways open to them for charting the route to emancipation? There is now an assertive trend among the Dalits which refuses to incorporate the dominant cultural values as a *modus operandi* of emancipation. Dalit cultural associations, groups such as the Forum for Dalit Culture (*Dalit panpattu peravai*) and Dalit journals are trying to open new ways in this regard. A new Tamil Dalit literature — varied in style and ideological content — portrays Dalit life and denounces the existing order. While the beginnings of this literature can be traced to the Christian Sri Lankan novelist Daniel, its major exponents today are the novelist Poomani, the short-story writers Idhayavendan and Devibharati, the writer Bama and the playwright Gunasekharan, to mention only the most prominent examples.<sup>14</sup> The rejection of the dominant cultural values is multifaceted, and of course does draw on outside influence such as other Dalit literary or political experiences (leading Marathi Dalit author Arjun Dangle, for example, has been translated into Tamil), or the works of revolutionary Marxist intellectuals. On a much larger scale, the influence of Ambedkar, whose writings have been extensively translated in Tamil recently, is beginning to rival that of Marx and Periyar. Symbolically, the three of them appear on the cover of K. Manokaran's *Varalarrup por*,<sup>15</sup> where they are portrayed as being attacked by a Brahmin and an orthodox Marwari (a regional group of merchant castes from Rajasthan, whose members have established themselves in bazaars all over India, many also being moneylenders). At a more theoretical level, the writings of Raj Gautamam reassess completely the cultural history of Tamil Nadu.<sup>16</sup> Gautamam traces the roots of the age-old oppression afflicting the Dalits to the perverted values of the caste system "imported" from the North. In such a radical analysis, the cultural values of the high castes are no longer a recognized model to adopt for joining the mainstream: they are the definite sources of inhumanity. Dalit-ness may sometimes join hands with those pleading for the greatness of the Tamils. With Gautamam, however, Dalit-ness defies established Tamilness, calling for a new culture on which freedom may be based. Emancipation, then, is not only a liberation from social bondage but also a construction of cultural tools required for alternative modes of thinking. Amongst such tools, urban Dalit intellectuals have created, beyond the established publishing houses, numerous small literary and ideological journals and poetry magazines. Although often with modest circulations and short-lived, such publications have repeatedly reappeared. These *ciruppattirikai* have long been a resource for hundreds of groups moving new ideas, and not just in Dalit circles in Tamilnadu.

In addition to words, images also convey a part of the new message. It could be plain drawings, such as those adorning some recent publications. Some of them are explic-

itly militant, and contest the dominant Hindu paradigm: on the cover of *Yuttam Totarum*, a collection of Subbaiya's revolutionary poems, Ambedkar is seen trampling a copy of Manu's laws, the ancient Hindu code.<sup>17</sup> There are also unusual cover photographs which go one step further by showing objects that refer, either directly or indirectly, to what the Hindu purity criteria derogatorily associate with the "Untouchables": a large bloody piece of beef hanging at a butcher's stall on the cover of Kurusu Sacrats' *Navval*,<sup>18</sup> or a rotten mummy in a fetal position on the cover of a collective "metafictional novel."<sup>19</sup> Such images are not just a pale copy of western surrealism, although in both instances their deliberate intent was to shock the conformists. More deeply, those images of beef and blood, of birth and death, express strongly the reappropriation by authors of the symbols of pollution, and hence untouchability. The use of such symbols clearly sends a new message: Dalits are not to be ashamed of the "polluted" images traditionally ascribed to them.

For the moment, those images on book covers have a limited circulation, even amongst literate Dalits. There is, however, a much more prevalent symbol around which Dalit identity is expressing itself: the portraits and the statues of Ambedkar. The Ambedkarite Republican Party and the Ambedkar People Movement are still not very widespread, but they are now much more visible than before. Ambedkar's statues are to be seen in large numbers, blue flags flutter in towns and villages. Ambedkar is very much present these days in intellectual debates, bookshops, newspaper columns, academic conferences and so on. He is now regularly referred to in political discourses of all shades, even by BJP politicians.<sup>20</sup> This sudden importance of a hitherto-neglected political personality who died in 1956 is an apt testimony to the growing strength of Dalit consciousness. Skeptics might contend that sheer opportunism drives all sorts of orators and politicians to pay tribute to the new hero as a means of cornering the Dalit vote. Yet empty though it might be, the rhetoric is itself both a testimony to and an instrument of change among those without voice. It shows that, like other groups, they have a figure revered by the establishment, a highly educated Dalit, a key redactor of the Indian Constitution who rejected Hindu domination and converted to Buddhism, a modern-day Dalit saint complete with his suit and tie. An attack on a statue of Ambedkar, a not uncommon occurrence, is seen as a desecration.

It is not by chance that Bhim Rao Ambedkar has become an icon. His contribution to the emancipation of the Dalits — combining theoretical work and official responsibility in the service of the nation with a constant concern for the emancipation of his brethren — is unparalleled. The Republican Party he founded has not met with his expectations, but his example and his motto, "Educate, organize and agitate," is still the guideline for many NGOs who believe that dignity and justice are not just bestowed from above but have to be gained through struggle.

#### IV. The Paths of Militancy

Dalit liberation movement today pursues three main lines of action. The first seems to equip the Dalits with confidence; the second resorts to militant action; and the third raises the issue of the appropriate political tools.

The first two lines of action can be combined to a certain extent. The example of the Dalit Liberation Education Trust is significant. As the name suggests, this Madras NGO, run by Christian Dalits, identifies education as a powerful tool for social change, though without denying the need for action. It helps to rethink the conditions for liberation and, like other NGOs, tries to place the traditional oppression and the quest for justice in a broader framework with large implications in the field of civil and human rights. This helps both to question the limitation of Indian democracy, tainted by untouchability, and to raise the Dalit liberation issue in international forums.<sup>21</sup> To equip Dalits with a better knowledge of their rights helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

A second line of struggle resorts to spectacular militant action. Sometimes the goal is symbolic — important for recognition, pride, confidence — and the figure of Ambedkar as an icon of Dalit emancipation is often privileged in such actions. The best known has been the long struggle by Dalit groups from Maharashtra to have the Marathwada University renamed Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University.<sup>22</sup> Protest or revendicative marches, or celebrations of Ambedkar's anniversary, not to mention the collective reaction to attacks on Ambedkar statues, offer opportunities for public expressions of Dalit identity and aspirations which are sometimes serious enough to attract national attention. Such was the case with the protest agitation in suburban Bombay in July 1997, a protest marked by the killing of 10 Dalits.

But action can also have economic goals, taking the protest beyond identity symbols, as the agitation for *panchami* lands shows. *Panchama* is a very old term for those beyond the pale of the four varnas (*panch* in sanskrit means five), i.e., those defined by the Laws of Manu as Untouchables, barred both from education and landownership. In 1890 the British regime in the then Madras Presidency passed a law assigning land to the Dalits. It took more than 50 years for 650 acres of uncultivated land to be distributed to about 500 Dalits families in seven villages of Chingleput district, south of Madras. Despite the law prohibiting the sale of such lands to non-Dalits, other castes were able to gain control of them in the 1950s. In 1989 a movement for the reappropriation of these lands began in Chingleput. It expanded in 1994, when village police fired on a crowd in Karanai protesting the forcible removal of a statue of Ambedkar installed just hours earlier on claimed lands.<sup>23</sup> The incident, in which two Dalits died, had a profound impact in the state, and resulted in the consolidation of the Panchami Land Committee. In 1996 the Committee, with the support of 127 Dalit organizations, launched a march of about 100,000 claiming their land rights.<sup>24</sup>

The emergence of such large movements raises two distinct issues. The first relates to the structure of the Dalit movement itself, which is riven by internal divisions. The more radical groups are close to the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), which is marginal politically but plays an important ideological role. Other radical Dalit groups combine an ultra-left ideology with a concern for Tamilness as articulated by the Liberation Panthers, a Southern Dalit group supporting the Tamil Tigers in nearby Sri Lanka. Christian Dalits are much more important in struggle than their small numbers might suggest, and include Protestants like Rt. Rev. M. Azariah, Bishop of Madras, Church of South India, and Catholics. A number of Dalit priests complain about the persistence of caste prejudices in the community and the Church hierarchy. The most militant follow Liberation theology, which finds in Dalit emancipation an obvious field of action and theorization.<sup>25</sup> Militant groups can sometimes bridge religious and philosophical differences. At other times, differences result from competition between concurrent groups, and more fundamentally from disagreements about strategies and perceptions of the transformed Dalit identity.

The second issue is political. Before independence, Gandhi persuaded Ambedkar to renounce the separate Dalit electorate the British were ready to concede (a good opportunity to weaken the National Congress, as the British saw it). After 1947, for decades the Dalit vote was not autonomous. Most rural Dalits have, for long, “voted for the master,” i.e., for the landlord. The rise of the DMK introduced, as already noted, a new rhetoric and progressive actions. But Dalits were not seen as a special entity needing more than specific reservations and development programs offered to the Scheduled Castes. Like the Congress Party at the national level, the DMK saw itself as an umbrella organization, able to muster votes from everybody (with the exception of the Brahmin in the early stages), from the Dalit agricultural laborer to his landlord. The Communist parties have certainly had an impact in some areas, particularly with labor movements among agricultural laborers. But the established communists of the CPI and CPI-M,<sup>26</sup> faithful to the doctrine, could not emphasize caste differences in their organizing. The Marxist-Leninists of the CPI-ML are certainly much more engaged in the Dalit struggle for land, and may even believe in the revolutionary potential of a Dalit mass movement, but they are a very small minority. The major parties in the state — the DMK and AnnaDMK — are now perceived by many Dalit groups and NGOs as mainstream structures, paying mere lip service to the Dalits without offering them sufficient room in the leadership or adequate support to make a real difference. Hence the renewed quest for the best political instrument: should the Dalits conduct political struggle in larger formations, or should they set up their own parties?

The caste movement reappeared in Tamilnadu with a bang in 1987 when the Vanniyars — a numerous caste of small peasants, classified as OBCs — launched an agitation in the northern districts to highlight their problems, at the

cost of numerous lives. Shortly thereafter, their organization, the Vanniyar Sangam, set up a political party, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Workers Party, which failed in successive elections to attract sufficient Vanniyar votes to elect representatives who could air their grievances in the Legislature. Subsequently the PMK, under its Vanniar founder leader C. Ramadoss, developed a new and inclusive strategy, presenting itself as the party of the OBCs, Muslims and Dalits, and adopting the North Indian concept of *bahujan* — the masses — which extends the definition of the oppressed far beyond the Scheduled Castes. This strategy seeks to overcome the fact that, in the field, OBCs have been as violent adversaries of the Dalits as the high castes, exemplified by the history of clashes between the Vanniyars and the Paraiyars in Northern Tamilnadu and even more so by the violent confrontations between Pallars, a Dalit caste renamed Devendra Kula Velalar (Velalar is a high caste of landlord origin) and Thevars. Alliance building and the arithmetic of electoral politics may help Dalits and OBCs gain access to power, through coalition if necessary. This is the story of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous Indian state, where Mayawati had the distinction of being, albeit briefly, the first Dalit Chief Minister in India, first with the support of the Samajwadi Party, backed largely by OBCs, and then paradoxically with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which, whatever its present policy of wooing Dalit voters and offering party seats to Dalits and Tribals, still has a high caste image.

Having learned from the tactics of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the PMK leader, not without some debate in the party, decided to back the apparently disgraced leader of the AnnaDMK, Jayalalitha, who had allied herself with the BJP during the 1998 general election. The AnnaDMK made an unexpected comeback (partly due to the weak support extended to the DMK by disappointed Dalits), and for the first time the PMK won four seats to the Indian Parliament. In the fluid political situation prevailing in an uncertain coalition, the PMK even got one ministerial appointment in the BJP-led Vajpayee Government. The happy nominee, it must be noted, was not a Vanniyar, but a Dalit, publicizing his identity in his very name: Dalit Ezhilmalai.<sup>27</sup> Neither in Tamilnadu nor in Uttar Pradesh is the alliance between Dalits and the BJP fortuitous. It may sound strange that Dalits should ally with the political arm of the hard core Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, whose religious sister organization, the Vishva Hindu Parishad, pretends to embody the eternal values of Hinduism. Two observations might explain this unexpected alliance. First, despite a high caste leadership, the strategy of the Sangh Parivar, the coalition of organizations that propagate Hindutva, is to try to accommodate all Hindus in its fold, including Dalits and Tribals (and the BJP plays the same card). Second, in the very fluid situation that has followed the decline of the Congress Party, political risks, including odd and unstable alliances, are sometimes the necessary precondition for political power. Dalit political parties are caught in this general predicament. Caught between this drift and the bane of divi-

sion which has so weakened the Ambedkarite Republican Party, the road is not an easy one. Clearly enough, new formations will emerge, the last one in Tamilnadu being the “New Tamil Country” (Pudiyar Tamilagam) founded in 1998 by a noted Dalit militant, K. Krishnasami, Chairman of the Devendra Kula Velalar Federation, the association of the main Dalit caste of South Tamilnadu. Whether such Dalit parties succeed or fail is not the issue; their very appearance is significant. Certainly, the progress of the PMK and the appearance of a Tamil Dalit party point to the fragmentation of the established Tamil polity: caste parties are now challenging the traditional hegemony of the Dravidian non-Brahmin parties,<sup>28</sup> but they are also unwilling to portray themselves as exclusively Dalit for fear of losing the electoral support of other castes.

As a matter of fact, the Pudiyar Tamilagam appears in a context marked by deep conflicts. In 1997 the relationship between the OBC Thevar caste and the Devendra Kula Velalars (DKV) took a turn for the worse. With the higher castes migrating to urban areas, the Thevars have become landowners, and rely upon the DKV for agricultural labor. But the social equation has changed, and the Dalits aspire to more than mere survival. They are not satisfied with whatever little (and poor) land the state has given them. While elders like Viramma point out that their situation has improved in the last fifty years, the younger generation expects a lot more, including jobs and respect. As V.S. Sambadan has observed, the sparks of violence which disturbed the southern districts in 1997 have been symbolic: desecrations of Ambedkar statues, changes in the names of districts or public transport corporations.<sup>29</sup> But behind the sparks basic issues continue to divide “backward caste” like the Thevars from the Dalit Pallars: based on economic competition, social assertion and political access to power.<sup>30</sup> Politics and symbols met unfortunately in the gruesome murder of six Dalits from Melavalavu village, in Madurai district, on June 30, 1997. This included Murugesan, the new president, and Mookan, the new vice-president of the village *panchayat*, that had for the first time a constituency reserved for Dalit candidates. In a number of reserved constituencies, no Dalit had dared to contest. Murugesan was convinced to do so, despite severe obstruction by the local dominant castes to “reversed” constituencies. He was elected, but prevented from taking office, and finally murdered, and even beheaded. Two weeks later, far from Melavalavu, the Indian Parliament and Members of the States Assemblies chose another Dalit as President of India.

The divergent fates of the two Presidents is not just paradoxical. It emphasizes that much is still to change, and that what is possible and even celebrated at the national level is not necessarily accepted at the ground level of the village. George Matthew, Director of the Institute of Social Sciences, has rightly pointed out that the Melavalavu murders are not just “one more instance of caste tension. It was a serious attack on the institution of the *panchayati raj* (the village government) which has the potential of changing the powerful rural groups.” Since the recent administrative

reforms, the *panchayat* is not just an honorable body of elected villagers, without much say on real issues. It now has control of local resources, and its president enjoys both status and power. Hence the reluctance of many established castes — including OBCs, which may be locally dominant — to accept a Dalit leadership, which offends them on both accounts, status and power. The necessary change of mind is not just a matter of Dalit consciousness. Change is needed as well among those high castes or OBCs who believe they are born leaders. As Mathew notes, the murders call into question the kind of political and social education that has taken place in Indian villages since Independence: “while empowerment of the weaker sections, organizing them to fight for their rights, was happening as a natural reaction to oppression, there was no concomitant move to educate the dominant caste about the changing times, the values of democracy, social justice and equity.”<sup>31</sup>

While all tensions do not result in murder, the difficulties faced in expanding democracy and the slow pace of real change at the local level have resulted in a feeling of “broken promises” among the Dalits. Could a Dalit political party offer a way out? Several choices are open to Pudiya Tamilagam. The first would be the way it plans its expansion. Will it become not just the party of the Devendra Kula Velalar but also encompass the Dalit castes from northern Tamilnadu? But should it stop there? If it succeeds in attracting most of the Dalit vote in Tamilnadu (and not just the two percent it got during its first electoral test in 1998), it may hope to play a major role in the political life of the state, and be strong enough to join a governing coalition. It could follow the PMK’s lead and try to build an alliance with OBCs and Muslims. The PMK and the new Dalit party would therefore compete on the same field. Once a party chooses to contest elections, this must sooner or later result in dialogue with other groups and parties. The very names of the two formations open perspectives larger than caste: workers, in the case of the PMK, and a renovated Tamilness in the case of the Pudiya Tamilagam. The key question remains: Is the concept of *bahujan* a myth, or a hopeful anticipation? Or does such a hope result from a simplistic reading of the power distribution in Indian society, separating the “high caste oppressors” from all the other groups? In the field, to say the least, “other backward classes” and Dalits do not necessarily share the same views or the same interests, and the union with the Muslims supposes that Dalits do not fall prey to the strategy of Hindu communalists who have attempted with some success to subordinate the Dalit caste identity to a larger “Hinduness” affiliation.<sup>32</sup>

This brings us to the basic question of caste. Faced with “broken promises,” Dalits have to consider conducting their struggle in a specific caste frame — either as a group of Scheduled Castes or through their own political party — to implement specific actions linked with reservation and human and civil rights. But how to reconcile such a choice with the Ambedkarite concept of the annihilation of caste? What is needed is not just the political tool of a caste party,

and even the hypothetical all-India confederation of Dalit regional parties, however necessary that might be at this moment. The need of the times is also to carry on a cultural revolution.

## V. Culture, Identity and Empowerment in Changing India

Whatever interpretation is given to the interaction between castes of different status in the old *jajmani* relationship, caste culture is hierarchical and divisive. With the weakening of the caste *system*, the interplay of unequal but regulated relations between castes is bound to collapse, except on the new level of political alliances. But neither political tools nor the new National Human Rights Commission and its state counterparts that help to implement the existing legislation are enough. Many Dalit groups and intellectuals believe that an alternative culture has to emerge as well, culture being understood broadly. In most cases, the goal is to free the Dalits from the dominant Hindu paradigm.

Conversion has sometimes been seen as the best opportunity, be it to Buddhism (particularly in Maharashtra after Ambedkar),<sup>33</sup> Christianity or Islam.<sup>34</sup> But conversion does not solve all problems on the ground or in the larger social context: converts may also be discriminated against, in or/and outside their new community. Furthermore many Dalits are not ready to convert, and conversion can hardly be a precondition for change. The problem is therefore to be able to go beyond the filter of religious persuasions. The program for action published in Madras by Katti Padma Rao, a Dalit leader from Andhra Pradesh, is an attempt to address the challenge of emancipation in all fields.<sup>35</sup> A mix of strong anti-Hinduism, socialism and radical opposition to the caste logic, it is certainly not credible and practical on all points. But it illustrates the difficulties faced by militants who believe that the overarching reality of untouchability calls for an equally overarching emancipation strategy, one that is attentive not only to socioeconomic contexts and political tools but also emphasizes a radical rethinking of attitudes, ideas, daily practices. Trying to build an alternative culture is a process which asks for constant efforts at rejecting the legacy of the dominant past.

Padma Rao’s first point is certainly too radical to be implemented. Impracticable and as much of a restraint on freedom as the old system, though in different ways, it goes to the core of the caste problem, that is, endogamy: “intra-caste marriage must be banned. Inter-caste marriage must become mandatory.”<sup>36</sup> A second line of action recommends alternatives to the dominant culture in terms of names (dropping the caste titles, giving to children or to houses names chosen outside the Hindu fold) and celebrating festivals honoring Dalit leaders instead of Hindu gods. A third line of action addresses the “reconstruction of rural culture,” banning caste titles from villages names or village streets, stopping construction of specific Dalit “colonies” in favor of mixed settlements, in addition to eliminating illiteracy, establishing health centers and rural libraries and opening community halls for meetings. The fourth proposal

calls for the propagation of people's art and culture through a revalorization of popular art forms and, simultaneously, new creations celebrating Dalit life and Dalit heroes. The fifth proposal addresses the spread of education and calls for the multiplication of village schools, educational institutions and research centers, not to mention the revision of curriculum and text books. The sixth recommendation focuses on the necessity to spread alternative culture among women in order "to encourage them to resist the pressure of patriarchal domination" brought by Hindu culture. Padma Rao also calls for economic reorganization (on socialist lines) and political reorganization (building a political organization for all the oppressed classes, with the goal of Dalit rule in mind).

The radicalism of such a program limits its practicability, but the attempt to build up a detailed line of action at least identifies clearly the fields where change is needed and defines one line of thinking. The resolute denunciation of the dominant Hindu culture supposes profound changes in the daily life and in the "empire of signs" which governs its semiology. Politically and socially, Padma Rao suggests a blue and red perspective where the blue (the Dalit color) emancipation calls for a class (red) alliance with "backward and minority classes" against the upper castes Hindu ruling classes.

The question remains whether an alternative Dalit culture and Dalit activism is enough, or does Dalit emancipation also require a change in the mainstream culture? S.K. Thorat, in a paper on "Dalit and Human Rights" has seen the Dalits today as "a part of the whole, but a part apart."<sup>37</sup> One can hardly find a better formulation of the present dilemma facing Dalit militants and all those struggling for Dalit emancipation. "A part apart" could be the motto of some Dalit intellectuals who believe that only Dalits can emancipate themselves, and that non-Dalits cannot really understand the Dalit experience, nor be fully trusted. "A part apart" could also convey the mixed feelings of a large part of the 80 percent non-Dalit Indians who do not see themselves as oppressors but still believe that the former "Untouchables" are not really fit for integration into the mainstream.

Let us consider the thoughts of a noted fellow-traveler of the Dalit movement, D.N. Nagaraj, on the dialectics of Dalit oppression and emancipation in a small but very dense book: *The Flaming Feet*.<sup>38</sup> His experience is largely drawn from the Dalit movement in Karnataka, and combines themes in cultural politics with motifs and metaphors in literature. But Nagaraj offers clues and raises issues which are of much larger value, in space as well as in content. His parallel between Gandhi and Ambedkar brings us back to the point raised earlier: the need for a change in the self-perception of the Dalits, but also in the self-perception of the non-Dalits. What history shows in this regard is that what is needed is not the Gandhian emphasis on Dalit quest for self-purification as a precondition for the eradication of untouchability. Against Gandhi's self-purification need, Ambedkar posits a quest for Dalit self-respect, which raises

immediately the question of identity and the need for the emergence of an alternative culture which could eliminate the stigma of untouchability and stand in opposition to the established logic and psychology of the caste system.<sup>39</sup> Ambedkar went so far as to leave the Hindu fold in his quest for a new collective identity. But while his neo-Buddhists followers and a number of intellectuals would define themselves today as non-Hindus, it is still doubtful that the Dalit masses would follow suit.

Is Indian democracy able to help Dalit emancipation, not just through reservation by law but also through the diffusion of new perceptions among Dalits and non-Dalits alike? The question centers partly on the place given to the individual, and partly on accepted norms. Nagaraj, addressing the problem of violence against Dalits, notes rightly that the village, as Ambedkar saw it, cannot be the basic unit for justice, for traditionally "the structure of justice rests on the consensus of the entire village, which could also mean the unchallenged rule of the upper castes."<sup>40</sup> Here again, the caste ethos has to be rightly assessed: as Nagaraj notes, if an upper caste Hindu misbehaves in the village, this will be considered as an individual act, involving individual responsibility. But if a Dalit break the norms, he will be perceived first as a member of his group, and the entire Dalit community could suffer retaliation. A narrow path is thus open to Dalit militants who seek a way to attack oppression by combining ideology and material domination (hence the importance of the struggles for rights *and* land, which address these two fields), but also by trying to respect the "code of conduct," in the process gaining greater legitimacy in the "traditional" society, which is vital for the success of the Movement. In the meantime, the Dalit activist, "in a paradoxical position," has to recognize that "on him or her is the larger responsibility of creating a new sense of ethics for both the conflicting communities."<sup>41</sup> More to the point, the success of the Dalit movement cannot be delinked from that of other social movements, be they the women's movement, the farmers' movement or the ecological movement. With the latter two, the relationship is not an easy one.

Looking at the bleak picture of untouchability in rural India, must we believe, as some Dalit militants do, that emancipation in the villages will be impossible against so many odds, however resolute the struggles, and that migration to town is the only way to free oneself? True, the rule of caste is not so rigid in large cities. But are Indian towns really such an attractive promised land? Urban India might also bring up much more acutely the problem of cultural memory, a memory already challenged either because it is lost in a silent history or because of the contempt it raises not just among non-Dalits but also sometimes among Dalits as well. The fact that some urban Dalit intellectuals who try to theorize Dalitness and emancipation do not always have an intimate knowledge of the psyche and culture of rural Dalits suggest the continued importance of rural movements, rural perceptions and rural memories.

Last but not least stands the Dalits' "rights to cultural

space.” In Dalit writing in the Kannada language, Nagaraj finds two schools. The “school of social rage” “concentrates basically on the experiences of anger, agony and revolutionary hope.” The “school of spiritual quest” transmutes the social rage “into a spiritual vision of equality.” Why “spiritual quest?” Not necessarily because of an attachment to a defined religious line, but because this school “tries to understand the world of poverty and untouchability in terms of metaphysical dismay over the nature of human relationship. The ethos of the portrayal of life is not informed by anger and agony, but by a celebration of the joys of life and its possibilities, which also includes the will to change.”<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the sphere of literature, these two schools can also suggest a model, a metaphor for the choices offered to the Dalit society at large, or for the types of action open to militants. Those animated by an intimate or spectacular social rage might feel that no middle ground exist between nihilist or desparate intellectual marginality and strident revolutionary advocacy and militancy. But how to build from this anger a moving and intimate connection with the entire Dalit community? Can this rage sustain a durable way, beyond minority extremism, for the political, cultural and social emancipation of the Dalit masses? There is an unavoidable contradiction between activist groupings and larger party politics, the former being generally prone to isolation and/or repression, the latter bringing quickly enough, after the first electoral successes, the need for compromise. On the other hand, the spiritual quest — or may we say the humanistic path — is more prone to being coopted by the system. The real challenge for the second path is to resist this cooptation while transforming the system. Nagaraj pleads “for a radical reconstruction of villages from a critical-modernist perspective which can also mean a radical revision of existing values along the lines of Indian religious reformers.”<sup>43</sup> Some Dalit militants or leftist radicals would call for a complete break with religion, reformed or not. Others would follow Nagaraj in opting for a middle-of-the-road line. A third group might find that this complex goal offers a path of change more acceptable to Indian society, because it is less disconnected from the legacy of a past not entirely encapsulated in upper caste orthodoxy. Whatever paths are chosen, Dalits intellectuals and militants know very well that deconstructing the prevailing Indian social order and constructing a new one will not be an easy process.<sup>44</sup> It will involve Dalits and non-Dalits, the past and the present, the community as a whole and its fragments, and the self. It is a total enterprise, with innumerable implications. But it is clearly a process in which Indian Dalits are engaged today.

## VI. The Colors of Change: Blue, Red, Saffron, Rainbow?

At the end of this century, we are on the whole observing a rather confused situation. Indian society is in a state of flux. Castes are very much a part of the political game, but the caste system as such is condemned. The OBCs are asserting themselves everywhere, including in the decisive

circles of power. One finds more and more Dalits in positions of responsibility and power, largely through the reservation system, while most of the community is still subject to various sorts of overt or covert discrimination. But there will be no scaling back of expectations now, despite the atrocities still perpetrated against Dalits and the setbacks to protest struggles or revendication campaigns. Promises have neither been fulfilled or forgotten. But the Dalit aspiration for change has become too strong in the minds of millions for backing down. Myriads of daily struggles, spectacular or not, sustain this aspiration, which has now gained access to the media and the political field.

The present state of uncertainty is in itself a victory and suggests that the past cannot perpetuate itself indefinitely. But Dalit emancipation remains a challenge for it raises formidable issues pertaining not just to the fate of the Dalits but also to Hinduism and to the Indian society as a whole. Seven points might call for answers, that only the future will provide:

- The first addresses Dalit identity itself: must the Dalits place themselves behind the blue standard and, faithful to Ambedkar, find a place in the larger society without abandoning their sense of belonging? But how to reconcile the legitimate revendications of a caste (or “macro-caste” if we put all Scheduled Castes together) so oppressed for centuries with the goal of “annihilation of caste?” This goal supposes that members of other castes, both the oppressed and oppressor will let castes be annihilated. Could it be the historical mission of the Dalits to constantly harass the dominant paradigm and shake the old oppressive order?
- The second point is a correlate of the first one: how to preserve Dalit memories? Can the experiences, the history of millions of Dalits simply be abandoned for the sake of joining the mainstream? This could be a temptation for urban intellectuals. But how can the past and the present of more than 150 million people be ignored for long? The urban-rural divide between Dalits becomes an additional challenge. Will the political and the NGOs activists bridge a potential gap between a growing corps of urban Dalit intellectuals and the mass of rural illiterates? The answer varies from place to place, and depends on the types of links preserved by the Dalit intelligentsia with rural Dalits. This relationship will have a decisive impact on the way in which a genuine and practicable emancipation is theorized.
- A third point relates to the nature and the real extent of the “mainstream” Hindu identity. Is there only one Hindu ideality set by the *shastras* of the brahminical tradition? Is there not also a legacy of other traditions on which to build the future, a large and diverse cultural space which encompasses not just the Dalits but also the Tribals, the reformist movements formulating a new Hinduism where the individual has a place, the secular democratic ideal, not to mention eventually other faiths not based officially on caste? Where do

the OBCs stand in this landscape? The fourth varna, the Shudras, were also excluded from knowledge and power by the dominant classical paradigm. Are the survivals of such exclusions strong enough to make possible an alliance between OBCs and Dalits, or is that just wishful thinking? Is Melavalanu an anachronism or a sign that the OBCs, gradually empowered over the past 100 years, are not yet ready to share the cake to which they have just gained access?

- The fourth point takes us to the impact of regional parameters. In the Tamil case, the legacy of the Dravidian movement is decisive. Even if the fragmentation of the Dravidian parties' vote banks opens the field to more autonomous formations, the question of competing identities remains, unavoidably perhaps, a challenge. Dalit or Tamil? It is not by chance that the new Dalit party calls itself "New Tamilnadu." The Dravidian ideology offers a way out of the dilemma of Dalit-ness/Tamilness, for it offers a seductive interpretation of history: by putting the blame for the scourge of caste and untouchability upon "the Brahmins who came from the North," one may link the future Dalit emancipation to the more egalitarian and secular values attributed to the old Tamil civilization. Beyond the specificity of this case, the question of regional affiliations remains important: will they obstruct a possible pan-Indian union of Dalit movements, or will the circulation of activists and ideas facilitate the incorporation of regional figures from other parts of India, helping to build a new and richly diverse national legacy? As an example, Periyar has now become an icon for the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh.
- The fifth point queries the possibility of the union of the Red (the Left) and the Blue (the color of the Dalits). The established Left has always tried to circumscribe the challenge of caste, without really addressing it, and simply denounced caste as a mask for class. With the Dalit issue gaining momentum, it will be more and more difficult for the Left to ignore this challenge for long, partly because Dalit sensibilities on this issue can no longer be ignored and the concept of "oppressed" requires urgent theorizing. For the time being, the Communist Parties have not been a part of *bahujan* strategies. There are also substantial differences between the parliamentary Left, which has definitely to answer the challenge of caste parties, and the ultra-Left, for whom the Dalits are the potentially revolutionary subjects par excellence?
- The sixth point is about alliances between the Dalit and other social movements. The alliance between Dalits and OBCs is not simply a matter of political convenience and electoral arithmetic. Politics is not just a matter of power: it is more basically a question of goals, policy and change. What are the forces that are bringing changes to the daily life of millions of Dalits? Will they transform the socioeconomic fundamentals of Dalit life and, indeed, affect the entire social balance?

Dalit emancipation requires the imperative need for fresh thinking amongst non-Dalits about untouchability. On a wider level, how to connect the Dalit movement with the women's movement? Could Dalit women, more and more visible in the present struggles, help transcend caste barriers through gender commonality? And to what extent will an alliance with Muslims and Christians help transcend, through Dalit involvement, the instrumentalized prejudices between the minorities and the Hindu majority, knowing that the "old song" of the irreparable Hindu-Muslim divide is mostly fiction?

- The seventh point brings us back to the difficulty to forge a stronger relationship with OBCs if Dalit emancipation calls for, as many militants contend, a rupture with Hinduism? Or put differently and abstractly: how must Hinduism itself change in relation to Dalit emancipation? If the duality/dichotomy between "the brahmin" and "the untouchable" was a foundation of the caste system, what will happen with the latter rejecting his/her status? Could we imagine that the double process of OBCs' upliftment and Dalit revendication may help a new Hinduism emerge, less preoccupied with orthodox hierarchies, more open to individual or lineage relations to deities in a much more fluid society? The dismantling of the caste system and the politicization of caste would not hinder such an evolution. In the changing cultural and political context, Hinduism is bound to change, perhaps along the lines proposed by some of 19th and 20th century reformist movements, paying less attention to castes and probably also by inventing new ways of accommodating Dalits.

In this context, one cannot underestimate the strategy of Hindutva, which tends, despite the weight of its high caste leadership, to weaken caste differences in order to forge a pan-Indian Hindu identity. Dalits and Hindu tribals are clearly being invited to hitch their wagons to the communal project, and to let them assert an overarching Hindu identity rather than a primordial (caste or tribe) affiliation. Will the saffron hypothesis of the Sangh Parivar offer a major temptation to Dalits to join a new communal mainstream, which would also subvert more radical Dalit leanings?

All these issues, and many more, pose uncertain and difficult questions to which the answers are, as yet, inchoate. But the Dalit movement is definitely here to stay and will probably, as today, continue along diverse paths, tempted sometimes by isolation and at others opening itself to other forces. Blue, red and saffron are the predominant colors of change. In the end a rainbow might emerge from the synthesis of now-divergent paths. At minimum it will have to be a secular, democratic synthesis consistent with the Dalit movement's call for justice, respect and progress. The nature of the Indian polity is at stake as well, and so is the future of India's dominant ideologies and the nature of the social bond. This challenge is not just a matter of intellectual analysis or social theory. In thousands of Indian towns, in hundreds of thousands of Indian villages, the fate

of the Dalits will largely fashion India's future, and this is not irrelevant to India's ambition for the next century. Dalits call for equality. As never before, they enter as actors, under our eyes, the field of history. Everyone must understand that, by doing so, they struggle for themselves, but not just for themselves.

### Acknowledgements

Beside the obvious debt we owe Viramma, her kin and the Dalits of Karani, this paper draws partly from a shorter draft presented under the title: "On Dalit Emancipation in Tamilnadu. The Politics and Semantics of Social Change" at the Conference on "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, his Philosophy and Thought," organized by the Nehru Centre, London, in November 1994. Suranjan Das was kind enough to revise this draft. To be accepted as an observer at the first "National Workshop on Human Rights and Societal Changes with Reference to SCs and STs" organized by the Dalit Liberation Education Trust and the National Human Rights Commission in Madras, in August 1996, offered an excellent opportunity for ascertaining key trends of the emancipation issue and the diversity of views expressed by various militants, Dalit NGOs, concerned scholars and officials from all over India, with a strong representation from the South. Thanks are due in this regard to Henry Thiagaraj. Discussions with intellectual supporters of the Dalit cause, such as D.N. Nagaraj, M.S.S. Pandian and S. Anandhi, were very useful, not to mention all those — Dalits and non-Dalits alike — with whom we spoke in Pondicherry, Madras, Delhi, London and Paris. However, the interpretations and the positions expressed in this paper are obviously our exclusive responsibility.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> When the Dalit Panthers were founded, an obvious reference to the US Black Panthers. See Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit. Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 2nd revised edition, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> We shall limit here the use of "Dalit" to refer to those earlier defined as the so-called "Untouchables" or Harijans. Some tend to enlarge the concept in order to include all those oppressed by the traditional dominant ideology, be they the so-called low castes, the Muslims, or women. See Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions. The anti-caste movement and the construction of an Indian identity* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, London: Sangam, 1995). This is perhaps a way to help social movements to coalesce for changing the pattern of domination in India, but in the present stage probably rather confusing. Others prefer to use the Hindi word "Bahujan" — the masses — to define the entire body of the oppressed, without discussing the possible contradictions existing among them.

<sup>3</sup> The French original by Viramma, Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine: *Une vie paria. le rire des asservis. Inde du sud* (Paris: Terre Humaine, Plon-UNESCO, 1995), has been translated into English with abridged notes and comments: *Viramma. Life of an Untouchable* (London, New York: Verso-UNESCO, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India. Structure and Consensus* (Princeton, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Gough, *Rural Society in Southeast India* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Joan P. Mencher, "Group and Self-Identification. The View from the Bottom." *ICSSR Research Abstracts Quarterly* (New Delhi, 1973), Vol. III, 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Figures quoted from official government data by S. Anandhi in her lecture "Dalits and the land question" delivered at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, May 4, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> For Tamilnadu, A. Padmanaban gives the following figures for registered "cases of crimes committed on Scheduled Castes by Members

of Non-Scheduled Castes:" 709 for 1988, 482 for 1989 and 544 for 1990. For All-India the figures are respectively 15207, 15799, 17737. Such data, however, does not always indicate what these crimes were. A. Padmanaban, *Dalits at the Crossroads. Their Struggle Past and Present* (Madras, 1996), p. 175. For the year 1986, among the 758 cases registered, 18 were murders, 8 injuries, 14 rapes, 16 arson, and the rest undetermined (*Report of the SCs and STs Commission, 1986-87*, Madras, quoted by S. Anandhi, *cit.*).

<sup>9</sup> For more details see A. Padmanaban, *op. cit.*, 1996, who quotes T.P. Kalamananathan's *Mr K. Veeramani refuted and historical facts about the Scheduled Castes struggle for emancipation in South India*.

<sup>10</sup> The Vaikom agitation was aimed at opening the streets bordering the main temple of the town to all, as a prelude to the opening of the temple itself. Gandhi came there long after Naicker, who criticized him on his moderation.

<sup>11</sup> The Indian President is elected by the two Chambers of the Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) and by the Members of the State Legislative Assemblies. The tradition is for the parties in power and the Opposition to try to find a consensus candidate. K.R. Narayanan was such a candidate of great distinction, the son of a Dalit family from Kerala who made the best use of the scholarships he received. He has been a minister in the government of Indira Gandhi, Vice-Chancellor of the prestigious Nehru University in New Delhi, India's Ambassador to Washington and Vice-President before being elevated to his present position.

<sup>12</sup> The Indian electoral system provides for "reserved constituencies" (75 seats for Scheduled Castes — including 7 from Tamilnadu — and 37 from Scheduled Tribes, out of a total of 543 seats). In such constituencies, only SCs or STs candidates can compete: it is a way of guaranteeing that Dalits and Tribals will get a minimal number of representatives to the Lok Sabha, the Lower House of the Parliament.

<sup>13</sup> In the Preamble, the Constitution vows to secure for all Indian citizens, justice, liberty, "equality of status and opportunity," "fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual." Article 15 (prohibition of discrimination) has obvious references to untouchability when it mentions "access to shops, restaurant, hotels... use of wells, bathing ghats, roads." We must recall here that the Constitution and the laws of independent India have not banned castes. They have simply outlawed untouchability and made it a punishable offense: article 17 proclaims that "untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden."

<sup>14</sup> In a documented analysis of the various types of Dalit literature they found in Tamil, M. Kannan and F. Gros consider that the Tamil Dalit literature is still in its infancy, and not creative enough, despite the proliferation of writings: "Les dalit tamouls en quête d'une littérature," *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (Paris, 1996), no. 83, pp. 124-153.

<sup>15</sup> Karuna Manokaran, *Varalarup por* (The History of the War) Samikaniti Patippakam, Tiruppur (1993).

<sup>16</sup> Raj Gauthamam, *Talit parvaiyil tamij panpatu* (Dalit perspectives on Tamil culture, in Tamil) Pondicherry, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> K. Subbaiya: *Yuttam Totarum* (The War will come), Spartacus (Spartacus) Patippakam, (Pondicherry, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Kurusu Sacratris (Socrates): *Navval* (Nagarkoyil: Ernasto Veliyidu, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Preda, Predan, Ramesh, Prem: *Putaikappatta piratikalum ejtappatta manitarkalum* (The buried copies and the men on whom it has been written about), Kiranam Veliyidu, Chennai, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> While BJP politicians might celebrate Ambedkar for courting the Dalits, pro-Hindutva intellectuals adopt a different position, denigrating the neo-Buddhism promoted by Ambedkar as a way of Dalit

emancipation. See the controversy raised by Arun Shourie's book: *Worshipping the False Gods*, in 1997. Kancha Ilaiah, well known for his own book *Why I am not a Hindu*, links the attacks on neo-Buddhists and on Ambedkar as another attempt to dissociate the leading Dalit figure from Gandhi, as the Hindu nationalists try today to win back Gandhi's image and prestige to their side, even though Gandhi's assassin came from the fold of the Hindu extremists. See Ilaiah's comment: "Attacks on Ambedkar," *The Hindu*, August 30, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Henry Thiagaraj (ed): *Human Rights from a Dalit Perspective*, Dalit Liberation Education Trust, Madras, n.d. (circ. 1994), and the *Dalit International Newsletter*, published from Waterford, CT, USA.

<sup>22</sup> In few cases, however, new Universities have been named Ambedkar, by Governments eager to send a signal to the Dalit community.

<sup>23</sup> See the brochure *Dalit Struggle. An Interview with Fr L. Yesumarian*, Kolar Gold Field/Madras, 1995. L. Yesumarian is a Jesuit priest and advocate defending Dalit causes in courts, and a key leader of the *panchami* land struggle.

<sup>24</sup> S. Anandhi, in her Paris lecture on "Dalits and the land question," May 4, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> See Rev. John C.B. Webster, *Towards Dalit Liberation. From Indian Church to Indian Theology. An Attempt at Theological Construction* (Madras Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> The Communist Party of India is the old Indian Communist Party, close to the USSR for a long time. The Communist Party of India-Marxist split from the CPI in 1964; it had a greater freedom from Moscow, without turning pro-Chinese. Both of them follow a parliamentary strategy, and have elected MPs. The Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist broke away from the CPI-M in 1969 and chose a pro-Maoist line, was very active in the Naxalite movement in Bengal, which was crushed by the CPI-M government in power. Most of the ML groups distrust the electoral process as a tool for real change.

<sup>27</sup> It may be noted also that, for rewarding the Telugu Desam leader — and Chairman of the United Front — whose defection helped the BJP coalition to gain the confidence vote after the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP chose to elevate to the high status of Speaker of the Lok Sabha a Dalit MP from the Telugu Desam: G.M.C. Balayogi. One must remember that a Dalit, Babu Jagjivan Ram, had been one of the most important Ministers of Indira Gandhi, holding key portfolios in the seventies.

<sup>28</sup> See M.S.S. Pandian: "The fragmentation of the Tamil Polity," *The Hindu*, March 26, 1998. Pandian notes also two additional divisive trends weakening the hegemony of Dravidian politics. In the context set by "the slowly and surely growing Hindu communalism in Tamilnadu," some non-Brahmin high castes have started playing the Hindu mobilization card on their own on the political field, just as some Brahmin-led organizations do. On the other hand, some Muslims (besides those tempted by extremist militancy) tend as well to set up their own new party, such as the Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam, whose name itself is a clear transfer from the DMK: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.

<sup>29</sup> To give names of Dalits to some of them raised tensions amongst other castes.

<sup>30</sup> V.S. Sambandan: "Behind the southern sparks (I). Changing economic equations," *The Hindu*, July 31, 1997.

<sup>31</sup> George Mathew, "The meaning of Melavalavu," in *The Hindu*, September 30, 1997

<sup>32</sup> As S. Anandhi observes in Madras slums. See her study: *Contending Identities. Dalits and Secular Politics in Madras Slums* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> The 6.3 millions Buddhists registered by the Indian Census of 1991

are primarily the so-called "neo-Buddhists," i.e., converted Dalits. They represent only 0.77 percent of the Indian population, and roughly 2.1 percent of the Scheduled Castes population.

<sup>34</sup> While "old" conversions are a matter of fact, new conversions — particularly of Dalits — are a matter of controversy. The conversion to Islam of a few hundreds Tamil Dalits at Meenakshipuram, in 1981, has been seen by Hindu nationalists as a dangerous signal of a deliberate attempt of Islamic groups to "subvert" (with the help of Gulf money) disgruntled Dalits in order to implement a deliberate strategy of undermining Hinduism in India. For a more balanced view, see M. A. Kalam, "Why the Harijans convert to Islamic views. Reservations with reservation," *South India Research* (1984), 4, 2, pp. 153-167.

<sup>35</sup> Katti Padma Rao, *Caste and Alternative Culture* (Madras: Centre for Research on New International Economic Order, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Such a suggestion, which would ban freedom in a matter related to what appears as the ultimate refuge of individuality calls for (at least) two comments. Firstly, it consists of simply inverting the old interdiction of marrying outside one's caste. In other words, Padma Rao's proposal still takes for granted the old conception that marriage is not a matter of love, but a social alliance. Furthermore, the actual prohibition of marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits is a matter of custom, not of law, a custom which has not yet disappeared from rural India. A "love marriage" between a Devendra Kula Velala and a "caste Hindu" at Chettikulam village (Perambalur district) in 1998 resulted in the social boycott of 600 Dalit families, who were prohibited by the dominant caste from sending their children to school, from buying food, and getting medicine from the local shops, in addition to the violence instigated against some of them (see *The Hindu*, July 24, 1998). Secondly, to call for a law underlines the fact of how difficult it is to change minds without the State imposing its own prohibitions. There is, of course, no chance that such a proposal could ever become a law. What the government does, on the other hand, is to encourage inter-caste marriages celebrated in collective weddings ceremonies in the presence of political leaders, with a gift in kind or in cash offered to the couples.

<sup>37</sup> S.K. Thorat, "Dalits and Human Rights. A Part of the Whole but a Part Apart," paper presented to the *National Workshop on Human Rights and Societal Changes with Reference to Scs and Sts*, Madras, August 3-4, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> D.R. Nagaraj: *The Flaming Feet. A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (Bangalore: South Forum Press/Institute for Cultural Research and Action, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>42</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

<sup>43</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Deconstruction is not an easy process, for it requires one to deconstruct also a part of oneself. In writing a review of our book, *Une vie paria* for a noted Dalit literary journal published in Tamil from Pondicherry, *Nirappirikai*, the author M. Kannan, a non-Dalit who does not know French, willingly relied extensively upon the perspective offered to him by an unquoted (but easily identified) French master of Tamil Classical Studies, hence reproducing, strangely enough for a radical journal promoting a new culture, the old *guru-shishya* brahminical tradition linking the obedient disciple to his wise master. Faced with the words of Viramma, the middle-class reviewer could not free himself from his own cultural background and hear an ordinary Paraiyar voice that did not belong to an "angry" stereotype. He preferred to attribute it to a manipulative Western label because a French scholar had collaborated in editing and publishing Viramma's life story. The irony is that *Nirappirikai* itself, open to

post-modernist thinking, is frequently quoting Foucault and Derrida. The reviewer remained unaware of a link between Viramma's sayings and Foucault's writings on the cultural interiorization of oppression. In the same vein, Kannan's reaction to Viramma's crude language and to her (short) comments on sexual pleasure are very much in line with the standard petit-bourgeois puritan Indian model inherited from colonial times. This dichotomy between the necessary but difficult intellectual conceptualization of Dalitness and the willingness to listen to the ordinary voices has large implications. It explains incidentally why, when the reviewer and the two *Nirappirikai* editors went to Viramma to question her, they were simply perceived by her as a team of arrogant urbanites disrespectful of an old Paraiyar woman. Oral culture, which requires time and respect, is decidedly a difficult challenge for many intellectuals. Quite a few, be they Indian Kannans or French orientalist erudites, are apparently not yet prepared to see an illiterate Dalit be part of a series — *Terre Humaine* — on an equal footing with Claude Levi-Strauss and a number of well recognized academics. The review referred to has been published by M. Kannan, in *Nirappirikai*, May 1996, no. 8, pp. 71-78.

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