

Book Reviews

***No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier: Tamil and Malayalam*, Edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, Published by Penguin India, 2011, 656 pages, ₹599, ISBN: 978-014341-4261**

George Thadathil is the Principal of Salesian College Sonada and Siliguri. He is the author of *Vision from the Margin* (2007) and has edited and co-edited number of books besides contributing to a number of journals and edited volumes on Philosophy, Literature and Social Sciences.

The work under review has received much acclaim as it falls within the multiple genre of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and is an attempt to foreground a region and within the region a segment of the population that is voicing itself on the national and international scene. The mode in which this emergence is recorded beginning from the local and the grass-root is itself significant. It is when the country is looked at through such microscopic perspectives that the hidden and the shadowed begin to make their mark and the present work is one in that direction.

The book *No Alphabet in Sight* is published as it were to rectify a mistake and correct a false perception. It attempts to bring to public consciousness what exists behind the shadows, and such a task itself is mammoth considering the scale at which it has been undertaken in two volumes. The first volume is a collection of New Dalit Writing and features Tamil and Malayalam writers from South India. The editors K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, are two stalwarts in cultural and women studies, who reveal their expertise in this collection which is nothing short of a heady mix of fiction and non-fiction, verse and prose offering multiple points of view.

Depending on the taste and sensibility of the reader this collection could knock one over with the brilliance of its poems - dark, dense and touching that basic chord in human being; or with the intellectual clarity and poignancy of argumentation in its prose non-fiction pieces. The volume brings together close to 40 intellectuals' works from Tamil Nadu and Kerala - all searching and questioning the same situation The Dalit situation and what will be its fate in Modern India? The book delves into these questions and issues, about what it means to be a Dalit and the paradox that despite modernization and technological advancement, we are and will probably remain a backward nation. One reviewer comments: "For me, the book was an eye-opener, making everything that was hidden being brought to the front." Therefore the exhortation that it is "a must read if you have the time and the patience and the willingness to know more".¹

1 <http://thehungryreader.wordpress.com/2011/05/25/book-review-no-alphabet-in-sight-new-dalit-writing-from-south-india-dossier-1-tamil-and-malayalam-edited-by-k-satyanarayana-and-susie-tharu/> accessed on 19 April 2012.

The book brings to focus dalit writing by people from every walk of life - teachers, clerks, students, officers, factory workers, journalists and activists. It engages the most central and pressing issues in modern Indian society like education, law, democracy, urbanisation, religion, development and politics for a revised understanding of the changing society from a dalit perspective. The editors and publishers seem to pose a challenge and opportunity, through this exercise of publishing *No Alphabet in Sight* the first of two volumes on *New Dalit Writing from South India*."

This volume of *No Alphabet in Sight*, is aptly classified as a 'dossier' to emphasise the range of documents - poetry, fiction, social analysis, cultural critique, and political speech - translated and compiled into a 640-page tome of works from Tamil and Malayalam. These texts stand out as they are grounded, textured accounts, whether it be on the history of slavery in Kerala narrated by Sanal Mohan or in the poetry of S. Joseph that goes, "These are what my sister's Bible has: /a ration-book come loose, /a loan application form/a card from the cut-throat moneylender/the notices of feasts/ in the Church and the temple/a photograph of my brother's child/a paper that says how to knit a baby-cap/a hundred rupee note/an SSLC Book".

The 70-page Introduction to the volume written by the editors, worth a publication in its own right, carefully plots the historical-cultural significance of writing by dalits especially after the Mandal Commission of 1990, which set in process a 'national debate on caste' leading to 'the rediscovery of Ambedkar as a national figure,' initiated as it was by the Dalit ideologues and activists. The Introduction highlights that caste today is not only the scourge of tradition, but even more, "a contemporary form of power" as it "works in renewed and updated forms in modern contexts and institutions." It exposes the pretensions the beneficiaries (upper castes) conjure up to deny caste overlooking blindly the manner in which it is engrained in modern (and yes, urban) institutions that shower privileges upon them and the ignominy of demanding justice on the Dalits.

It is significant that the volume has appeared as translated into English, not merely because English is a world language, a language of academe, or one of India's link languages. It is because having been translated into English, the language of the Indian elite and large sections of the middle classes, the dalit experience and perspectives make inroads into the prevailing (often biased) understanding of this middle class privilege under the rubric of meritocracy. English is one of those Indian institutions from which dalits have long been excluded and at the same time offered a world of opportunities to many among them as in the case of Ambedkar. In these high-quality, natural-sounding translations, dalit experiences intrude on, and forever change, the English world view.

As the editors state, 'the caste problem' is not something lower castes suffer from. Rather, it is the flip side of the social, economic, and educational infrastructure that

enables upper castes to negotiate modern society and its institutions. It is not about the past and historical redress, but rather about what caste has become in the modern world, "hidden" only for those who already reap benefits from institutions that favor upper castes whether in law, education, the arts or public culture. As the Tamil writer Stalin Rajangam observes, ["It is a deep-set caste mentality that cannot tolerate these dalit movements' new access to power"] (242).

The scholarly, meticulously erudite character of the book is revealed in the author biographies that fascinatingly introduce each document. One could sum them up and find in them a kind of protest literature of how dalit lives are constructed with, and against, institutions that oppose them. As a representative voice Bama states in a speech to university students in Hyderabad, "My father was in the Indian Army. I have had the privilege of education. So I am able to come here and talk to you. Had it not been for that, I would not have been here, speaking to you. I would have been working in the fields along with my sisters in the village"(91). Similarly, the activist and writer Ravikumar, though he had a passion for reading newspapers from a young age, had to read those papers in hair salons rather than tea shops because of their "two-tumbler system." Further on, the reader learns about the development of his own intellectual history, and the connections he established between human rights, literature and politics (being elected an MLA himself) not only in India but in Latin America and elsewhere.

Incidentally Ravikumar receives a lengthier attention in this volume not only due to his political career, nor probably because he was an advisor to *No Alphabet in Sight*, and is co-editor, along with R. Azhagarasan, of *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (the sister volume) but as an example of the research process followed from the ground up, culling years of writing and theory from an array of little magazines. This approach reveals much about the emergence of literature as well as politics in a culture. Theatre director and writer K.A. Gunasekaran reflects on one such magazine, *Nirapirikai* (initiated by Ravikumar): "Each issue was worth studying carefully and after I had done that, I felt as though I had grown a metre taller. ...*Nirapirikai* was not just a written text; it was also the process of discussion - a sort of workshop mode - in which each issue was developed and then analysed after it had come out" (159).

The array of perspectives in the volume, often in dialogue and debate with one another - whether about Marxism, Ambedkar, Periyar, Iyothee Thass or about issues of feminism, violence, land and the competition among jati groups - prove most valuable. There is no one kind of dalit voice or experience - hardly. "By birth I am a dalit; not by writing," explains Cho Dharman. "Thus far," he continues, "the depictions have been one-dimensional - dalits appear wearing dirty clothes, stinking, easily falling among people given to violence; they are illiterate, coolies without property, submissive, people who struggle only for food and wage. ... What we have to do is document the multidimensional dalit, his soul/being/essence" (152). Or again in the words of

Imayam: "Good literature should take one into a region of silence. Otherwise what is difference between a writer and a sociologist? When confronted by life, tatvam (theory) fades".²

What Susie and Satyanarayana have achieved through their collection of translations is not a mere generation of new understanding of a troubled and forgotten past but rather in and through these translations help rectify a wrong. A corrective to the past by highlighting the legitimate role that Dalits have played in the making of modern India. A story that historians even of repute like DD Kosambi failed to see and acknowledge. As the dalit lawyer S.J Raja argues as quoted in the introduction: "to apply for a government job, you need the stipulated educational qualification; you should demonstrate that you will be able to do the job. What is the qualification for owning land? He asks the current landowning castes: can you prepare the fields? Can you irrigate them? Can you supervise the irrigation channels day and night? Can you thresh the sheaves of grain using bullocks on the threshing ground?' If merit or efficiency is to be the norm, he tells them, 'you cannot own even a handful of this nation's land" (143).

The title of the volume - a treasure trove of fiction, poetry, oral and written memoirs and oratory, history, investigative reporting, analysis - *No Alphabet in Sight* is an allusion to a newly emerging reconfiguration of modernity itself just as European modernity through its writings of renaissance carved out a new modern secular subjecthood. This is an attempt to rectify that lack of the fraternal, democratic egalitarian frame of reference in the traditional texts that document mythology and literature.

The literary merit of this volume is that it shows socio-political discourse being undertaken by dalits as literature waiting to take wings and the political merit of this volume is that it unveils powerfully the political power of literary (all that it contains) expressions to redefine prevailing norms of power (43). It ought to be the part of the curriculum for not only English Literature but also political science, Sociology, Anthropology, History and Philosophy. It has the potential to trigger a new discourse.

² <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/confronting-life/930644/4> accessed on 19 April 2012.