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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Re: Caste Out of Development Seminar

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who contributed to and participated in the “Caste Out of Development” seminar 15-16th December in Chennai. I regard the seminar as of particular significance in setting out an agenda for research and policy, in addition to taking stock of the preliminary results of the two-year collaborative research project on ‘Civil Society Activism and Transnational Advocacy on Dalit Rights and Development.’ As well as thanking you, I wanted to recall, what for me were, a few of the seminar’s highlights.

To my mind the seminar achieved a number of things. First it brought together elements for a reconceptualization of caste, taking as the point of departure the shared recognition that caste, its inequalities and discriminations, are not eroded by the conditions of capitalism and economic growth in India, but rather re-inscribed through new modes and mechanisms in (as Rajan put it) a ‘mindboggling’ diversity of ways that still need to be captured empirically. Certainly the seminar reminded us of the dangers of settling into any pre-determined understanding of caste or of development, the great value of social research being to unsettle and challenge.

We opened with Gandhi’s significant observation in this context, that while for Dalits caste is commonly experienced as negative discrimination, for privileged groups caste is an asset — the social capital for business or employment, the medium of cultural accumulation etc. The mechanisms that effect the categorical exclusion of Dalits, equally serve the ‘opportunity hoarding’ of other sections of society. As Gandhi indicated, this means that self/social-reform, even state welfare, is an unlikely avenue for change, and instead the challenge is to find ways to strengthen and empower Dalits through economic development opportunities.

Gopal highlighted the depth of this challenge by pointing to the ways in which development and Dalit entrepreneurship are themselves subject to processes of caste. Significantly, the discriminatory effects involved do not require intention (still less any particular ideology); they are structural. Gopal explained how discrimination arises from the separation (and hierarchization) of spaces, markets and occupations as demonstrated for example in Kaveri Gill’s work on scavenging and scrap trading in Delhi where inferior markets map onto inferiorized social spaces. Dalit aspiration is structurally constrained. Consequently our methods of analysis need to recognise the multi-level effects of caste including those falling beyond the explicit, intentional and ideological.

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Rajan's paper offered as a different (mirror) starting point, but a parallel argument about the 'haitus' between the concepts and realities of caste. These he suggested account for a disturbing disconnection between, on the one hand, the cultural discourse of caste (centred on Brahman-bahujan antagonism) that influences electoral politics and, on the other, the political economy of caste as a factor within the contemporary economic system. This hiatus has disabled political actors from pursuing the implementation of development or meeting the demands of Dalits as citizens with rights to a dignified standard of living, often leaving the field to NGOs. Rajan used the case of Christian Dalits and their denial of SC status as further evidence of way Dalit development is constrained by the politics of the nation and its fixed identity boundaries.

Surinder's survey of Dalit activists in Delhi revealed the critical importance of the state through SC reservations (especially the now disappearing Class 4 jobs) to the social mobility of an earlier generation that was the foundation for contemporary Dalit activism. Surinder's survey and Rajan's work with Dalit Christians both revealed the centrality of dalitness amidst a plethora of religious identities, but also (paradoxically) that 'Dalit' itself could be an implicit identity, even denied in favour of Buddhist, Christian or a loose affiliation to the figure of Ambedkar. Significantly, Surinder's activists demonstrated a commitment to the community that was unbound by particular organisations, and took place in multiple fields and blurred into community leadership, which allowed Dalit activism to escape professionalization.

State-level perspectives were provided by Manu's paper on the Special Component Plan (SCP) in Tamil Nadu, Dominic's on the Dalit Sangarsha Samitthi (DSS) in Karnataka and Satyanarayan's overview of Dalit activism in AP. Each also drew attention to general points. Manu argued that SCP represents a 'new paradigm for public policy' beyond welfare towards a rights-based approach and, because wholly unrealised, has become a focal point of Dalit discourses and struggles. Dominic's account of the emergence of the DSS stressed the importance of the issue of land, and the significance of the DSS at village level in changing the balance of power in Dalit-Vokkaliga struggles. Satyanarayan stressed the particular significance of massacres of Dalits in the rise of Dalit movements in AP, drawing activists out of Left political organisations. Subsequently dalit activism took different directions: one focusing on specific interests *within* the Dalit category, the other turning through NGO forms to human rights frameworks.

These papers (and Prakash's commentary) indicated the diversity and regional specificity of contemporary Dalit agendas, as well as significant shifts in the discourse such as from welfare to emancipation or rights (although Pandian reminded us that welfare can be a right too). Anand, then drew us back to the core problem of whether these various identity-focused approaches would ultimately serve Dalit interests, and the question of the goal of the annihilation of castes.

In the day's papers, the need to identify and mobilise as Dalits in order to challenge discrimination and effect social change was taken as self-evident. Anand had a different point, which was that in entering the game of marshalling the social capital of caste to secure their interests, Dalits will always be at a disadvantage in relation to other castes. Therefore, only more inclusive class-based mobilisation (and the neutralising of caste) will ultimately serve Dalits' interests. This position, of course, generated an interesting debate. For one thing, if the reasons for identity-based mobilisation are not self-evident, it was asked what drives this process? Are there structural conditions of identity-oriented approaches that need to be examined (e.g., the way capitalism uses and embeds in caste structures or fragments livelihoods and labour markets so as to encourage caste-based mobilisation); what are the effects of the 'state sponsoring' of caste identity consolidation; is there a separation of the identity-prioritising mobile middle-classes from a majority of poor Dalits whose primary experience is as impoverished and exploited; or exactly the opposite (as Gandhi suggested) it is the failure of the commercially or

professionally successful to self-identify as 'Dalit' that perpetuates stereotypes and stigma, and limits possibilities for affirmation. These and other questions re-engaged older caste *vs* class debates as well as raising the issue of whether Dalits alone can represent Dalits (or take leadership of the organisations). They also returned us to the richness of Ambedkar's caste-class-minority conception of Dalit and this historical experience. The desire that underlies a lot of this debate was captured by Milind in terms of Dalits laying a new claim to (or assertion of) the universal without ignoring cultural history and the specifics of identity that requires positive affirmation.

From the discussions it remained clear that 'Dalit' is simultaneously a category of mobilisation and of discrimination. In the field of development, it was also clear that 'SC' has also become a hallmark for low quality schemes (e.g., housing), unimplemented programmes, unspent budgets, and bureaucratic indifference. Dalit associations are weakened by lack of recognition, as well as manipulated by management within organisational power structures (Anand). While SC reservations have played a critical role in Dalit mobility and leadership formation, they have little changed the conditions of the majority, even while perpetuating illusory aspirations.

The second day of the Seminar turned to the predicaments and possibilities of Dalit activism especially focusing on NGOs and their networks. The papers by Arun, Luisa and myself allowed further reflections on the roots and institutional context of Dalit NGO activism, including the role of the student body (AICUF), NGO donors and international advocacy networks. If I were to identify one overlapping theme here, it would be the significance of disconnect or disjuncture in Dalit activism, and the consequent need to examine civil society action at multiple levels and as different modes of action. The challenge here was to get outside taken for granted ways of seeing activism, for instance as necessarily emerging from local experiences, in order to understand the degree to which processes of civil society activism are autonomous and take place within constructions such as the 'network' or the 'international.' Failure to distinguish different levels/modes of activist process could lead to the misconstruing of agency, outcomes and effects. Anandhi's account of the effect of trans-local NGO politics and the internationalised rights discourse on the ability to work around the local realities of caste and gender was a case in point. My paper suggested that the processes and dilemmas of Dalit NGO networking are only understandable if we grasp the necessary *dis*articulation of networks as discursive effects and as organisational relations. Another case of disjuncture was Luisa's discussion of the disembedding of transnational advocacy from political relations of the global economy, as well as from organisational or community relations.

In thinking carefully about the meaning of 'the global', 'the network', organisational processes and the uncertain relationship to local politics, these papers took heed of Saseej's point (in reviewing the first day) that we need to be alert to the categories with which activism seeks to formulate itself; and to be wary of an analysis which, by using a movements framework, conflates what is to be explained and what is doing the explaining. The kind of sociological exploration of activists that Surinder offered, or the ethnographic insights from other papers would have to be part of the way activist realities could be understood. Saseej hinted that we might also more carefully problematize 'development' as a normative concept, thinking about its governmental as well as the emancipatory implications for Dalits in relation to the state. Moreover, as Pandian reminded us, as soon as we invoke rights we bring in the state, which becomes the arbiter of rights-bearing identities (cf. the Christian Dalit case). And Kalpana made the further point that Dalits (especially in the face of atrocities) seek claims to dignity that are justiciable. Therefore careful attention is needed to the kinds of political performance involved in assertions of 'rights' of different kinds in different contexts.

The more detailed case-study papers of the last two sessions by Suryakant and Babu, and by Anandhi and Jayshree gave clearer focus to the dynamics of Dalit-focussed NGO work. To some extent they countered the previous emphasis on disjuncture by showing how activist and rights agendas are worked out in a thoroughly socially embedded manner. Suryakant described how a global NGO discourse gets vernacularized in the domain of local politics around land. Babu also showed how Dalit NGO activists were firmly part of the society in which they acted. Indeed the external NGO forms may become invisible (behind movements or fronts). Local communities can also be 'flexible in their affiliation and participation... in different Dalit organisations' (Suryakant). Suryakant and Babu not only showed how the NGO language of rights-based development is turned into particular skills in advocacy or land acquisition, data collection, knowledge of revenue systems or legal process, but also that NGO workers are skilled at mediating between a wider Dalit discourse and local relations so as to avoid fuelling antagonism locally between Dalits and non-Dalits.

The embedding of NGO discourse is not however without problems. In a different context, Anandhi spoke of the difficulties that arise when women's rights NGO interventions cut across local relations or negotiations of caste identity and dignity (as when Arunthathiyar youth object to NGO representations of Mathamma as a gender violation). Both Anandhi and Jayshree demonstrated that NGO discourse is further transformed in gender terms. They pointed to distinctively gendered process of Dalit activism, and how spaces for political agency may be constituted quite differently for Dalit women and men. Jayshree showed, counter-intuitively, how for Dalit women exclusion enables spaces of agency denied to Dalit men who were constrained by the formal or public forums in which they participated and tried to press their claims. It is clear that for both Dalit women and men the resources which are critical to identity making are symbolic (temple honours) as well as material (housing, land), but that there are also distinctive processes of re-valourising Dalit women's identity in the context of struggles. Kalpana suggested that we think carefully about the significance of the particular assets (or services) for which Dalit women struggle. The importance of housing plots rather than agricultural land, for example, is suggestive of the women's fear of eviction from their matrimonial homes in the context of domestic violence. She also pointed out that the NGO process could also open up unexpected locations for women's 'resistance' such as the commonly criticised self-help groups.

Selva's final paper showed us how Dalits striving for justice involve universal and particular claims: as human beings, as members of the *um*, as participants in market transactions entitled to respectful neutrality (e.g., in buying barbering services). He traced a progression in Dalit action from 'Untouchable consciousness' and 'SC consciousness' to 'Dalit consciousness.' (Kalpana then usefully distinguished *constitution* from state in 'SC consciousness'.) But it was also clear that this unifying notion, had to be open, not only to the distinctions of gender, but also of caste, as Rajan, Babu and Anandhi's paper on the socio-cultural separateness of Arunthathiyars in different parts of Tamilnadu and its implications showed. Pandian observed that there is nothing inherently good about categorical unity, whether of 'non-Brahman' or of 'Dalit.' Unity involves, he suggested, a politics of sacrifice (of difference) and of silencing; non-unity can also be productive of political spaces and languages. In fact, use of the term 'Dalit' in particular regions implies unstated reference to particular castes (Pandian's point). And Babu reminded us that modes of dominance also need to be differentiated: Kshatyaism from Brahmanism; 'Thevarism' from 'Vanniyarism.'

Prakash closed our seminar with a reminder of our own research process which moves from experience, to the articulation of experience, to conceptualisation, theorisation and ultimately back into activism.

Of course these are just a few immediate recollections from the two days' proceedings. The seminar would have been much less coherent were it not for the contribution of Milind, Prakash, Pandian and Kalpana as brilliant discussants of the different panels, and for the roundup comments by Saseej and Prakash. Thank you all!

The next step will be to develop these papers, individually and as a corpus, into a published volume. I would be very grateful if you would confirm the availability of a completed version of your papers for this project. I would also be grateful to have draft copies of papers I have not yet received. I will meanwhile work on an overview and no doubt seek your individual and collective advice as I do so. I will review all the draft papers and get back to individual authors with comments, and set out a timetable for completed works. At the same time I will prepare a book proposal in order secure an advance contract from a publisher so as to tie ourselves to a definite timetable.

Once again thank you all for a terrific seminar. I am looking forward to taking this project forward with you. In the mean time I wish you all a very happy 2012.

With best wishes,

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