

## The quiet voice: Literature from the margins

In a small flat opposite the Mysore theatre and culture centre, a chance encounter bolsters a collaboration that gives a poet a new language through which to communicate his torment. It is 2002 and Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy has just met Rowena Hill. He is a Dalit poet and writer from Chamarajanagar district in Karnataka; she, a scholar and translator from Venezuela, who has already translated a collection of vachanas – poems of a metaphysical and social movement in Karnataka from roughly the tenth to the twelfth centuries. The meeting rapidly leads to several others. Frantic hand gestures and much pointing at a dictionary (Chinnaswamy barely speaks English and Hill's knowledge of Kannada is rudimentary) culminate in many of Chinnaswamy's poems being translated in English, and later, in Spanish.

In translating Chinnaswamy's poetry, Hill is careful about remaining faithful to the text, because the urgent anger in his words must find precise idioms, and a syntax that matches the ferocity of the original. She does, however, admit to struggling with authenticity: "The language used may be a dialect, and will certainly contain non-standard features. It may depend on rhythm to give it a sense of form, and the rhythms of Kannada, as other Indian languages, with their 'back to front' syntax and its repetitive verb endings, can only be hinted at in a European language." Her diligence has made verses like these accessible to an international readership:

*When I go to the temple*

*I don't leave my sandals outside,*

*I stay outside myself.*

*Sandals on a cobbler's feet*

*is news as rare*

*as a man biting a dog. (Sandals and I)*

Hill has translated twenty-six of Chinnaswamy's poems into Spanish, which were published in the Columbian journal *Arquitrave* in 2004. She compares her prior experience of translating vachanas with the emotionally fraught process of grappling with Chinnaswamy's verses: "Apart from the directness of speech in the vachanakaras (who in fact became an important reference for the Dalit poets), nothing in these writers had prepared me for the anguish, the indignation and sometimes the crudeness of Chinnaswamy's verses, which nonetheless retained the concentration and the attention to sound of poetry," she says.

Perhaps the sheer vehemence of feeling and the eloquent rage of the activist define a canon of poetry and literature hurriedly classified as 'Dalit'. Jotiba Phule, who belonged to

the mali caste of gardeners and farmers, is believed to have used the word Dalit in terms of *dalittuthan* (to uplift the downtrodden). The origins of the term can be found in Pali Buddhist literature, and etymologically, it has evolved from the Pali *dalidda* in the *Dalidda Sutta*. But what has recently underpinned the lyricism of the oppressed, is the suicide note of PhD scholar and Ambedkar Students Association activist Rohith Vemula. The note, an outcry that dwells on science and philosophy, the stars and the soul, contains a telling metaphor:

*My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.*

The unappreciated child. The rag boy who sifts through a dump of plastic bottles, torn rubber condoms, old papers with red tampons, egg shells, in Chinnaswamy's *To a Rag and Bone Boy*. Or those multitudes in activist-poet Siddalingaiah's *The Dalits Are Here*, whose minds burn with dreams, whose eyes spark with revolution, who carry burning torches in their hands. Vemula's ostracism, denoted by the image of the spurned child, finds a thematic reverberation in Dalit writing, particularly in work honed and hammered into shape by the burning furnace of activism. The Karamchedu massacre of 1985, for instance, is widely believed to have laid the foundation for Telugu Dalit literature. The incident at Karamchedu flared when Suvartamma, a woman who belonged to the madiga caste, objected to two kamma youth bathing their buffalos in a village tank full of drinking water. Her protest was described as misbehaviour by the upper-caste kmmas, who mobilized a mob against the Madigas. The attack led to the formation of the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha (DMS) in 1985 – a consortium of young thinkers and activists from untouchable castes like mala and madiga. But while the history of Dalit movements and consequent literary endeavour suppurates with caste oppression, incidents like the one that led to the Karamchedu massacre are common, even now.

'The kind of situations I describe in my poems has not stopped occurring. Recently, in a town in central India, a Dalit girl was beaten by an upper caste woman on the pretext that her shadow had fallen on the kinsman of that woman. The girl was carrying water from the hand pump. Such incidents still happen in this new century, in so-called modern India, and disturb sensitive people like me,' says Chinnaswamy, of the poignant tone and texture of his poems.

Autobiographies too, chronicle with searing intensity, the loneliness of not belonging – to a village, a community, the local school – because of one's caste. Urmila Pawar, who grew up in Adgaon village in the Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra, tells of a persistent humiliation, in her memoir, *Aaydan*, which was translated from Marathi into English by Dr Maya Pandit Narkar in 2003. *Aaydan* means things made of bamboo. The English title, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* captures the conceit that governs the language of the text. The weaving of cane baskets was the work of the Mahar community that

peopled the picturesque Konkan coast, and is a vivid metaphor for the community's lowly caste as well as destitution. Writes Pawar:

*My mother used to weave 'aaydans,' the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us.*

The translation of *Aaydan* from Marathi to English presented the challenge of "breaking down hegemonic traditions of translation," says Narkar, who is a professor at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. "Modern Marathi language and literature is often described as the reincarnation of English. Translation of literature from Marathi into English seeks to change the balance of power," she explains. *Aayadan* also dares to defy the norms of Dalit story-telling that attempt to evoke pity in the reader. "It isn't merely a sob-story; it is a tale of resilience, of grit," says Narkar.

Pawar, on the cusp of celebrating her 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, mentions being deeply saddened by Veluma's suicide, and his expulsion from the mainstream din of student life, which led to the scholar hanging himself. "I grew up in a time when even my shadow was considered inauspicious," she says. "Things haven't changed much, have they?" she muses, rhetorically.

The influence of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, both as a reformer and writer, is indelible in Pawar, who recalls reading him after she matriculated from a small school in Ratnagiri. "A few Ambedkar activists came to the district and told us that the Hindus hated us; there was no place for us in their religion," she recalls, her words resonating with Ambedkar's impassioned preface to the second edition of *Annihilation of Caste*, written in 1937:

*I do not care for the credit which every progressive society must give to its rebels. I shall be satisfied if I make the Hindus realise that they are the sick men of India, and that their sickness is causing danger to the health and happiness of other Indians.*

The 'sick men of India' are also the loathsome protagonists of the stories and poems of contemporary Dalit writers like Anita Bharti, who is the vice-principal of Rani Chennama Government Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya in Jahangirpuri, Delhi. Her collection of short stories, *Ek thi Quote Wali*, published in 2012 by Lokmitra Prakarshan, contains a story that is a retelling of Munshi Premchand's *Thakur ka Kuan*. The story, *Thakur ka Kuan II*, begins where Premchand's story ends. Bharti redefines the female Dalit protagonist, Gangi, as a feisty and outspoken crusader, who fights for the villagers' right to access clean drinking water.

Professor Kiran Chaudhry, who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for French and Francophone Studies, mentions guiding an MPhil dissertation on *Thakur ka Kuan II*. 'The story is a contemporary redefinition of canonical literature; the protagonist asserts

herself and refuses to give in to self-pity,' she says. Professor Chaudhry has also translated into French a short story by yet another Dalit writer, Dr Rajat Rani Meenu. The story, *Hum Kaun Hain*, appeared in its French version, *Qui Sommes-Nous*, in the journal *Rencontre avec l'Inde*, published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in 2015. 'Most modern Dalit short stories lay a lot of emphasis on education – as a way out of oppression. Also, *Hum Kaun Hain* is written in simple, urbane Hindi; it isn't full of colloquialisms or dialect, as one would imagine Dalit literature to be,' says Professor Chaudhry in praise of the story.

Dr Rajat Rani Meenu, author of *Hum Kaun Hain*, and of a collection by the same name, teaches in the Hindi department of Kamla Nehru College in Delhi University's South Campus. She is also a poet. In a poem titled *Kyun Nahin Hilta Patta Ek Bhi: Desh ke Daliton ke Prati*, she poses a pertinent question:

*Hamare saath jab hota hai balatkaar,*

*Saamohik balatkaar –*

*Tab kyun hilta nahin patta ek bhi?*

*Aur jab tumhare saath hua balatkaar*

*Tab kyun hil gaye sansad bhi?*

Not a leaf stirs when we are collectively raped. But when *you* are violated, it shakes up the parliament. Why, she asks, in a blatant reference to the rape of Nirbhaya in 2012, which raised the collective conscience of an apathetic Delhi, even as untouchables or ati-shudras were sexually assaulted every day, and swelled the numbers of the anonymous dead. Her words, convulsing with the loneliness and rage that is reminiscent of Veluma's suicide note, are apt for poetry, which may, someday, stir a mindful reader to an equal fury.