

**BOOK REVIEW: IMAGINING KALLENPOKKUDAN DIFFERENTLY
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*“Does the boatman write poetry?
For he draws a wrinkled circle
with the water that he
scoops out of the boat.”*

~ S. Joseph (‘Different Poems’, Trans. by Sachidanandan)¹

There was a time the publishers show least interest in Dalit critical literary contributions, making its presence invisible at the regional and national literary spheres. However, there seems to be a change as Dalit intellectuals and their literary works receive public attention and visibility in the recent years. The thriving publishing industry in the regional vernacular spaces began to give space for Dalit writings as there emerged a new cultural and economic space for the same.

As a result, Dalit politics and writings have began assuming importance in the global critical literary sphere. With the publication of two dossiers on South Indian Dalit writings in Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, Dalit literary expressions, hitherto limited to the regional linguistic boundaries to international literary-scapes.

The recent edited book in Malayalam language *KallenPokkudan: Karuppu, Chuvappu, Pacha* (KallenPokkudan: Black, Red and Green) is a significant step in this direction. It strives to document, compile and publish the various writings on KallenPokkudan, a Dalit environmental and political activist hailing from north Kerala.

The print and visual representations of Pokkudan provided the moment of rupture in the regional cultural-scape of Kerala, in which Dalit history, politics and lifeworld remain merely as an ‘absence presence’. The media representations of KallenPokkudan have created a space of visibility for Dalit cultural presence. Pokkudan has published two autobiographies; acted in two feature films - internationally acclaimed film JayanCherian’s ‘Papileo Buddha’ and Prof. Sivaprasad’s ‘Sthalam’; nearly ten documentaries made on him; won many awards for his contributions to environment protection; many theses written on him submitted to Universities abroad.

¹See K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu .ed. 2010. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India Dossier1: Tamil and Malayalam*, 458

The edited volume seeks to complicate the print imaginations about Dalit by reading closely the Dalit agential engagements with the analysis of the figure of the popularly known Dalit activist KallenPokkudan in the narratives of print and journalism cultures. The scope and limitations of these agential roles within the emergent field of Dalit autobiographical and journalistic writings, both encompassing the negotiated realm of the cultures of print and journalism, are discussed with the figure of KallenPokkudan as the point of analysis.

KallenPokkudan became famous with his eco-political interventions using mangrove planting in his village in north Kerala. CPI (M), one of the strong political contenders of the region took strong stand against Pokkudan, especially his act of planting mangroves and the caste critique of the communist party, eventually leading to the confrontation and destruction of mangroves planted in the village. The strong political position taken by Pokkudan has caught the attention of the public space, making Pokkudan the figure of resistance for not only Dalits, but among the emergent space of new social movements, particularly the environmental activists.

Many documentaries have been made and human-interest features written about him till date. And with two autobiographies, one in the early 2000 and the other after a decade in 2010, KallenPokkudan came back with a strong political message by narrating of his own life story. This was successful to some extent in marking the tensions in the political scenario with the evolution and visibility of the critical Dalit space in the public space.

The print space at the market-driven capitalist conjuncture of print journalism and the newly emerged literary genre of Dalit autobiographical writings have been probed in this volume at length. It seeks to problematize the narratives of inclusion and visibility propounded by these print narratives and tries to present the counter-hegemonic imaginations and resistances through which Dalits exercise their agency within the same mediated space of printing/writing. It looks at the emerging genre of Dalit autobiographical writings as the space of mediation and negotiation within the canonical space of print cultures. And the journalistic and autobiographical imaginations of Dalit lifeworld can be seen exemplified in a negotiated mode at the narrative praxis of the print space.

In other words, the imagined modes of cultural representations explicate the story of the modern cultural life of Dalits who reinvents writing as the epistemological site for registering resistance and expressing their political agency not only as part of asserting community and history, but also as a mode of registering themselves in the claimed space of citizenship as modern individuated Dalit subjects. The market-driven popular culture space of writing/printing/publishing becomes the field to exercise hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interventions, the interstices of which lie the power of negotiation and the resultant modes of Imagination / representation.

Constructed and disseminated within the capitalistic cultural field of printing/publishing, the autobiographical writing assumes the space to articulate and document lived experiences. The political significance of this act of documenting lived experiences in the form of autobiographical writing poses the limited possibility of creating an alternate narrative of life, history and politics of Dalit lifeworld. It registers not only the collective consciousness of an imagined political community, but also the arrival of the modern individuated Dalit who could articulate their life and politics through their own writings.

The agential claims of such an act of writing lies caught up in the complex web of power relations determining the authority of who can make claims about knowledge production. This tension could be seen thriving in the print imaginations of Dalits and the Dalit interventions in printing/writing. The journalistic and autobiographical imaginations of KallenPokkudan embeds

this tension and throw light on these hegemonic and counter-hegemonic imaginations about Dalit in Kerala's milieu.

The Dalit sphere of counterpublics have become one of the prominent socio-cultural space of renewed articulations about history, politics and cultural articulations of Dalits. Sanal Mohan, who wrote the critical preface to the volume, has pointed out that the book will make every reader remind about the significance of the politics of green and black, which may shape the future trajectory of politics all over the world. Citing the racial and casteist signifiers embedded in black color, he argues:

Many may be hesitant to accept the signifying presence of colour based discriminations in Kerala. The editors recognize that the significance of the black colour lies as the resistance and critique of such racial dominations (Mohan 2013, 31).

As enunciated, the book is a true contribution not only towards the political resistance but also posits the epistemological interventions of Dalits through the medium of print in producing critical knowledge about Kerala society.

Still, few glitches remain. The editors could have paid little more attention to proof reading and language editing. However, the translations from Malayalam to English seem to have been done with some organic perfection.

Workcited

KallenPokkudan: Karuppu, Chuvappu, Pacha (KallenPokkudan: Black, Red and Green)

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