



Indian Council of
Social Science Research



ICSSR Sponsored

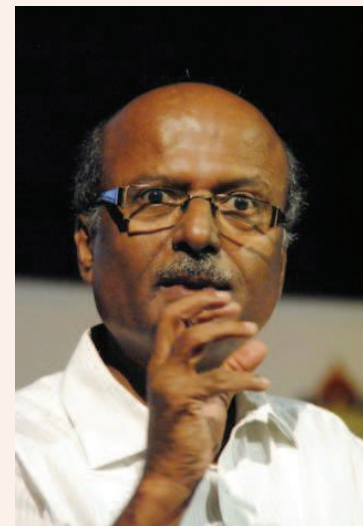
PUBLIC LECTURE

On

*Indian Democracy and the Reconstitution of Dalit Self:
Contemporary Dalit Writings*

Professor Valerian Rodrigues,
*Centre for Political Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi*

17-10-2014



Venue: Council Hall, Tezpur University

Time: 3 pm

Organised by



Department of Sociology

Indian Democracy and the Reconstitution of Dalit Self:

Contemporary Dalit Writings

(Outline)

There has been an argument that after independence, the enormously creative agency of Dalits in the first half of the 20th century, came to be co-opted by the Indian state, making the case of Dalit emancipation a function of the bureaucratic and policy apparatuses of the state (Anupama Rao, 2011). As a corollary this argument suggests, that Dalit agency can be redirected towards a radical project, in waiting. While the condition of vast masses of Dalits has not undergone a significant change in independent India, and could be said to have even worsened in some respects, this lecture argues that Dalit emancipatory project is intimately bound up with Indian democracy, constitutional in expression, and not outside it. It at the same time suggests, that the notion of democracy in this instance needs to be deeply overwritten with an ethical dimension, and cannot be merely confined to electoral democracy.

At an early stage of Indian national movement the caste question came to inform it quite centrally, and differential understanding of the national movement came to be proposed on that basis (Geeta and Rajadurai, 1998). A significant section of the national scholarship argued that the principles sustaining the caste system cannot be reconciled with the principles central to democracy (Panikkar, 1933; Ambedkar, 1936). There was a divide on this question: Whether one should pursue independence and a democratic order on priority, which in turn would attend to the caste question, or propose a democratic order through struggle against caste system, alongside other issues? While the first perspective came to inform state ideology in India, the second, continues to remain vibrant in the complex civil society domain in India. The transformation of Indian party system bears testimony to it. However, such egalitarian gains and democratic reach have not necessarily transformed social values, and everyday dispositions anchored on caste. While Dalit writings have strongly endorsed the former, they have bemoaned the latter. In other words, egalitarian pursuit alone, however, desirous it might be, is not adequate response to the untouchability question, and *pari passu*, to certain attributes of the caste question.

From early on, Dalit thinkers and scholars, have been unanimous that while the caste question and the question of untouchability were related they were distinct. The untouchability question was closely related to what it means to be human. It is a question of one's selfhood, of dignity that every human, qua human, owes to another.

The egalitarian thrust of Indian democracy, has made significant advances; however, there has not been a significant shift with regard to treating human beings as equally human. It is deeply rooted, in everyday social relations, linguistic usages and bodily dispositions. While some of the institutionalized and overt treatment of others as sub-human can be countered by use of public power, public power cannot be the guardian of beliefs, attitudes and dispositions. Untouchability is primarily an ethical question, how we treat humans. By extension, it has a profound bearing on caste practices as well.
