

International workshop

Dalit Politics at the Crossroads

14 July 2022

Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences

Jilská 1, Prague

The results of the recent elections to the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly raise several questions concerning the Dalit politics in India. Does the unprecedented defeat of the Bahujan Samaj Party indicate a failure of the Dalit electoral politics? Or has the idea of upliftment of the unprivileged entered the political mainstream by being effectively dissolved and co-opted by the mainstream political parties, especially by the BJP? How do the traditional caste hierarchies transform themselves, how do they manifest themselves in politics and how are they being accepted by various disadvantaged groups? And finally, what are the future prospects and opportunities of the movements aiming at the emancipation of the marginalized castes and classes in India, be it through politics or through social change?

14:00–14:30 Registration

14:30–15:30 Keynote lecture

Badri Narayan

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

Introduction to Dalit Movement and Politics

15:30–17:00 Crisis of Dalit-Bahujan Movement

Badri Narayan

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

Issues, Agendas, Dictions, Language: Multiple Crises of the Dalit-Bahujan Movement

The recent Legislative Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh has proved that the Dalit-Bahujan movement in its organised form has not been able to do effective impact on electoral democratic politics. Why is this happening? Our observation suggests that the Dalit-Bahujan movement is on the verge of decline both as a social movement and as a political movement, and it is unable to address the changing desires of Dalit communities, especially Dalit youths and middle class. In my lecture I will try to explore deeper socio-political causes of organised Dalit-Bahujan movement in India and analyze the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election in the context of major epistemological and ontological questions.

Archana Singh

G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj

Lauh Virangana Mayawati: A Critical Analysis of the Trajectory of Image Making

The story of Mayawati (the leader of Bahujan Samaj Party) is the story of Dalit woman (gendered subaltern) with persistent determinations who ultimately become one of the most powerful leaders of India. This presentation is an exhaustive analysis of the dialogical relationship between a leader and the communities, in the context of his/her image construction, as a powerful leader to empower, awaken and consolidate the community members as a strong base on which his or her leadership will emerge.

This construction of image and discourses around it is a parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate a counter-discourse to formulate an oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests and needs. This is the creation of alternative histories and literature to deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of the upper caste, where they simultaneously struggle, resists and subverts the mainstream discourse of the world.

The presentation will examine the counter-narratives of marginality of Dalit women in these “contesting discourses” which came into existence as counter-discourse with “bhoga hua yatharth” (experiential reality), to deconstruct the notion of hegemonic mainstream discourse.

Pavel Hons

Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences

From Mallar to Pallar and Back: Ideology of Devendrakula Velalars

Dalits are not a homogenous group as they differ in many respects, be it language, religion, traditional occupation, or their eating habits. They may also differ in their emancipation strategies and arguments they have gradually developed during their struggle. While all of them fight against untouchability and discrimination, their argumentation may differ on other questions. Most of them have espoused ideas of Dalit leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar, for whom the utmost objective was eradication of caste. Moreover he openly rejected Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. Millions of Dalits followed his example and venerate him as a supreme leader till this day.

Devendrakula Velalars are an exception to the rule. Instead of eradication of caste they seem to prefer to strengthen their caste identity and to move up the social ladder. They try to embed history of their community in the history of South India and to prove that the three famous Tamil dynasties, i.e., Pandyas, Cholas and Cheras, originated from amongst them. It was only after ascendancy of the Telugu speaking Nayaks that their proud name Mallar was changed into derogatory Pallar, they were bereft of their land and turned into untouchables. Within the religious sphere they argue for their strong relationship with Shiva and several important temples, most importantly the Murugan temple at Palani.

In short they are trying to prove that they used to be an important dignified community for which they are trying to find evidence in old manuscripts, temple inscriptions and other sources. The aim of the paper is to follow the intellectual journey of the main ideologues and intellectuals of this caste and to match their arguments with recent steps taken by their political representation.

17:00–18:00 Open discussion

Moderator: Jiří Krejčík, Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Please register at jiri.krejcik@soc.cas.cz by 13 July 2022.

The workshop is organized jointly by the Institute of Sociology and the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences within the Research Programme “Global Conflicts and Local Interactions”, Strategy AV21.

