



Tangible progress Dalit often face discrimination and go unheard, but academics are working to change that

Listening to the 'voice of the poor'

Indian and British academics are promoting Dalit literature. Matthew Reisz reports

The work of Indian Dalit writers who still struggle to be heard even within their own country is being showcased by an Indian lecturer and British colleagues.

The Dalit, formerly known as "untouchables", were traditionally restricted to certain low-status occupations and allowed to marry only within their own caste. Although "untouchability" was outlawed by the Indian constitution of 1950, the community still faces discrimination, particularly in rural areas. They can be denied access to resources such as wells and sometimes experience violence. They can also be marginalised by fellow students and lecturers if they obtain places at university and often find it difficult to have their voices heard within the wider culture.

Supra Mukherjee is associate professor of English at West Bengal State University, which she described as "a university on the margins of

the urban centre of Kolkata". While the institution's English degrees include "a lot of English English literature and a lot of Brahminical Indian literature, some in Indian English and some in the vernacular", she told *Times Higher Education*, it has recently introduced a compulsory unit on "the literature of the margins, including lower-caste Dalit literature – as well as tribal literature and literature from the geographical margins of mainland India".

There are currently 12 books by Dalits on the syllabus and the number being published is "increasing pretty fast", although Professor Mukherjee has had to translate some of the texts from Bengali herself.

This new course had been broadly welcomed, Professor Mukherjee added, because "a large section of the students are from the communities of the margins", so "this is the first time they are hear-

ing themselves and their own voices represented by books that they read, rather than just looking at representations of themselves by higher castes and higher classes.

"It is the first time the poor man's voice, speaking of the poor, [is being heard] as part of their study books."

Although there can be resistance from upper-caste students who believe that affirmative action initiatives have given the Dalit a head start, Professor Mukherjee said that "the classroom gives them a healthy space where they [students] can debate and think about these issues which otherwise remain unspeakable".

Professor Mukherjee recently travelled to Britain to attend an



event organised by the Postcolonial Studies Centre at Nottingham Trent University to launch its new Changing Wor(l)ds network, devoted to "cultural activism in the literary marketplace".

Scholars at the centre are working on the writings of different groups whose voices often go unheard – Palestinian women, refugee women, the "queer of colour" and the Dalit – as well as the politics of the literary marketplace and "decolonising publishing in the UK". They invited a range of cultural organisations, local and national, to join forces to "explore the potential of literature to act as a force for cultural activism and ultimately, we hope, social change". One of the panels featured the feminist Dalit poet Kalyani Thakur (pictured inset) and her translator, Professor Mukherjee, who was also there to act as interpreter.

They were introduced by Nicole Thiara, lecturer in English at Nottingham Trent, and Judith Misrahi-Barak, lecturer in English at the Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, who have together worked on a project called "Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literature", funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Both stressed the many obstacles that Dalit writing still faced to being read and studied. Dr Thiara pointed out that "it would need several lifetimes to acquire the languages to read [the full spectrum of] Dalit literature", while Dr Misrahi-Barak noted that "even many of my colleagues in post-colonial studies didn't know the word 'Dalit' or the caste atrocities going on every day".

Caste remained a huge issue in India, according to Professor Mukherjee. Gandhi, she recalled, "had forced his wife to clean the toilet in order to break down divisions between low- and high-status work", but he had also adapted to caste as a fact of life in India, which "has now penetrated Christianity and Islam, too".

Yet the Dalit were fighting back by "using English as a tool to establish equality and connect across the subcontinent", she added. It was up to translators, small publishers and supportive "syllabus makers" such as herself to help push the process forward.

To conclude the day, the organisers announced plans for a Festival in the Margins (or Changing Wor(l)ds Festival), to be held in 2019, which would prominently feature Dalit writers and activists alongside refugee communities.

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