

# Dalits and Memories

## Remembrance of Days Past

ALEXANDRA DE HEERING

This paper explores the various ways Cakkiliyar people, a Dalit community, relate, through memory, to their past and their history. Far from constituting a homogeneous group, the more than 60 testimonies collected among Cakkiliyars reveal a diversity of perspectives on the past, strongly influenced by the situation in the present and aspirations for the future. Three distinct ways of thinking and three prototypes emerge from the testimonies; each one is defined by a specific way of positioning oneself in relation to various historical times.

This paper delves into the memories of Cakkiliyars in Tamil Nadu. The Cakkiliyars, nowadays preferably referred to as Arunthathiyars,<sup>1</sup> form the third largest Dalit group in Western Tamil Nadu after Pallars and Paraiyars. For their traditional occupation, scavenging, and for their supposed “non-Tamilness” (the mother tongue of some Cakkiliyars is Telugu, for others Kannada, and they are said to originate from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka), they also experience discrimination within the Dalit group.

This oral history project took place in the Palni Hills (South-west Tamil Nadu), in two small villages located near the seasonally buzzing town of Kodaikanal. These two villages, which have long subsisted only on agriculture, came into existence more than a century and a half ago, when some people migrated there, possibly fleeing a drought in the plains. Soon enough, those first settlers felt the need for assistance in daily chores. They came to an agreement with some land and labour owners down in the plains to bring uphill a few Cakkiliyars, who would be used as *pannaiyals* (bonded labourers) and as servants. A few untouchables<sup>2</sup> were thus “invited” to move to those hilly villages to perform their traditional tasks—playing drums, digging pits, removing dead cattle, etc—as well as agricultural labour. Initially, land was plenty, so the first Cakkiliyar settlers were allocated some plots of land by the earlier upper caste settlers as a kind of reward. Those lands, however, long remained fallow. Today, more than a century later, the villages have grown and developed, each village following its own trajectory. The thatched huts have been mostly converted into mud and sometimes concrete houses, the *pannaiyal* system has been abandoned, kids go to school at least for a few years, and money is in circulation in the *ceri* (Dalit colony). The Dalits, if still owning land, cultivate it, and they have also stopped bowing their heads when encountering a high caste member on their way. And yet, they continue to face prejudices because of their caste and to be seen and treated as inferiors, although in a less blatant way.

In order to create a mini-archive of the history of these two Cakkiliyar communities, I interviewed community members in 2010 and 2011, with the help of an interpreter. People’s houses became, for a few hours, recording studios, with children playing around, dogs barking out, or vessels being cleaned out loudly. Each encounter was an occasion to literally look at the body as a source for history, by observing the witnesses’ bodies, their postures, their gestures and their hands.

This article was externally reviewed.

Alexandra de Heering ([assiadeheering@gmail.com](mailto:assiadeheering@gmail.com)) is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Namur, Belgium and the French Institute of Pondicherry, India.

## 1 Past and Memories

The project as a whole studied both the history (what happened) and the memories (what is remembered of what happened) of Cakkiliyars (de Heering 2016), but the focus of this paper is limited to memories. The use of memory, which (re)constructs and forgets, represents a real challenge, since it produces documents collected here and now about there and then (Charlton et al 2007: 48). This has compelled oral historians depending almost exclusively on people's memory to reflect on its methodological constraints. A paradigm shift occurred when, after switching the focus from the events to their meaning (Portelli 1981: 99), oral historians recognised that the peculiarities and so-called unreliability of memory might actually "be a resource, rather than a problem, for historical interpretation and reconstruction" (Thomson 1998: 585).

India has not experienced the "memory craze" (Megill 1998) that Europe did in the 1970s, three decades after the Holocaust. Some important studies have been done on the memory of major historical events in India, with partition being the main focus of inquiry (Butalia 1998; Pandey 2001), but they remain peripheral. This study does not focus on one specific historical event, but rather on the historicity of a social phenomenon, a specific social condition intrinsically related to the Indian caste system, of being a Dalit, then and now. I decided to emphasise the "non-exemplary" lives and memories of ordinary Dalit men and women (Pandian 2008). They, after all, belong to the majority. Narayan (2008) has documented the recent interest on the part of militant Dalits—who cannot be labelled as ordinary—in reconstructing their history to develop a counter-narrative to mainstream history. What is the ordinary Dalit's relation to, interest in, and use of history?

To answer these questions, this project privileged a local-scale analysis, in the tradition of microhistory, and extensive fieldwork conducted in two Cakkiliyar colonies of the Palni Hills. In total, more than 60 life stories were collected, and women and men from all ages interviewed, individually or in groups, about their past.

Attention was paid not only to what people narrated, but also to what they elided. Far from constituting a homogeneous group in the act of remembering, the Cakkiliyars expressed a variety of interests in, and connections to, the past. This diversity is the core of the present paper, which also questions the existence of the popular notion of collective memory within the Dalit/Cakkiliyar/Arunthathiyar community.

## 2 One Metanarrative: Common Patterns

But before going deeper into that, a close look at what unifies the oral accounts is necessary. Here, I briefly discuss four common patterns and their *raison d'être*.

To begin with, Cakkiliyars' oral narratives are narratives of suffering. This is comparable to Dalit autobiographies. Almost all the witnesses bring up the difficulties with which they were confronted every day, and often use it as the starting point for the narration.

**Suppama:** In our lives we suffered a lot, we raised our children; we suffered a lot in our lives. In the past we only suffered. We raised our children in our poverty.<sup>3</sup>

**Annammal:** We experienced a lot of difficulties; we experienced a lot of difficulties, filled with poverty. (...) With children, my family experienced a lot of pain and difficulties.

Suffering (*tunṇam*), poverty (*vaṇumai*), difficulty, sorrow (*kaṣṭam*), and pain (*vali*) in which they lived is what overwhelms the minds of Cakkiliyar witnesses when asked about their past. Their narratives focus on the deficiencies of the past often as compared to the present situation. With suffering as the central theme of the Cakkiliyars' past, the tone is set.

The second characteristic is related to the difficulty faced by Cakkiliyars in recollecting beyond the screen of suffering. When asked for further details, many did not know what else to say, as if none of their experiences were of any interest. They also often found it difficult to explain the ways things changed. Consequently, most of the time, the past is presented as a long period without any particular texture; changes took place progressively but imperceptibly. Explanations on the evolutions within the community are often confused.

**Young men:** These were the struggles we faced... and then... at last... slowly slowly, it started reducing and today is far better.

**Interviewer:** Hmm, so, the main reason she is here is, the important thing for her to find out is, what are the reasons for this change? (...) There might have been many reasons right. So what were the reasons to make this change happen?

**Jothi:** No specific reasons. Which one should I tell you about? ...?

Third, many witnesses jump back and forth between the past and present in their explanations. Rather than narrating change in a linear fashion, they resort to comparisons through juxtapositions; they enumerate the changes by making a parallel between the situation of "those times" and that of today, skipping the explanation of the intermediate period, or the steps which made the changes possible.

**Kaliammal:** From what used to happen to what is happening now, it is of course only very good.

**Interviewer:** How do you say it is good?

**Ka:** How means... in those days, because of caste differences, they used to say *avan*, *evan* (that boy, this boy)... but now they address us by our names or they say *vānkō* (honorific form in Tamil). They will call and say *vānkō*. Or they would say *vām mā* (honorific form in Tamil to address women). So the changes from before are so much better.

The present is therefore very much present in portrayals of the past, which is the fourth characteristic. In fact, even though most of my direct questions concerned the past, many witnesses preferred to linger on their present situation, their current questioning, their fears and the traps in which they are caught.

**Interviewer:** Do you think there have been any changes? Since those days, until today, have there been any changes [in your life]?

**Murugan:** Nothing like that has happened I think, sister... but what happened now is, in today's time, actually... people live together... and since they were all together, they got separated and went... and today, we... we are somehow advancing these days. They (his parents' generation) did not pay any attention [towards studies]. And so they got segregated...

Beside the doubts it raised about the appropriateness of the oral history enterprise, the omnipresence of the present indicates the nature of relationships the Cakkiliyars have with their history: neither of rupture nor continuity, but something between the two, which is surprising to the historian

accustomed to caesura. This rich presence of the present deserves close attention.

The first hypothesis is that witnesses have chosen the present to talk about a past which has not completely disappeared. Many practices have been maintained until today. How, for example, can they talk in the past tense of practices, such as not sharing food with other castes or the prohibition against entering temples, which persist today? Dalit writers also blur the past and present to make powerfully visible the persistence of oppression based upon caste membership (Basu 2011: ii). A second hypothesis is that the current situation is what really worries the witnesses. We met many people confronted with thorny problems, including a couple obsessed by their inability to have children and a young man unable to work because of serious health problems, who could not think or speak of anything else. Focused as they were on their own worries, they were unable to address the collective question of caste. The third and last hypothesis rests on the idea that it is more valorising and galvanising for the Cakkiliyars to talk about today rather than yesterday. The evocation of their present situation lets them mark the difference between today's practices and those of days gone by. Their way of recounting expresses the image they want to give of themselves.

The four major factors identified above are observable in all testimonies without, however, being as strong everywhere.<sup>4</sup> We now try to understand the reasons why bearing witness for Dalits is far from being an innocent exercise.

The first, and probably most important, reason is what might be called the trauma sustained by the Cakkiliyars because of the abusive and humiliating treatment inflicted upon them for generations. Trauma need not indeed be considered only as consequence of a distinct or acute event but may also be the result of a constellation of life experiences related to an ongoing social condition of structural oppression and devaluation (Erikson 1994). Research on trauma has shown that its victims have the tendency to forget the emotionally negative experiences, to the point where they are no longer capable of bearing witness to them (Rogers et al 2004; Williams and Banyard 1999). Given the harshness of the Indian context for the Dalits, it would seem relevant to interpret the resistance and the reserve of many Cakkiliyars to witnessing as the expression of an unconscious suppression of memories or of events too painful to confront.

Three complementary reasons may explain the reluctance to speak—all closely linked with the question of trauma. The first is suffering caused by recounting sorrowful experiences, which may prevent Dalits from speaking freely. Rather than face up to an inglorious past, many Dalits opt for denial as a survival technique, just as the Marathi writer Daya Pawar preferred to forget his past in order to remain alive (Pawar 1996: 61). In so doing, they adopt a tactic analogous to that described by Jorge Semprun in *L'écriture ou la vie*, when he relates how old deportees, having crossed the unspeakable, had to choose to forget temporarily in order to continue to live and create (1994). Silence may thus be understood as a protection strategy.

Second, fear stands in the way of freedom to speak. Despite the progressive relaxation of caste restrictions, psychological barriers persist along with the fear of the upper castes. How may the latter react if they find out that people are talking about them adversely? Symptomatically, when speaking negatively about the higher castes, the Cakkiliyar witnesses do so in a whisper. They fear reprisals.

Finally, the last reason: rebuffed forever, Dalits have a tendency to belittle themselves and minimise their abilities. Some people, for example, ascribe their inability to remember to their illiteracy. This is certainly an excuse, since the two types of memory in question (semantic memory for learning and episodic memory for recollecting events) are theoretically very different. Being unable to read does not hinder memory; everyone has the capacity to recall events (Brédart and Van Der Linden 2004: 70). Moreover, witnesses often told us:

**Palani:** Everything is over now, what is there for us to tell?

It is quite clear that this response is a mixture of fatalism and lack of interest in their own stories. Up until now, the past has been nothing but suffering.

**Lakshmi:** What can I tell [you]? What I suffered exists till today. It has not come to an end yet. (...) [Up to] now we are suffering.

What is the use or the necessity of “spitting out those stinks” as Pawar expresses it in his autobiography (Pawar 1996: 61)? In contrast to rich and dominant families, who preserve and transmit memories of a glorious past, Dalits feel no pride in olden times. Humiliations and exclusions are not what one would choose to pass on to future generations.

### 3 One Caste, Two Villages, Three Prototypes

Trauma, awakening of suffering, fear and lack of self-respect constitute for Dalits obstacles to free expression of the past. Yet, in spite of the common structure just described, testimonies are diverse as much from the point of view of form and content as of ease or difficulty in speaking effectively of the past. Thus, even if common experiences interlock the members of the Cakkiliyar community, the memories they have of it vary. Broadly, three different ways of thinking within the Cakkiliyar community emerged from the testimonies on the basis of which we have made a kind of reading grid. This attempt to establish a typology of states of mind existing within the Cakkiliyar communities aims at better discerning the tendencies and the stakes within each type. As Genette says, “the much decried ‘grid’ is not an instrument of incarceration (...), it is a process of discovery and a method of description” (1972: 271).

So we identified three mentalities or prototypes. For the sake of synthesis, each of these categories has been associated with one of the several names by which untouchables are often addressed, as well as a fundamental personality trait. These prototypes are: the Dalit mind, or the prototype of the quest for dignity; the Harijan mind, or the prototype of dependence and submission; and the Cakkiliyar mind, or the prototype of moderation and indecision.

### 3.1 Prototype of Dalits

The first prototype is that of the active quest for dignity, or the Dalit prototype. It gathers together the Cakkiliyars with a protesting soul, ready for anything to speed up the changes and to redefine their identity and that of their group. Individually or collectively, in words and actions, they work towards the effective amelioration of their material situation and social condition. Emancipation (*munṇēṛṛam*, *vaḷarcci*), rights (*urimai*), consciousness and equality (*camam*, *camattuvam*) have become an integral part of their vocabulary. They firmly reject untouchability and often draw on biological, physical and psychical comparisons to come to the conclusion that they are identical with the upper castes. Dalits of this type, convinced of being as valuable as anyone else, claim to be ready, if mocked, to use their fists and fight to defend their honour (*māṇam*), a concept of major importance in Tamil culture (Gorringer 2010: 286). They are also ready to make use of the legal tools that have been implemented in their favour [Prevention of Atrocities (Act)] and that certainly bolsters their feeling of strength. Yet they have no illusion that upper castes, under a veneer of tolerance and relative acceptance made obligatory by law, consider them as equals. Their contempt remains very strong, and Dalits know it.

**Vijayakumar:** They still think that we are Cakkiliyars. They do not think that we are equal human beings.

**Raman:** See, if they get a chance today, they will still want to make us as their slaves only. But we have gone ahead of them and so we will not get caught in their hands again.

### 3.2 Prototype of Harijans

The prototype of Harijans, in contrast to the first prototype, gathers together the Cakkiliyars still imprinted with submission and self-deprecation. This group includes individuals whose mentality has not distinctly evolved since those times when they were working as pannaiyals for their upper caste masters. A kind of ideological justification—they are untouchables—is provided to explain this philosophy of dependence (Viramma et al 1995: 467).<sup>5</sup> As before, they show respect for the dominant castes, which have power and money. As before, they are afraid of them and are wary above all of incurring their displeasure. As before, they are ready to do certain services for them. These Cakkiliyars are ruled by the fear of transgressing. They have not made ideas of liberty and emancipation their own nor mastered the vocabulary of liberation. They aspire to a better life but are unable to conceive of the changes in other ways than granted from above; that is, with the assent of those who are in charge, whether the state or the higher castes themselves, whom they still tend to perceive as benefactors. For them, the change is material before it is social, since they do not bring into question the untouchability system, the guarantee in their eyes of a secure and consensual society. Today, inter-caste relations have changed, and some Cakkiliyars of this prototype speak of their discomfort in the face of loss of landmarks and express nostalgia for the old way of life.

### 3.3 Prototype of Cakkiliyars

The third and last prototype is more protean than the two others, which embody two extremes. Here are found all those

Cakkiliyars who cannot be defined by the preceding criteria. Hesitant and sometimes afraid, their position is neither one of militancy and engagement nor one of nostalgia. They certainly reject some of the most degrading forms of untouchability, do not agree with the caste logic, and hope for a better and less chancy future, but continue to behave in a way that perpetuates the norm. Held back by the context, they dare not engage in direct confrontation with other castes. As those who are nostalgic, they fear the consequences of major changes affecting their relationship with the higher castes, but, in contrast to them, they recognise the necessity of those moves. They therefore tolerate the militant actions of some members of their community, without following them. Often, that reveals a lack of confidence and a feeling of inferiority, usually because of a lack of education. They consider themselves inadequately equipped for the challenges of today and therefore keep themselves apart from the higher castes and avoid any conflict with them.

These three types can be related to the different states of mind which Dalits go through on the way to maturity of consciousness: from submission that characterises the philosophy of dependence of Harijans, to active non-submission and quest for dignity that Dalits embody, passing through the expression of a serious, but mostly passive, disagreement with rules by the Cakkiliyars full of indecision and resignation. But who, ultimately, belongs to which group? Once the totality of the testimonies was seen from a panoramic point of view, it appeared that the committed Cakkiliyar is often a man, a young man who has studied for several years. His work usually keeps him distanced from the higher castes and provides him with a certain amount of financial stability. The still psychologically, and sometimes materially, dependent Cakkiliyar is an old illiterate woman. Landless, she is regularly engaged for coolie work by a higher caste landowner, from whom she now and then receives small “gifts.” The indecisive Cakkiliyar may be middle-aged and either a man or a woman, who has spent several years at school but left too early for this to have had a decisive impact. This person works where work is available, without privileged links joining him or her to any higher caste owner.

These portraits, however, need to be more nuanced. Even if each person gravitates towards one prototype or another, nobody ever fits the type fully. Moreover, individuals in a given category do not necessarily share all the major identifying characteristics of the type. After all, it is the personal specificities, the character and the trajectory of each that count. Age, profession or ownership of land are certainly determining factors in the formation of the mind of each person, but they never tell the whole story.

In the final analysis, these prototypes are especially defined by the ways of positioning oneself in relation to the various historical times, and this is what is most significant for this research. The attempt now is to understand the different conceptions of the past according to the prototypes and the stakes pertaining to each one of them. To this end, comments will be made in turn upon the way of speaking, the style, the content and the position adopted by each of the participants, so as to become aware of the factors that hinder (or liberate)

speech and reminiscences. It would seem that according to specificities, aspirations, and individual needs (in other words of the prototype to which each one belongs), what blocks some from speaking serves precisely to free others who are ready to break the silence. From silence to denunciation, passing through the expression of discord, Dalits go through different stages in their trajectory from innocence to maturity of consciousness (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 2).

#### 4 Three Posture towards the Past

##### 4.1 Harijans and Silence

Withdrawal into silence characterises the Cakkiliyars classified within the prototype of submission. They do not remain completely mute but certainly hold back, consciously or not, from evoking certain aspects of their past. They usually are the ones who easily relate legends or myths but find it difficult to talk about themselves, about their experiences, and their feelings. Since the society they lived in had no room for this kind of account, witnessing represents a real challenge.

Their sufferings appear to pervade their entire being. Due to their advanced age, most of the representatives of this type have lived through the worst hours of caste discrimination. They are, therefore, the major victims of the collective trauma characteristic of the community as a whole. They are quite resistant to bearing witness to their earlier condition. Incapable of reading social relations in terms of exploitation and of glimpsing ways out of their situation, some regularly take the unexpected position of expressing nostalgia for the bygone epoch. As Sean Field suggested, when speaking of the memorial practices of post-apartheid South Africa, these Harijans create for themselves “zones of psychological security” (2008: 111). In those days, they ate better, the situation was more stable, and it rained more. They speak of what they have lost without really being aware of or putting forward what has been gained.

**Kaliammal:** Before we lived a very rich life, our family lived very well with my children. There was no poverty, but for these 12 years we have been suffering. Sometimes we will get the coolie, some days we would not get the coolie. Now I am suffering a lot.

**Perumal:** Back then? We were all united and very happy with each other. We did not have any disputes and we were very happy. The only thing is they did not come into our house, and we did not go into their house. We were united and living together well back then but that is not how it is now.

More generally, they hold on to diffuse memories of the past. A genuine difficulty with verbalisation paralyses them, as though they have not mastered the language adequately for speaking about it. They actually do not know what to say or how to speak. They consequently limit themselves to a very descriptive account, although in an unanimously plaintive voice, of the difficult living conditions then. The practical dimensions of the past existence doubtlessly occupy the first place in their narratives. These Cakkiliyar witnesses focus on what was missing.

**Palani:** Yes, we ate after eight o'clock and then we slept. They woke up again at four o'clock in the morning and they left. So like that they

went to work and also they brought *nellu* (paddy) or this or that, while coming back. So, it was those kinds of difficulties they faced. (...) During those days, there was no soap to wash the clothes, it was *cāmpal* (ashes). **Murugan:** When more kids started to come (when new kids were born), we faced lot of difficulties, a lot of pain. When more and more kids came, we had no amenities and not even enough to eat. We needed to go here and there to borrow Rs 5 or 10. That was how we have lived throughout those days.

Questions of caste, on the other hand, are simply touched upon if not entirely ignored. It is the poverty they seem to have suffered from and not so much the existence of caste inequalities. Harijans of the submission prototype evade the question of inter-caste relationships as much as possible. They do not talk about the physical suffering endured because of them; they do not talk about the physical and sexual abuses of which they may have been victims;<sup>6</sup> they do not talk of the fact that they accepted their status of slaves; nor about the fact that they strongly opposed any attempts at change undertaken by others. These issues are passed over in silence, voluntarily or not, unconsciously or due to reserve. Silence, however, does not necessarily imply forgetfulness, as Pollak points out (1990);<sup>7</sup> it needs to be heard and grasped.

The representatives of the submission prototype show no visible interest in describing their past. What good would it do them? Therefore, they prefer not to speak about it.

**Murugayi:** What was there in the past? The children of today, if only they gave us *kañci* (gruel), only then it was good. Otherwise who knows? Our past life... it was like that. That was our past life. (...) Our life is over, sister. Now it is only their lives. Our life to an extent is over, our story.

Quotidian preoccupations take precedence over everything. Recollecting the past is useless; it no longer exists. Shortly after the beginning of the interview a witness responds:

**Lakshmi:** What all I have suffered, I have told you already. It will not end today or tomorrow.

Another old woman speaks in identical terms.

**Paraviammal:** What are we going to do about it by just talking about it? You asked us and we told you. The others would not even ask. They would not show much interest in knowing about things also. So what can you do? (...) It is so difficult to think about all those things now. If you think about the difficult time, it is difficult.

What is the point of uselessly making oneself miserable by dwelling on ancient wounds? Many, because they reckoned it would do them and their families no good, opted for silence, and burying of memories as a protection strategy. The preoccupation with individual benefit prevails over any collective necessity the preservation of the past might have.

Other, more pragmatic, arguments clarify this lack of enthusiasm. A man explains that he, unlike rich people (amongst whom he classed the interviewer), had never had the time to sit down and reflect upon the past. According to him, the keeping of traces of the past is the prerogative of the leisured class, with the money—and therefore the time—needed to exhume memories. Sharing of this kind hardly happens amongst them—it is of no interest to them and they do not have the time.

## 4.2 Dalits and Denunciation

This reluctance to talk about the past is not shared by the most engaged fringe of Cakkiliyars, the ones belonging to the Dalit prototype. A confrontation between an old man of the submission prototype and a group of young people close to that of the quest for dignity prototype, perfectly illustrates the rupture between these categories. On this occasion, two worlds and two views of the past collided, as often in inter-generation groups. While the old man was striving to talk of the complications of everyday life, the young men intervened to suggest subjects he should address and pressured him to talk of their untouchability and of inter-caste relations.

**Young guys saying:** Yeah separately. We are untouchable people!

**Lakshumanan (old):** (shouting) ...If we go to work, they will pour kañci for us. They will bring and pour for us, we will drink.

**Young guys:** ... They do not let us touch!

**Lakshumanan:** They would not let us touch.

**Interviewer:** Why? Why they do not let you touch?

**Lakshumanan:** We are from a different caste and they are from a different caste.

**Interviewer:** No, I do not know, neither me nor she. That is why we are asking.

**Lakshumanan:** (shouting) That is what I said, we are all low caste people (*tīṇattakātavarka!*). What else is there to say?

The young people could not admit the tempered version of the past the old man was providing and insisted for the truth to come out. At some point, they took control of the interview to communicate to the interviewers what they knew about the past.

**All the young guys together:** *Akkā* (elder sister) please wait...! Every morning when they wake up, they have to go and wish them. They have to keep a stick in the hand, and to wear the *kōmaṇam* (loincloth). If they give some food, they have to bring it home, and there will be insects in it.

**Lakshumanan:** (shouting) Everything will be there in it. Did you get it and eat it or not?

**Young guys:** Say that, say that! That is what you should tell!

Unlike the Harijans described above, the Dalits of the dignity prototype want to talk. Why is it that while some of them only keep quiet, these others make the choice to speak? For some, as for Dalit authors like Bama, it is a duty (Buck and Kannan 2011: 74), and the silence must be broken and the injustices brought to light; for others, it has become a personal necessity. A certain degree of consciousness as well as a determination to change things are necessary for the Dalits to take an active part in the interviews. Speaking is perceived as an opportunity to denounce. For them, and for them only, the needs of the community (to make known) take precedence over their personal interest (to protect themselves). Dalit literature constitutes a striking expression of the manner in which the collective interest is given first place (Beth 2007: 546–47). As brought into evidence by a study of oral history on victims of trauma in another context, the realisation of slavery, anger and the desire for reparation can replace the shame and stigma of the trauma (Klempner 1998: 199). To denounce, inspires and galvanises them (Buck and Kannan 2011: 94).

Inter-caste relations in the wider sense is for many of the Dalit prototype a favourite theme. Many are obsessed with the problematic of caste practices and untouchability and grab

hold of this subject in a symptomatic manner from the opening question of the interview itself.

**Interviewer:** Is there any difference between before the marriage, and after the marriage?

**Kavitha:** No difference, but these people (sc) should develop, they have to develop from their stage. There should not be any difference between the high and the low, all should develop. Many of them think that sc are low, but that should change.

They describe, denounce, decry and revolt, all at the same time. It is not rare for descriptions to be accompanied by signs of disgust with regard to the behaviour of the higher castes as well as by incomprehension of the credulity and feebleness of their own people. They speak without shame of the most humiliating and degrading treatments.

**Moorthi:** And so in those days, they did not even regard us as humans. Like I told you in the beginning, we were people who had to protect whatever they did, like their dogs. But dogs are faithful. But they (high caste) did not have that gratefulness at all... (satirically laughing) The upper caste!

**Karthik:** They perceived us as slaves. (All repeat the word, *kottaṇimai* which means slaves). (...) Sister, these days it is a lot better. But in those days, they tortured us a lot.

**Shanmugam:** hmm... torture... Slavery!

As for their content, the interviews are often detailed and fluid. Sometimes snatches of songs may be recognised, two or three lines, as a detour in the course of an explanation. They sometimes borrow from Dalit militancy (metaphors, comparisons, etc), which somewhat homogenises their accounts. This is, however, still a long way from the extreme rhetorical processes underlined by Gorringer in his study on the discourse of the Liberation Panthers of Tamil Nadu (2010: 285).

In the Dalit testimonies, as in Dalit autobiographies, the “I” (the individual) quickly merges with the necessity of “we” (the community):

**Mayan:** They (my parents) did not allow me to study. I grazed the cows here, and gave the cows their food (...). After some time, I got some education. During that time we knew only how to graze the cows, apart from that nothing. But now, little by little, step-by-step we are making our children study. We want our children to study. So now we do not go to do the grazing work.

Individual accounts based on personal memories swiftly move into a wider field; the memory of an entire social group (Arnold and Blackburn [eds] 2004: 21). As such, they do not offer an account of their personal “me,” but rather use their experiences to prove, in the name of everyone, the existence of discriminations and to expose the strategies of their community (Kumar 2010: 208). The “I” and the “we,” often follow one another and end by being confused. The singular is thus universalised (Nayar 2006: 89).

From this perspective, their position in relation to their history is completely new. They are aware of the importance of knowing it and of making it known. Accounts of the past are at once spaces for explanation, places of rehabilitation of their own dignity, and places for claims and denunciation. Not content with transmitting the essence of their life in the villages in the past, these committed people list the changes, as victories on their path to emancipation.

**Moorthi:** No, see there have been changes. So, we did that work before, today we do not do it anymore. Those days we could not be educated, and today we are being educated. And so, that is a reason... it is a change. And not just that, when we compare [today] to those days, there are a lot of changes today... ok... So like those days, the yearly salary like for slaves is no more there.

**Sakhtivel:** And so, the servants had to go to the masters' houses. All ten of us. And then, they would take the body to the graveyard and do many other customs. But now, we do not like any of those things... 'If you die, you take care, and if we die, we will handle it.' Because if someone among them dies, can we just always sit outside their houses? So we felt that it was not needed... (...) We told them that we do not need any *tappu* (percussion) playing work, and so we stopped it.

Generally speaking, these witnesses speak with emphasis on events that have really made a difference (often recent happenings), but also of those wins, which they themselves participated. These accounts nourish the quest for dignity mentioned above. While it is naturally more rewarding to speak of "victories," the Dalits are more than ready to denounce the still powerful social and societal immobility.

**Amsavali:** And today, nobody will join hands to pray to them. If we have to do that to the high caste people, then they will think too high, and they will suppress us to the low strata. And so, people who are aware, they will not join their hands. But there are few people who still do it.

**Interviewer:** Are they being called so even today?

**Kandavelu:** Yes... even today...

**Murugesan:** Yes. And so, when we are next to them, we get so angry hearing that. 'What is this?', they call us so badly. And these elderly people say, 'It is ok... let them go.'

On this occasion, it is as much the beliefs of individuals belonging to the other prototypes as the attitudes of the higher castes that are subject to lively criticism.

Committed witnesses use the past to denounce, to express their disagreement, to put forward the path travelled, and also to lay more claim to the changes. From this point of view, they use their past to feed and consolidate their fight. This also allows them to bestow a new identity upon themselves to match their future aspirations.

### 4.3 Cakkiliyars and Incertitude

The representatives of the third and last prototype have a rather nebulous relationship with the past, bordering between silence and denunciation. The moderate Cakkiliyars seem like fence sitters, not knowing how to position themselves: they disapprove of both the present and past state of affairs but do not reject them out of hand. They do not, however, take refuge in silence as do those of the Harijan prototype; they speak, or to be more precise respond to our questions.

They talk about everything, with a slight preference for questions relating to living conditions. They have no special difficulty in discussing relations between castes but rarely open the subject on their own account. To evoke the discriminations, they adopt a neutral tone, implying that they know how difficult it is/was to quit the caste system. At different levels, they still feel constrained, to live within a system that ties them, but to which they do not, however, entirely adhere (they, for instance, do not believe in their own impurity and

aspire to change (Mencher 1974: 476)). They hope for something different in the future.

The sometimes confused nature of their answers (which contain paradoxes and contradictions) give a fair picture of their ambiguities.

**Thulassi:** The untouchability thing... during my parents' time they did not look at the differences. They thought that everybody was equal and they did not bother about anything. (...) The high caste thought that it was a shame to touch us. It was something they thought for themselves. But now they do not treat us bad. It has all changed. The untouchability practice has changed. It is not there anymore.

How could untouchability have ceased to exist if it did not exist in the past? The confusion seems to reflect a lack of landmarks. In a way, it is, as if, imprisoned by a kind of inertia, people from this prototype constantly revert to fatalism. They know they were ill-treated and humiliated but are not prepared to adopt the denunciatory and protesting style of the Dalits. In contrast to them, they do not use accounts of the past to claim modifications. They estimate that "it would be better if..." but do not insist upon the necessity for change.

**Murugan:** We do not want to give and take (refers to the dependency on the high caste) from them. Let us be like normal [human beings]... all these high and low things. If one drinks from a glass, let us also drink from a glass... so if there was no caste distinction, then all would be same. That would be nice... all as equals.

As partisans of gentle solutions that make no waves, they do not engage in specific battles. They count upon the aid of intermediaries to improve their condition, and not on themselves alone. Their position with regard to their past is thus ambivalent. They had no real reluctance to reply to questions, but were without specific focus—for example, an insistence upon their past slavery. They felt no need to say anything, and would probably not have said much if they had not been strongly encouraged.

### 5 A Common Memory?

Cakkiliyars, across generations, possess a significant common memory capital whose canvas imposes itself on most of the accounts, which are pervaded with suffering, poverty, labour, servitude, discrimination and rejection.

However, despite a common memory that no doubt nourishes the totality of accounts of the past, memory is not integrally shared by everyone and in the same way. It is not possible to speak of a single common memory. Three prototypes of witness were distinguished and thus also three types of memory. It may thus be said that there are three memory branches belonging to a unique trunk from where they all fetch their common substance, but each of these branches flourishes in its own direction and according to its own rationale. The memory process is evolutionary and dynamic. In connection with the identities it determines and that determine it, not all the members of the community develop in the same way. There are Harijans of the submission prototype who prefer to keep quiet about their past, Cakkiliyars of the indecision prototype who condemn with no vigour past life conditions, and Dalits of the quest for dignity prototype who use accounts

of the past to denounce their condition. These three types of usage of the past co-exist without being mutually exclusive. Each of these stages reflects specific will in the present and aspirations for the future.

Cakkiliyars have not yet solved the historical dilemma deeply rooted in their community, which on the ground is expressed by a good amount of ignorance, disinterest, and indecision. The absence, until recently, of a solid political representation and of a literary expression, numerical

inferiority and the fact that Cakkiliyars are geographically scattered within Tamil Nadu certainly impinge on their emancipation movement, and on their relationship to their past. The walk from the past to the present and towards the future presents a real challenge for all Dalits, but more specifically for the Arunthathiyars due to the impinging forces just listed. And this process might take time, since the end-points of memory, for some, seem to consist in points of departure for others.

## NOTES

- Both designations will be used interchangeably in this paper, although most of the witnesses used the word Cakkiliyars when referring to themselves.
- The term Dalit will usually be preferred to the term untouchable, as it encompasses an idea of agency and rejects the idea of this section of the population not being "touchable."
- All the excerpts have been translated from Tamil into English and come from the interviews collected by the author and her field assistant in 2011 and 2012.
- This part is partially based on the author's article (de Heering 2013).
- Viramma belongs to the Paraiyar caste. Similar patterns have been observed in her account and accounts from Cakkiliyar people belonging to the Harijan prototype.
- Sexual aggression is one of the "weapons" regularly used by the higher castes to firm up their domination.
- Pollak speaks of the silence of concentration camp survivors, prey to a buried feeling of guilt, and caught between the rage to transmit and the powerlessness of communicating.

## REFERENCES

- Arnold, David and Stuart Blackburn (eds) (2004): *Telling Lives in India, Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, Bloomington: Indiana UP and Permanent Black.
- Basu, Raj Sekhar (2011): *Nandanar's Children: The Paraiyans' Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850-1956*, Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Beth, Sarah (2007): "Hindi Dalit Autobiography: An Exploration of Identity," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 41, No 3, pp 545-74.
- Bredart, Serge and Martial Van der Linden (dir) (2004): *Souvenirs récupérés, souvenirs oubliés et faux souvenirs*, Marseille: Editions Solal.
- Buck, David C and M Kannan (eds) (2011): *Tamil Dalit Literature: My Own Experience*, Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry.
- Butalia, Urvashi (1998): *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Charlton, Thomas L, Lois E Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (eds) (2007): *History of Oral History, Foundations and Methodology*, Lanham: AltaMira Press.
- de Heering, Alexandra (2013): "Oral History and Dalit Testimonies: From the Ordeal to Speak to the Necessity to Testify," *South Asia Research*, Vol 33, No 1, pp 39-55.
- (2016): *Beyond the Words, Between the Lines, Dalit History Through Their Testimonies*, Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry.
- Erikson, Kai T (1994): *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disaster*, New York: WW Norton & Co.

- Field, Sean (2008): "Imagining Communities: Memory, Loss, and Resilience in Post-Apartheid Cape Town," *Oral History and Public Memories*, Hamilton, Paula and Linda Shopes (eds) (2008): Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Genette, Gérard (1972): *Figures III*, Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Gorrige, Hugo (2010): "Resounding Rhetoric, Retreating Rebels: The Use and Impact of Militant Speeches in Tamil Dalit Movements," *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol 18, No 3, pp 281-92.
- Klempler, Mark (1998): "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *The Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), New York: Routledge.
- Megill, Alan (1998): "History, Memory, Identity," *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol 11, No 3, pp 37-62.
- Mencher, Joan P (1974): "The Caste System Upside Down, or the Not-So-Mysterious East," *Current Anthropology*, Vol 15, No 4, pp 469-93.
- Narayan, Badri (2008): "Demarginalisation and History: Dalit Re-Invention of the Past," *South Asia Research*, Vol 28, No 2, pp 169-84.
- Nayar, Pramod K (2006): "Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol 41, No 2, pp 83-100.
- Pandey, Gyanendra (2001): *Remembering Partition. Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Pandian, M S S (2008): "Writing Ordinary Lives," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 43, No 38, pp 34-40.
- Pawar, Daya (1996): *Ma vie d'intouchable* (French translation Jean-Luc Proffit and Madhuri Purandare), Paris: Editions la Découverte.
- Pollak, Michel (1990): *L'expérience concentrationnaire, Essai sur le maintien de l'identité sociale*, Paris: Métailié.
- Portelli, Alessandro (1981): "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal*, No 12.
- Rogers, Kim Lacy, Selma Leydesdorff and Graham Dawson (eds) (2004): *Trauma: Life Stories of Survivors*, New Brunswick and London: Transaction.
- Satyanarayana, K and Susie Tharu (eds) (2011): *No Alphabet in Sight, New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Semprun, Jorge (1994): *L'écriture ou la vie*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Thomson, Alistair (1998): "Fifty Years On: An International Experience on Oral History," *The Journal of American History*, Vol 85, No 2, pp 581-95.
- Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine (1995): *Une vie de paria. Le rire des asservis, Inde du Sud*, Paris: Plon/Éditions Unesco.
- Williams, L and V Banyard (eds) (1999): *Trauma and Memory*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

# Economic & Political WEEKLY

Subscribe to the **Print** edition



## What do you get with a Print subscription?

- 50 issues delivered to your door every year
- All special and review issues
- Access to Archives of the past two years
- Web Exclusives
- And a host of other features on [www.epw.in](http://www.epw.in)

To subscribe, visit: [www.epw.in/subscribe.html](http://www.epw.in/subscribe.html)  
Attractive rates available for students, individuals and institutions.

Postal address: Economic and Political Weekly,  
320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, GK Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013, India.  
Tel: +91-22-40638282 | Email: [circulation@epw.in](mailto:circulation@epw.in)