Journeys to Freedom: Dalit Narratives

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From the Introduction

...We reiterate our position: Somewhere between the postmodernist stand that in narrative all is rhetoric and no objectivity is possible, and a stand that makes truth claims for the respondents representations. We offer no redefinition of what it is to be a dalit in Gujarat. All we offer is a textual space in which these voices may be heard articulating their stories, a kaleidoscope where the pattern keeps changing, a reflection of the dalit community in flux. (p 28)

From Ambedkarites of Junagadh and Bharuch

Niraj Parmar of Amreli remarks that dalit politicians come to visit them but nothing much comes of these visits. He speaks of the time he had a chance tomeet Ram Vilas Paswan [a minister in the Union cabinet] who came to Bhavnagar when his organization was inaugurated. They were discussing the problems of dalits at a meeting by night and on this occasion Nirajbhai submitted a memorandum at 11pm. He returned in the morning to ask what response could be expected to the plight of the dalits he had described in the note. But since then there has been no follow up. Nirajbhai has lost faith I this kind of 'concern'. (p 62)

It appears that the conversion option taken by Ambedkarites is a political weapon with which to wage war on oppressive Hindu domination. Unlike the Christian converts, they have stood to gain very little from external sources from a material point of view, nothing in the way of special schools or institutional aid. Their strength comes from political organizations and parties, a fact that suggests that Buddhism per se does not play its traditional religious role in their lives, and that the path taken by Ambedkarites is thus not so much religious conversion as commitment to a political ideology. (64)

Extracts:

Confrontational dalit movements on the whole have drawn little support from the dalit Christians of Central Gujarat. Some of those who were interviewed, including the strong-willed Neelaben Thomasbhai, spoke of the power of prayer and of instances of faith healing. There was some sense that the outside world views Christians as both reliable and better educated; there was repeated mention of Christian values and a general pride in Christian identity. While the conversion issue has been a thorny subject in political circles, our interviews indicate that Christianity has offered dalits who choose that option a degree of economic and social improvement over their fellow Hindu dalits, largely through educational opportunities and organizational support. (p 114)

From Dalits and Human Rights

When a stand is taken against casteism among sub-castes and for unity, the word ‘dalit’ takes on a new connotation; Martin [Macwan] says, ‘Dalit is rather a moral position of people who believe in equality of all human beings and freedom from all oppression.’ (p 314)