Building caste identity through literature – a different kind of "Dalit" writing

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During the Nehruvian era, the national consensus on caste seemed much more comprehensive and durable than the one on secularism. Caste–unlike religion–was among a few "traditional" institutions that were presented as all bad, as "social evils" without any redeeming features. It was as if the only civilized response to caste was to urge its abolition. And in the 1950s and '60s it seemed as though everyone was civilized, for no one argued otherwise. (Deshpande, 98)

These are words of the well-known Indian sociologist Satish Deshpande. What he apparently has in mind is the shifting perception of caste in India since the 1990s. During this period, caste returned to the forefront of Indian thinking at both the ontological and the epistemological levels. More and more castes started to actively shape their identity and ask questions like: "Who are we?," "Who were our ancestors?" or "What do we have in common with other communities?" Caste has assumed an important role in politics, rivalry between castes has intensified and caste-related violence has escalated.[1] This trend can perhaps be connected with the rise of Hindu nationalism, but other factors are certainly involved. The implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report also played a role, as it encouraged castes to defend their economic-political interests. Deshpande contends that "the resurgence of the caste question—more specifically, the renewed militancy and social visibility of the so-called lower castes—has been much more of a shock to the largely upper-caste urban middle classes than the revival of hindutva [right-wing nationalist political ideology]" (98).

Such a development can be seen as a continuation of the substantialization and ethnicization of castes, which gained momentum in the colonial period and continued after India attained independence. According to Barnett, "substantialization involves a shift away from the whole and toward the person, or groups conceived on the model of the person" (156). One of its consequences is the emergence of caste as a "collective individual" (Barnett, 156). Another consequence is "the development of pride in one's social background" (Upadhyay, 7). Reddy views ethnicity as the capacity of caste "to strategically deploy established, essentialized notions of itself in a movement that seeks less to

undermine caste than to restore dignity to re-claimed caste identities" (547).

It seems safe to say that for historical and political reasons, Scheduled Castes occupy a particularly prominent place in this process. Until recently, they were marginalized, oppressed and discriminated against. They were not allowed to enter temples, public spaces or schools. With the arrival of democratic values, a modern judicial system, education, industrialization or public transport, they managed to attain a more visible place in society. They are now seeking to take advantage of these changes, shake off the stigma of untouchability and secure a dignified place in society. However, their emancipation has been neither smooth nor uniform. Over time, they have developed several strategies to achieve it. With a certain amount of simplification, these can be categorized as: first, efforts to destroy the caste system; second, efforts to change the system from within and find a place within Hindu society; third, conversion to other religions; and fourth, the development of a counter-ideology or counter-culture through the propagation of their own values, religion, etc. These strategies have further nuances and regional differences and have evolved in response to historical developments.[2]

The standpoints and objectives of Dalit movements are reflected in a particular literary current known as Dalit literature. While it had some predecessors, the origins of Dalit literature are generally traced to the 1950s and 1960s in Maharashtra. It gained prominence thanks to the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s and later gradually spread to other parts of India. It focuses on the oppression of Dalits, it describes their suffering and hardships, but at the same time, it also tries to awaken them and instil in them self-esteem and pride. As such, it has become a symbol of their resistance and a part of their struggle for emancipation, indeed an important tool of their political self-assertion.[3]

Works of Dalit literature have managed to draw the attention of both Dalits and non-Dalits, not only within India but also abroad. Today, it is an established literary movement taught at universities. However, alongside the widely studied works, there are others that are equally remarkable. These also originate from the pens of authors of the Scheduled Castes but differ from Dalit literature in many respects. Particularly significant in this regard is the literary production of thinkers and writers from the caste of Devendrakula Velalars, often called simply Devendrars, a Scheduled Caste in Tamil Nadu.

The aim of this article is to compare these two types of writing against the backdrop of different caste ideologies. Quite logically, more attention is paid to the literature of the Devendrars, as it is, to the best of my knowledge, hardly mentioned in academic writing in English. The themes of the short stories will be analysed in relation to the history, ideology and culture of the Devendrars, as expounded by their caste leaders and ideologists. They will also be read against the background of the recent political developments. The article argues for a growing ideological rift between Scheduled Castes in the region. It particularly notes their

different attitudes towards the issue of caste and the possibilities of emancipation. This rift manifests in many aspects of their coexistence and may have further consequences. In particular, it may affect the cooperation of these communities and contribute to their further mutual alienation and rivalry.

The article also looks at the goals and motivations for writing and the ways in which writers communicate their ideas to the readers. It compares Devendra production with Dalit literature from an aesthetic point of view and notes the extent to which it is activist and propagandist writing.

Overall, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex literary, social and cultural dynamics that shape caste identity in India.

As the conceptual framework of the article, I use the theory of ethnicization of caste proposed by Dumont (1970) and Barnett (1975), and further developed by Jaffrelot (2000), Reddy (2005) and Lee (2020). As a result, the article extends beyond the scope of literary study, integrating literary, ethnographic and sociological approaches.

The contours of Dalit literature and its further developments

Literary works focusing on the lives of Dalits began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century. The works of Premchand (some of his short stories, e.g., *Kafan*) and Mulk Raj Anand (especially the novel *Untouchable*, 1935) were later followed by those of Rohinton Mistry (the novel *A Fine Balance*, 1995) and Arundhati Roy (the novel *The God of Small Things*, 1997). All these authors came from high-caste backgrounds, and their portrayals of Dalit characters have since been subjected to harsh criticism by Dalit authors.[4] According to them, the characters are too docile, lack their own opinions, and have fully surrendered to the upper castes. The reason is the lack of knowledge of Dalit lives on the part of high-caste writers and the tendency to pursue their own goals and values. Sivakami, a Dalit writer and activist from Tamil Nadu, says: "I hold that nondalit writers emerge as self-styled autocrats passing adverse judgements on Dalit life, or that they use dalits as toys to tickle a few strange nerves of their regular readers." (Sivakami quoted in Anand, *Touchable Tales*, 23-24). Similarly, the writer and publisher S. Anand concludes: "If from Premchand to Mistry we have empathy sans agency, in Roy and Ghosh we see that the Dalit characters lack distinct subjecthood prior to their involvement with high-caste characters" ("Lighting Out").

These views led to a discussion about what can be regarded as Dalit literature and who can be considered a Dalit author. The first conference of the Dalit Sahitya Sangh in 1958 passed a resolution declaring that: "The literature written by the Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits

be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit literature" (Rai, 42). However, this attitude has gradually changed. A few decades later, the Dalit writer and literary critic Sharankumar Limbale categorically stated: "By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (19). The debate about who can be considered a Dalit writer has continued, but most authors seem to lean towards the view that only a person of Dalit origin can become a Dalit writer. This position is held, for example, by the Hindi Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki, who points out: "When they [non-Dalits] do not know the reality of this Dalit life, whatever they write about it will remain superficial, born out of pity and sympathy, and not out of a desire for change or repentance" (xxvi).

Defining Dalit literature is considerably more difficult, especially as the number of works has increased and their content and mode of expression has developed and changed. The early works were very raw and often focused on the hardships and suffering faced by Dalits. One of the motivations for writing was to draw attention to the conditions in which Dalits lived. Poetry and autobiography were found to be more convenient modes of expression, which is why these two genres prevailed. Various theories have emphasized the rawness and authenticity of the message, using the term "traumatic realism" (Nayar, 240-241) or even "Dalit realism" (Gajarawala, 16-23).

A very important feature of Dalit writing is its revolutionary character. Not everything written by a Dalit can be regarded as Dalit literature. It must be written in accordance with the ideals of the Dalit movement and its efforts to uplift the oppressed population: "Thus, it is Dalit consciousness that defines this literature, which emerges from the experience of discrimination, untouchability, social ostracism and social stigma" (Kumar 53). As a result, this literature very often has activist overtones, and the intersection of politics and aesthetics has been discussed by numerous Dalit as well as non-Dalit writers and scholars. The literary merit of Dalit literature is quite often dismissed as "secondary at best" and only a means of achieving the primary aim, which is "Dalit empowerment" (Thiara, 257).

In later periods, some writers sought to move beyond the initial phase of Dalit literature and experimented with form. Dalit writers now favor the genres of the short story and the novel. Some of the recently published works have been less "negative," i.e., less focused on trauma and even lyrical in nature. Examples include the novel *Untouchable Spring* by Kalyana Rao (originally published in Telugu in 2000) and *Kusumabale* by Devanoora Mahadeva (originally published in Kannada in 1988). The former is described by Nicole Thiara (266) as follows: "It functions less as a negative critique than a poetic celebration of Dalits as individuals and as a community and insists that their dignity, wealth of artistic talent, and beauty are the creative seeds of an equal, flourishing, and just society." Although works of the "classical type" continue to appear, overall there has been a noticeable shift towards works that celebrate the Dalit community, its vitality, resilience, joy, art and culture.[5] Indeed, Dalit

literature is now often a vehicle for asserting a distinct identity and consciousness. More attention is paid to internal differences and the voice is given even to communities which were hitherto overshadowed. This is what Satchidanandan has in mind when he writes about "the breaking of the monolith called the 'Dalit.'" He further argues that: "Writers now began to look at the diversity and even internal conflicts within the larger Dalit community and the specificity of each caste or group in terms of experience as well as imagination" (*Frontline*, 10 June).

This shift reflects the broader development of the Dalit movement and brings us to the key issue: the search for new and alternative directions. The 1990s and 2000s were filled with enthusiastic expectations, marked by the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ambedkar. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a prominent Dalit intellectual and social reformer who championed equality for all communities and the elimination of untouchability. He considered caste as the root of social evil and strove for its annihilation. After his death, Ambedkar emerged as a Dalit icon; his works were translated into many Indian languages and his ideas became foundational to many Dalit movements. While the elimination of caste remains their central goal, these movements also strongly emphasize education, social justice, and intercaste marriages. Dalit ideologists have argued for a long time that "Dalit" is not a realization of a caste or a group of castes but rather a revolutionary state of mind seeking to destroy the caste system. On the other hand, they have also come to recognize that caste cannot be eliminated altogether and caste is treated somewhat cautiously in this respect in the ideological writing. Thiara contends that "Dalit organisations increasingly argue for the need to reconceptualise caste in a way that will eradicate caste discrimination but not the distinct cultural identity of sub-castes …" (276). Thus, a certain shift is evident within the Dalit movement.

To achieve their objectives, Dalits tried to seize political power and established several political parties. These efforts were crowned by the huge success of the *Bahujan Samaj Party*, which managed to form a government four times in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh and became the third largest party in India in the general elections of 2014. However, this period was followed by a phase of certain disillusionment. The Dalit movement lost its initial drive, and the *Bahujan Samaj Party*, along with other Dalit political parties, experienced a significant decline. These parties now appear to be in a political vacuum, and their voters are even turning to the Hindu right-wing parties, including the *Bharatiya Janata Party*.[6] Some Dalit leaders (for example, Jignesh Mevani or Chandrashekhar Azad) have sought to rejuvenate and further develop the thoughts of the Dalit movement and, above all, to return its focus to the most needy, while others have completely turned away from this concept.

These trends and searching for new ways have also been reflected in Dalit literature. Muthukkaruppan (66) distinguishes between three categories of writers: those who actively identify as Dalit writers; those who have undergone a certain transformation; and those who reject the

Dalit label. For example, in the foreword to his collection of short stories, the Tamil writer Cho. Dharman writes: "My writing cannot be described as Dalit writing, as I am Dalit only by my birth, not by my writing" (Cipiccelvaṉ, 14). Similarly, Imayam does not want to be labelled a "Dalit writer," preferring to be known simply as a "Tamil writer" (*Indian Cultural Forum*). Both authors refuse to be judged on the basis of caste, insisting instead that they be evaluated on the basis of their literary production.

From this position, it is only a small step to abandon Dalit ideology altogether and seek to emancipate one's community using a completely different framework. It appears that an increasing number of communities are adopting this approach. One such community is the Devendrakula Velalars of Tamil Nadu.

The ideology of the Devendrakula Velalars

The Devendrakula Velalars, formerly also known as Pallars, are a Scheduled Caste from Southern Tamil Nadu. Their population is approximately two and a half million. Regarding their emancipation strategies, some of them converted to Islam or Christianity. For a while, they flirted with the idea of the Adi movement.[7] Although Ambedkar is acknowledged as a great leader, his ideas have never been fully embraced by the Devendrars as they have been by other Dalit castes. They are one of the communities which has sought to achieve emancipation within the Hindu fold.

Devendrar intellectuals have gradually evolved a different ideology in which history plays a very important role. They argue that Devendrars were once a strong ruling community closely connected with major Hindu temples and key Hindu deities, particularly Shiva. They were a warrior community originally called the Mallar, with strong ties to agriculture, especially rice cultivation, which they were supposedly taught by none other than the god Shiva himself. They also owned extensive lands and played a prominent role in numerous village rituals and ceremonies. However, over the course of history, their land was taken from them and they were subjugated and turned into untouchables.

Today, Devendrars seek to recreate their golden past and re-establish themselves as a strong community. They fight against discrimination and stigmatization, but instead of advocating the annihilation of the caste system, they aim to strengthen their caste identity. It can be understood as a way of asserting cultural autonomy and challenging dominant social norms. They argue that they have been historically marginalized and that their great figures and achievements have been deliberately removed from the mainstream discourse.

The Devendrars do not consider the caste identity as limiting; right on the contrary, they see it as something that gives them a sense of belonging, support and strength. They regard themselves as a proud community that has its own distinct history and culture. For this reason, they reject the term "Dalit" meaning "broken, crushed" which they find demeaning. Similarly, they oppose being classified as Scheduled Caste, and implore the government to shift them to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category. As such, they exemplify what Shah terms a "movement within cultural consensus" (Shah, 120).[8]

The Devendrars thus gravitate towards a different set of ideas which stand in contrast to Dalit ideology. In this way, they differ markedly from the Paraiyars, the most populous Scheduled Caste in Tamil Nadu. The Paraiyars are passionate supporters of Ambedkar (an estimate based on my reading of primary and secondary sources as well as my numerous visits to Tamil Nadu villages) who seek to move beyond caste identity and to embrace broader, more inclusive notions of identity and solidarity.

Devendrar literature

Devendrar thinkers propagate their views by various means, including pamphlets, magazines, books, memorials, cultural events, websites and political gatherings. They are highly active in this respect. They have published numerous books explaining the origins of their community, their history and culture. They run a number of websites and are also active on social media.

Furthermore, Devendrar intellectuals have also tried to create a special "sort" of fiction writing which resembles Dalit literature in certain respects. The first short stories of this kind were published in 1995 in the Devendrar magazine *Maḷḷar malar*. Later, they were issued as a collection of short stories under the title *Naṭpu*, meaning "Friendship" (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ). In his overview of Devendrar writing, Jeyā (114) also mentions poetry, which seems to follow the same pattern. I am not aware of any other similar work of fiction published more recently, but such a volume might easily have escaped my attention, as Devendrars are very active and publish a lot of books of various kinds, propagating their ideas.

This article focuses on the above-mentioned short story collection *Naṭpu*, which was published in 2000 in Tamil. It contains 14 short stories by five different writers. The editors of the collection and authors of a few short stories are prominent scholars and activists. Kurucāmi Cittar studied engineering but later took a strong interest in history. Ñāṉacēkaraṉ is a professor of Tamil studies at the university in Coimbatore. The other writers are less known, but they are also university-educated.

This writing obviously serves a dual purpose. First, it is a suitably undemanding medium to spread their ideas among others from the same

caste, which is explicitly mentioned in the introduction to the collection of short stories: "Besides formulating its concepts an important task of the agenda of every movement is efforts to bring these concepts to the hearts of people" (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 13). Second, through this literature, they define themselves against the Paraiyars and Dalit ideology. K. Pañcāṅkam says: "This book is a collection of short stories written by the Mallars irritated by speeches and writings of ignorants who keep using terms 'downtrodden, Dalit or Adi-Dravida' even after declaring that the terms Mallar or Devendrar should be used to designate the great and proud Mallars, aka the Devendrakula Velalars" (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 18). This quotation points to the terminological as well as ideological clash between the two castes. The term "Adi-Dravida" (original Dravidians) has been used since the end of the nineteenth century and originally was meant to include all Scheduled Castes. Nowadays, it is used to denote mainly the Paraiyars.

This collection of short stories can therefore be perceived as a product of the rivalry between the Devendrars and Paraiyars. At the turn of the millennium, Dalit literature was widely discussed, and the Paraiyars produced a large number of important writers, including Bama, Sivakami, Raj Gautaman, Azhagiya Periyavan, Ravikumar and others, while the Devendrars did not contribute significantly. The Devendrar writer Poomani and his son-in-law Cho. Dharman have never considered themselves Dalit writers, although some of their works could be included in this category.

This rivalry and ideological disagreement resulted in the publication of short stories that differ greatly from Dalit literature. Another important Devendrar ideologist, Gurusamy Siddhan, elsewhere asserts: "Dalit literature exposes only the lowness, oppressions, atrocities and ill-treatment among the oppressed and the oppressor. In other words, it transmits a kind of slave psychology among the 'handicapped' that is the Dalits. We do not like our people being handicapped so we are writing our own literature."[9] Therefore, a group of Devendrar scholars decided to write their own literature that would reflect their attitudes and opinions.

The Devendrar ideology as expounded in fiction

Let us now examine a few samples of this literature. As I have already mentioned, the Devendrars have decided to follow a different path from most of the Scheduled Castes. Instead of advocating the annihilation of caste, they are consciously trying to strengthen their caste identity. They have conducted a lot of research on their origins, history and culture. They assume that a strong community cannot live in a vacuum and that its members should not only be aware of their history but also take pride in it.

This is indicative of the process of ethnicization in which originally rather fluid caste identities get solid contours and become fixed. As a result, castes are perceived as distinct, well-knit units. An important component of this process is "the development of pride in one's social background" (Upadhyay, 7). Similarly, Jaffrelot points out: "…the ethnicization of the low castes … therefore, must imply the invention of a separate cultural identity…" (758). It naturally leads to increased caste patriotism.

These positions are clearly evident in the collection *Naṭpu* I am discussing. In fact, its very first sentence says: "Any community must know the hold of tradition and the hereditary qualities of the soil to identify itself" (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 5). The same themes then run in a similar vein through almost all the stories.

The first short story I have selected is titled *Camūka antastu* (Social status). It talks about a certain Karuppaiya, who was a common man called by others simply Karuppa. He led an ordinary life, but when he read about the history of the Devendrars, he added the title Devendrar to his name and demanded that others use it. One day, he was sitting under a tree and talking with some other men. When a local bigwig from the Thevar caste walked by, all the other men immediately stood up; only Karuppaiya remained sitting. To make matters worse, Karuppaiya asked Thevar his name:

> *"To this day no one has dared to ask my name. When people from all around see me, they tremble because I am a Thevar. You are a Pallar."*
> *"Do you add a caste title to your name to disclose your caste identity?"*
> *"Yes, when I add Thevar title to my name, others know my caste."*
> *"Then we also add our caste title."*
> *"Pallars do not have any caste title."*
> *"That was when we did not know our history. Now we know it."*
> *"What kind of history?"*
> *"Who we are."*
> *"Pallar."*
> *"No."*
> *"Who then?"*
> *"Descendants of Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas."*
> *"What are the proofs of that?"*
> *"Proofs are in the literature and stone inscriptions."* (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 31; all translations of selected excerpts from Tamil are mine).

In the end, Karuppaiya forces Thevar to call him Devendrar. Thevar realizes that from now on, it will not be so easy to push Karuppaiya around, and he leaves. The others praise Karuppaiya for his bravery and he walks home happily, feeling that he has received social respect.

While the story demonstrates a clear narrative structure and some degree of dramatic progression, it ultimately lacks formal depth, with a

particularly uninspired conclusion. The narrative appears to prioritize didactic purpose over aesthetic refinement, aiming primarily to instil a sense of communal pride and dispel internalized inferiority. In fact, it is stated in the preface of the book: "These short stories constitute a political act that disseminates the ideas formulated by the Mallar ideology" (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 13).

In this story, the author claims that the Devendrars are the descendants of the three great Tamil dynasties, i.e., Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas. This assertion appears in other stories as well. In fact, it is one of the basic tenets of the reconstructed history of the Devendrars. This hypothesis was first developed in the book *Mūvēntar yār* by Tēva Ācirvātam, and later it found its way into many other books and articles. Nowadays, it is almost mechanically repeated by numerous representatives of the Devendrar community.

It should be noted that Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas are three national dynasties held in high esteem by Tamils. By asserting that they are the descendants of these rulers, the Devendrars are appropriating a large part of Tamil history. However, they are not the only community to do so and we can find similar attempts, for example, in the writings of the Thevars (Hons 2023, 8).

This contention is further elaborated in the story *Urimai* (Rights), which not only reaffirms the noble origins of the Devendrars but also presents certain "evidence" to support this claim. The various distinctions Devendrars are – or were – entitled to and the primacy they possessed during various agricultural rituals and religious festivals serve as two such pieces of evidence. The story mentions their right to pull the temple chariot, a privilege which is now disputed. Through the mouths of Devendrar activists, the author explains that these rights have recently been denied to them by upper-caste people in the village. The Devendrars call a caste meeting at which one of their educated leaders explains the situation:

> *"Do you know who built that temple?"*
> *"We don't know."*
> *"What do you know then? Who are you? That is why we are now in such a state. Since you do not know anything everybody thinks that they can enslave us."*
> *"Leader, who are we?"*
> *"Listen! We are a ruling class! We belong to the Pandya lineage! This temple was built by a Pandya king belonging to our caste. And not only that, the privilege of first honour belongs to us."*
> *"Is it so? We did not know that."*
> *"The Nayak kings defeated the kings from our community. Then they snatched our land, distributed it to their fellow caste-men and treated us like slaves."* (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 100).

In the light of this passage, the story can be understood as an attempt to explain why the original proud and ruling community was relegated to the

status of untouchables. This downfall is explained by Devendrar ideologists as a plot on the part of the Nayak kings and castes that came to Tamil Nadu at the time of the Vijayanagar empire. Their prominent position in society and ownership of vast fields were precisely the reasons why they were persecuted by the new ruling class. To weaken their position, they were gradually deprived of their land and various privileges.

These frequent excursions into history stand in sharp contrast to the reading of Dalit literature by Gajarawala, for whom it is "an ahistorical expression of Dalit identity" which "does not bear traces of nostalgia or the glorification of the idyllic past" (169). We can see that in their writings, Devendrars often refer to history, their golden past is reconstructed, celebrated and extolled.

The most interesting story is titled *Naṭpu* (Friendship). This story narrates a conversation between two friends. Both belong to the Scheduled Castes, but one is a Paraiyar and the other a Devendrar. The contrasting standpoints of Dalits and Devendrars are presented in their conversation, but the position of the Dalits is refused and ironized. This fits in perfectly with the ideology of the Devendrars. They assume that the Dalit label has been appropriated by the Paraiyars, who stick to the ideas of Iyothee Thass, Ambedkar and other great Dalit leaders. The Devendrars define "dalitness" as meanness and an artificially constructed identity which obscures the genuine nature of communities. For them, it is a regressive ideology that revels in the feeling of injustice and does not lead to any real progress. The Devendrars argue that the only productive way forward is to create a strong and proud community that determines its own future path.

The rejection of the term "Dalit" cannot be underestimated. It is rejected not only by numerous Devendrar intellectuals and activists but also by common people. Gross in this respect asserts: "The vast majority of my interlocutors refused to call themselves Dalits, and reprimanded me when I made that mistake early on in my research tenure" (132). Two prominent representatives from the Paraiyar caste (who wish to remain anonymous) have even told me that they received a threatening phone call to this effect, i.e., not to designate the Devendrars as Dalits. Recently, the central as well as state governments were asked by the Center not to use the term "Dalit" for all Scheduled Castes in official documents (*Hindustan Times*, 2018). The term "Scheduled Caste" is to be used instead and many media seem to follow the same path. Note also that the title "Velalar" is normally associated with communities considered ritually second-highest after the Brahmins. These communities have expressed their disapproval of the renaming of the Pallar caste (*The Hindu*, 2020). This clearly shows how escalated the situation can be in this regard.

This kind of writing thus contributes to the differences, contestation and even enmity between castes.[10] Representatives of both castes are well aware of its cause and of the potential danger. For example, Devendrar thinker Taṅkarāj (128) proposes: "If the feelings of hatred are to be eliminated, we must first stop speaking derisively of the Paraiyars." It is, however, not only the Paraiyars. Mativaṇṇaṉ (60), writer and activist

coming from the caste of Arunthathiyars (the third biggest Scheduled Caste in Tamil Nadu after the Paraiyars and Devendrars), in his commentary on the Devendrar seminal work *Mūvēntar yār?* recently wrote: "If they want to prove themselves to be true Velelars, they do not need to spit anger and inflict humiliation on the Arunthathiyars, Paraiyars and others." These increasing differences and contestation hinder the cooperation of the Scheduled Castes. The significance of this cooperation is recognized by the leaders of both sides. However, while the Paraiyars seek the cooperation of the Scheduled Castes as a whole, the Devendrars simply want the cooperation of the individual castes:

> Dalit: *"So you have now become Devendrak ula Velalars, right?"*
> Devendrar: *"Is it a mistake to discard your mask and show your caste identity?"*
> Dalit: *"Yes."*
> Devendrar: *"I do not find it wrong. Everyone should love their caste. It is the same as a mother loving her child."*
> Dalit: *"Is this progress? Progress means to be a Dalit and to say it proudly."*
> Devendrar: *"I do not know whether it is progress or a regression. I will not say Dalit any longer. What does Dalit even mean?"*
> Dalit: *"It is a mistake that you have separated from us."*
> Devendrar: *"Rajan, our caste is still on the Scheduled Castes list. We have not separated yet. Have all backward castes become united by now?"*
> Dalit: *"No."*
> Devendrar: *"And do you know how many divisions there are among forward Brahmin castes?"*
> Dalit: *"I do not know."*
> Devendrar: *"If you do not know even this, what do you know?"*
> Dalit: *"Dalit! Dalit! Dalit! It is the only truth for me."*
> Devendrar: *"Throw your truth in the trash. You should liberate your community. In the same way, the liberation of Devendrars is in their own hands. .. Every caste should know its roots, culture, history and strength. Once you know your own strength, the strength of the whole caste will become evident.* (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 70-72; slightly shortened).

We can observe that in the second sentence, Devendrar compares being a Dalit to wearing a mask and hiding one's true identity. Another remarkable feature is the author's condemnation of efforts to unite castes into broader units, such as the unification of Brahmins, Other Backward Classes or Scheduled Castes. This only leads to weakening and loss of identity and becoming a faceless, featureless "mob" of people.

On the other hand, Devendrars have long struggled for the unification of their subcastes.[11] In this story, the process of ethnicization (a "shift from caste as a religious system to castes as substantialized, competing units" Barnett, 159) of the Devendrakula Velalars seems to have reached its final stage. They have become an ethnic group "claiming a unique natural identity" (Barnett, 158).

The story distinguishes itself formally by its near-total reliance on dialogue, apart from a brief introductory paragraph. The dialogic construction creates a sense of immediacy and rhythm, with exchanges between the protagonists marked by sharpness and energy. This oral dynamism builds toward a climax in the final two paragraphs. However, these closing lines flatten the momentum by reiterating earlier arguments rather than deepening or complicating them, thereby reducing their literary impact.

The last story I selected is titled *Ātikkam* (Dominance). Its main themes are caste dominance and violence between Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. The story talks about a Devendrar student going to Annamalai University for an examination. First he meets an older person in a bus and explains to him the real reason behind riots in Southern Tamil Nadu between the Devendrars and the Thevars. He says that after the Brahmins were expelled from ruling positions by the Dravidian movement, power came to the hands of the Other Backward Classes. They now exercise their dominance over the lower castes. The Devendrars started to catch up with them in the economy and education and the Thevars are not prepared to tolerate it.

Later, he engages in a conversation with a professor at the university, where he, besides other things, emphasizes the necessity and will of the Devendrars to face the oppression of the Thevars:

> *"Yes! The dominance of the Brahmins has ceased. Nowadays our dominance has been brought into force. Only your community thinks that it can resist it."*
> *"We come from heroic lineage, ruling class, agricultural class and a class of people who never submit to anyone and resist all kinds of dominance."*
> *"When other castes yield why only your community refuses to do it?"*
> *"Our hereditary occupation is agriculture. Your community belonged to criminal lineage and now engages in agriculture. Our two communities are of equal status. Until you recognize this it will not be possible to stop the struggle against caste domination by any force. Cut for cut, blow for blow, stab for stab."* (Cittar and Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 50–51).

Literarily, the story is characterized by a lack of formal sophistication. Its structure is predictable, and the dialogue operates within rigid parameters: questions and responses follow a mechanical pattern that leaves little room for ambiguity or interpretive openness. The ideological thrust is overt, with the interlocutor's swift submission undermining the potential for dramatic or intellectual tension. The story becomes a tool to explain to the readers some recent developments and to show that the Devendrars can enforce their interests even at the expense of the upper castes, who are not so unyielding.

The other stories in the collection are not so open and straightforward. Rather, they focus on other aspects of the Devendrar ideology, documenting the richness of their culture and tradition (for example, cultivation of rice) or criticizing internal divisions among the Devendrars (as these internal differences empower other castes). One story questions intercaste marriages. It does not reject them completely but cautiously says that one should not lose one's caste for the sake of love. This again stands in contrast to the Ambedkarite/Dalit ideology, which speaks for intercaste marriages.

These stories are less eloquent, but by not focusing so much on the ideological message, their literary merit somewhat increased (at least in some cases). Still, none of them can be considered a significant literary work.

Conclusion

The article attempted to compare two types of writing, both coming from the pens of the Scheduled Castes. It takes particular note of what the writers are trying to tell the readers and in what way. Since the two literatures are based on different ideological foundations, it was necessary to compare the two ideologies as well. The main emphasis was on the Devendrar literature, which is much less known. The Devendrar short stories provide compelling evidence of the efforts of caste thinkers to convey the main tenets of their ideology to the masses through fiction. They also offer valuable insight into the interaction and rivalry among the Scheduled Castes and their ideologies in one region. The growing popularity of Dalit literature must have played a part in the decision to publish them. The two literatures share several common features – for example, the appeal not to give in to pressure and to be proud of one's community. However, community means something different for these two groups.

The literature produced by the Devendrars is much less negative and tends more to foreground the cultural dignity and historical legitimacy of their community. These texts are often celebratory in tone, emphasizing communal strengths, aspirations, and moral fortitude. The intention is not merely to inform but to elevate – to foster a sense of pride and collective identity among readers. In doing so, the texts seek to construct a counter-discourse to narratives of marginalization.

From a literary-aesthetic perspective, however, many of these stories exhibit a straightforward and utilitarian approach to narrative. Figurative language, metaphor, and other literary devices are generally scarce. The prose tends to favour clarity over complexity, accessibility over stylistic experimentation. The plot of the stories is mostly linear, moving mechanically from point A to point B, offering neither a phasing nor a

retrospective view. Consequently, the rhetorical function often overshadows literary ambition. As such, this literature is more propagandistic and manipulative than Dalit literature.

Nevertheless, the use of dialogue in many Devendrar short stories signals an awareness of literary form as a means of engagement. The dialogic mode allows authors to animate ideological positions and dramatize conflict through character interaction. These exchanges, often rendered in colloquial and emotionally resonant language, provide a degree of realism and immediacy. In several cases, dialogue becomes the primary structural device, comprising the bulk of the narrative. This emphasis on spoken interaction suggests that, despite their ideological clarity, these writers have not entirely relinquished the pursuit of literary value. On the whole, we can say that while Dalit literature already offers a wealth of works that captivate readers and offer more than just an interesting insight into the lives of Dalits, Devendrars' literature is in its infancy.

The message contained in the short stories differs in many respects from that of Dalit writing on an ideological level. Devendrars keep repeating that they are against untouchability, discrimination and exploitation. At the same time, they argue that they do not want to waste time by pursuing the unrealistic goal of the annihilation of the caste system – their aim is to empower their community, eliminating caste inequality and the dominance of the so-called high castes (Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 65). They even accuse the Dalit ideology and Dalit literature of encouraging a pointless struggle, which paradoxically contributes to the preservation of casteism (Ñāṉacēkaraṉ, 7, 11). No wonder the Paraiyar scholar Rakupati reacted to this collection of short stories with indignation. According to him, the book is "nothing but an oppositional attitude towards the Dalit movement and Dalit literature functioning on the ideology of annihilation of caste and sidelining of Hindu religion as proposed by Ambedkar." He holds that Devendrar ideology openly tries to make caste a central institution of society (110-112).

The two literatures thus stand in stark contrast with each other, demonstrating that subaltern writing is not monolithic and that there are growing ideological divisions among the Scheduled Castes. While the Dalit literature is anti-caste, Devendrar writing could be called "caste-affirmative."

Differentiation among the Scheduled Castes nowadays manifests in manifold ways. Until the end of the nineteenth century, these communities were relatively low-profile ideologically. However, with the arrival of the Census and especially the programs of affirmative action, various castes have become much more aware of their identity and started to work with it. This trend has continued, perhaps with brief interruption, even after India reached independence. It has become even more acute since the decline of the *Bahujan Samaj Party*. That is why these works cannot be taken lightly as a kind of rhetorical exercise or idle philosophizing. They are a clear symptom of the search for new ways by the Scheduled Castes.

The standpoints propagated by the Devendrar thinkers have gradually been adopted by the political leadership (Hons 2023) and have also reached the grassroots level (Gross, 14, 69, 132-133).

Besides, there are also political consequences. It is clear that the ideology of the Devendrars is much closer to the positions of the Hindu Right. The *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), which has been failing in the elections in Tamil Nadu for a long time, is looking for possible allies here. The BJP's receptiveness to the demands of the Devendrars, including the passage of the unification and renaming act, is sometimes interpreted in this light (see, for example, Kumar 2021). The BJP's greater penetration into Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, is something that the Paraiyars' party *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* is trying to prevent.

How is it possible that two castes of more or less the same status, facing identical problems, opt for completely different, even contradictory strategies? Lee's (111) explanation appears neither sufficient nor convincing. He holds that ranked identities are preferred by landowning groups with limited contact with state bureaucracy, whereas large groups living in areas with democratic elections tend to favor unranked rhetoric. These criteria do not seem to be easily applicable in the case of the Devendrars and the Paraiyars. I believe that mutual animosity among the Scheduled Castes simply made the Devendrars seek their own path to emancipation, but there must have been other reasons as well. More research is needed to assess the validity of these explanations or develop alternative theories.

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