

## Today's Paper » MISCELLANEOUS » OTHERS

### Tamil Dalit writing set to go English

B. Kolappan



Photos of Dalit writers at Oxford University Press on Thursday.— Photo: M. Vedhan

From the fringes of literature to the portals of the Oxford University Press (OUP), it has been a long march for Dalit writing in Tamil Nadu. At a time when Dalit assertion is making itself heard in the political sphere, the OUP is bringing out an anthology of English translations of Tamil Dalit writing, seeking to give a clear picture of the different phases of writing and activities of Dalits in the State over a century.

The anthology, featuring the works of 40 writers, is divided into four sections: poetry, fiction (short story and novel), drama and prose (autobiography, speeches, biography and archival materials); and will be released on April 10.

Along with Bama, whose novel *Karukku* portrayed Dalit life in the authentic language of the people, Imayam, whose *Koveru Kazhuthaikal* told the story of puthirai vannar (dhobies working for Dalits), K.A. Gunasekaran, a writer and singer, former IAS officer P. Sivakami, Cho Dharman, Azhagiya Periyavan, and many others writers, Dalit leaders such as Dr. K. Krishnasamy, Thol Thirumavalavan and Athiyaman have found a place in the collection.

“Being part of modern Tamil writing that has touched enviable heights among Indian regional languages, Dalit writing, in terms of form, content and aesthetics, has witnessed great literary achievements. Moreover, Dalit writing in Tamil Nadu has a conscious political continuity since the 19th century, when the political discourse of the marginalised was dominated by scholars such as Pundit Iyothee Thass, Rettamalai Srinivasan and M.C.Rajah,” explains Ravikumar, former MLA and one of the editors of the Anthology.

Pundit Iyothee Thass was a great Tamil scholar, who wrote commentaries on classical Tamil literary works from a Buddhist point of view. “His writings comprise all elements of modernity,” points out Mr Ravikumar.

Pundit Iyothee Thass and Rettamalai Srinivasan had run their own magazines. The subscription of “Paraiyan” (1893-1900), a magazine run by Srinivasan, enjoyed a circulation higher than mainstream magazines and newspapers. The same was the case with Tamizhan (1907-1914) edited by Iyothee Thass. If Srinivasan believed strongly in emancipation of the depressed classes through political participation, the 1940s saw the emergence of Swami Sahajananda, a staunch Saivite, who sought to achieve the objective within the fold of Hindu religion.

“The pieces of literature selected for this anthology will show a marked shift in the canon of Dalit literature that prioritises only a subjective and confessional mode. These stories show a deep concern about representing the function of caste as a mode of power and foregrounds the challenges involved in writing creatively about it,” says Mini Krishnan, Editor of OUP Translation.

Mr Ravikumar says all the 40 writers are Dalits by birth, while explaining that the term ‘Dalit’ is not an identity, but a form of ‘subjectivity’.

“Dalit is a consciously chosen ideological position against the caste system. An untouchable alone can be a Dalit because caste defines a person by birth. It is like feminist position. Every woman is not a feminist, but only a woman can be a feminist,” Mr. Ravikumar further says.

Mini Krishnan notes that the prose aims not just to reconstruct the history of century-old Dalit struggle in Tamil society, but to also point out issues addressed by Dalit intellectuals.