

Report on preliminary fieldwork funded by
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Submitted by
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The Repertoire of Dalit Women's Political Praxis

Challenging archival and patriarchal prejudice
in the historiography of the Dalit movement in contemporary Kerala
by collaboratively accessing the Dalit Women's Society's repertoire of political praxis

In the summer of 2017, I conducted fieldwork centred on the offices of the Dalit Women's Society (DWS) in Kurichi, Kottayam, on a fellowship funded by the CSA. My plan was to conduct fieldwork – archival and ethnographic – that would help challenge what I saw as archival and patriarchal prejudice in the historiography of the Dalit movement as well as feminism. I was trying to understand, in short, why the DWS was not given its place in the histories of either the (largely masculinist) Dalit movement or the (largely upper-caste) feminism in Kerala. This research question was a result of a trip the previous summer, when I had visited the DWS offices for the first time (incidentally, part-funded by a CSA fellowship). During that first trip, I had identified archival holdings that the DWS had conscientiously – even lovingly – maintained of their political activities since being founded in 1992. I had also identified performances that would form, I thought, my principal objects of study: the Peace Rally of 1995, and the Dalit Studies lecture series of 1992-96. While my fieldwork in the summer of 2017 would meet these objectives, a number of unplanned and fortuitous ethnographic encounters would reorient my research direction.

In my work on the Peace Rally, I resorted to a method that may be properly described as ethnographic history: while I accessed archival records, I was keen to supplement these records with oral history interviews. Moreover, in sharing the records, I collaboratively accessed the memory in the

repertoire: time and again, I could see the memory of the Peace Rally enliven my interviewees.

Through sharing these materials, they re-lived their memories and provided value embodied histories through energy and affect.

The Dalit Studies lecture series had been recorded by the DWS in about 40 audio tapes. Such conscientious documentation was, I have come to realize, typical of the DWS. We have now digitized this entire holding, and it represents, in my opinion, an unprecedented audio resource that documents the discussions that animated contemporary Dalit politics. This project could have future uses such as being made available online, or being part of a larger online database of material on the Kerala Dalit movement. This audio database also represents an attempt at bringing tools derived from performance documentation and performance historiography to the study of anti-caste politics.

These were my planned activities that transpired more or less uneventfully. The unplanned – and extremely fortuitous – ethnographic encounters that took place during this fieldwork visit helped my understanding of the DWS. Their current activities in the summer of 2017 was, I found out much to my surprise, acupressure therapy and free food distribution. These were not activities they had engaged in before, and certainly not during my first visit in 2016. By following these activities – with some skepticism at first, I might as well confess – I arrived at a greater understanding of the DWS's worldview and their political praxis. While the planned work – Peace Rally and Dalit Studies lecture series – certainly yielded useful material, these fortuitous ethnographic encounters helped me *feel* what I began to think of as the DWS's “ecosystem of care”.

I am grateful to the funding received from the Center for South Asia (CSA) towards this preliminary fieldwork research. This report places on record the work I undertook utilizing these funds.