

Life Narratives as Documentation of a Community: A Reading of K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* and the Context of Tamil Dalit Life Narratives

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Abstract: This paper argues that life narratives written by Dalits form a distinct sub-genre in terms of content and form. They seek to document not one individual's life history but situate it in the context of one's community's living conditions over a life time. The conflation of the personal and the communitarian struggles, aspirations, negotiations with the mainstream casteist, discriminatory social structure is the defining core of Dalit life narratives. The narrator articulates a historical perspective to the continued struggle for social justice by his/her community. The narrator's personal graph is a social documentation of his/her community's marginalisation, oppression by the dominant communities and the challenging of prevailing caste hierarchies.

K.A. Gunasekaran's autobiography, *Vadu* (Scar), 2005, is a sociological document of Tamil society and the prevailing caste matrix. Weaving together his parents' struggle for survival, the discrimination faced by him at educational institutions and experiences of members of his community, K.A. Gunasekaran relies upon stone inscriptions, oral narratives, personal and collective memory in his writing. The use of photographs, folk songs, polyphonic voices and a non-linear narrative posit *Vadu* as an engaging life narrative that offers an insightful social critique and a historical perspective on the question of caste hegemony.

An analysis of *Vadu* takes us through Ambedkarite thought and its influence in the struggle for social justice as reflected in the life of a community. The individual's narrative forms a significant but non-privileged discourse that reflects growth, change and success in his community's fortunes as much as his own.

Keywords: Marginalisation, collective memory, sociological document, non-linear narrative, caste hierarchy, Dalit life narratives

Dalit literary discourse in Tamil is polyphonic, vibrant and a self-reflexive discourse. Its critical engagement with mainstream Tamil literature has given rise to innovative experimentation in form, content, linguistic register and a radical re-configuration of aesthetics. Dalit discourse politicises the personal by positing it as communitarian. The individual or the personal narrative is represented as a narrative about the community. The collective voice of the Dalit community, its struggles, aspirations and accomplishments get reflected in the narrator's lived experience. The narrator's resistance against casteist discrimination, oppressive social practices reflect the community's ways of coping, enduring and ways of standing up against the age-old structures of oppression and marginalisation of Dalits, in rural and urban Indian spaces. The subjectivity of the narrator is mediated through the collective consciousness of the community. Simultaneously, the narrative reveals an individuated, distinctive subjectivity of the narrator as a critically evolved and self-reflexive one from the oppressed community. The narrator's interventions, acts of resistance, help the self and the community emerge from traditional structures of oppression.

This paper will attempt to probe those points of conflation, otherness and solidarity between the narrator and his community in Dalit life narratives. Although the milestones reached by the individual in terms of social success or validation is a matter of community celebration, the condition of the community, however, requires more interventions and a sustained movement to resist recurring acts of oppression. Dalit life narratives, therefore, are formally and fundamentally different from mainstream autobiographies/ memoirs that depict rags to riches tale of personal progress and self-aggrandisement.

Dalit autobiography, thus, emerges as a sub-genre that testifies to the unequal social matrix of contemporary India. It seeks to document the condition of our society, of the Dalit community in particular, and records how inextricably yoked it is to a rigid caste structure. Dalit life narratives engage in a dialogue with the non-Dalit reader as much as they seek to reach out to the Dalit community. They offer an authenticated, lived reality of rural and urban social negotiation of caste, gender, religious and national markers or intersecting hegemonies. Dalit autobiography evolved as a popular genre in the seventies and eighties in Marathi and consolidated the Dalit discourse as articulating experiential reality. However, in Tamil, Dalit literature revealed a greater inclination towards other genres like poetry, short fiction, novel or drama. Autobiography/Life Narrative did not emerge in Tamil Dalit literary discourse until the beginning of this century. Bama's *Karukku* (1992), written in the confessional/ experiential mode, is a landmark in Dalit literary discourse for its radical defiance of literary formulations and genre categorisation. Locating *Karukku* in the catalogues of renowned libraries is quite revealing as some of them stack the text as a novel while others place it in the section on Autobiography! Bama, like many other Dalit writers in Tamil, problematises received notions of genre, form, style and principles of aesthetics. Autobiography or Life Narratives as a genre did not gain Tamil Dalit writers' attention in the nineties, a period when Tamil Dalit writing garnered critical and popular attention. In this context, K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (2005: tr. *The Scar*: 2009) emerges as the first Dalit Life Narrative in Tamil. (1)

K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* does not have a literary predecessor in contemporary Dalit literature in Tamil. However, it shares affinity with Rettamalai Srinivasan's (1859–1914) *Jeeviya Sarithira Surukkam* (A Brief History of My Life), published in 1939. An associate of Gandhi in South Africa, Srinivasan was a representative of the Depressed Classes in the Round Table Conferences held in 1930–32 and worked in close coordination with Ambedkar. He founded a journal, *Paraiyan*, in 1893 to give voice to the Parayar community, negotiated with the colonial government to grant access to roads and wells for Dalit communities. The Dalit community was one of the pioneers in founding journals and submitting petitions for reform in the second half of the nineteenth century in Tamil Nadu. The movement for social justice associated with the Dravidian movement came into being much later. (2) The Dravidian movement spearheaded by Periyar in the first half of the twentieth century and its foray into electoral politics after Independence sought to subsume the pioneering efforts by the Dalit community in the context of negotiating modernity, in particular, in the domain of the print media or the community's efforts towards greater representation in governance in the colonial administration. This resulted in poor documentation of the Parayar community's efforts for social reform. The neglect towards archival records of the journal *Paraiyan* is one such instance. Srinivasan's representation to the Governor-General, resolutions initiated by him in the Assembly and the petitioning of the community to British Parliament for holding the civil services exams in London are some of the significant interventions in challenging the hegemony of the elite upper castes in the bureaucracy. This carries historical significance for the community and adds an alternative layering to our perspective on the nationalist movement. The path of granting representation to Dalits in legislative bodies or reservation

in the bureaucracy and educational institutes was shaped by the efforts of Rettamalai Srinivasan and the Parayar Mahasabha (subsequently renamed Adi Dravidar Sabha) founded by him in 1892. The journal *Paraiyan*, was instrumental in forging a community identity and self-esteem to the Parayar community. Parayar Mahajana Sabha, under his leadership, felicitated Lord Elgin, the governor-general in 1893, during his visit to Chennai. This gesture strengthened the political identity of the community as “a distinct caste group” (3). As a member of the Legislative Assembly, Rettamalai Srinivasan initiated resolutions that demanded access to public buildings, markets, roads for Dalit communities. He also ensured that the Madras Municipality began running schools for children of oppressed castes. These facts are retrieved from his *A Brief History of My Life* that documents his work for his community in detail, and highlights his faith in legislative processes to bargain for greater representation and civic rights for Dalits. While Ambedkar’s *Autobiographical Notes*, published in the same year as Srinivasan’s *Brief History* (1939), has received much critical attention as *Waiting for a Visa*, Srinivasan’s work became readily available to Dalits only in recent years (as late as 2002). The journal, *Dalit*, published an excerpt in Tamil in 2002, and an annotated critical edition of *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* was brought out in 2017. (4) A biography of Srinivasan was published in 2011, authored by G. Thangavelu. The absence of a well-sustained tradition of Dalit life narratives in Tamil could be traced to such silences, gaps and neglect of influential pioneers of Dalit community who played an active role in nationalist movement, social reform and for the upliftment of the community. Their farsighted, activist interventions in the domain of Dalit rights and legal guarantees were ignored, unrecorded in accounts pertaining to nationalist movement and Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. This led to a subsuming of Dalit cause and self-articulation within the *Kazhagam* movement that focussed more on linguistic identity and regional autonomy rather than on ensuring equal opportunities for the oppressed communities.

L. Elayaperumal’s life narrative, *Cittirai Neruppu* (Flames of Summer), documents the struggles of poor, agricultural labourers from the Dalit community in the 1940s. His protest movements against the inhuman exploitation of the Adi Dravidians by the Brahmin, Naidu, Vanniyar, Reddiar landlords underscores the hegemony of caste rubric in rural Tamil Nadu that went unchecked during the peak of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Elayaperumal documents how Dalits were not allowed to wear “neat clothes and stylish haircut”, punished for “trespassing caste norms” by being tied up to trees for days and beaten up severely by their upper-caste landlords. (5) He also records casteist discrimination at mealtimes in college hostels, Army mess and the official neglect in administering inoculation programmes. He recounts the deaths of his father and foster-mother on the same day, as the Panchayat board officials refused to sanitise the streets inhabited by the Adi Dravidian community or inoculate its residents against cholera. The book is an important document on institutionalised casteist discrimination in Tamil Nadu, before and after Independence. The nomenclature of Adi Dravidian in place of Parayar as used more often, earlier, by Rettamalai Srinivasan is indicative of evolving politicization of identity during the late nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century. The pan-Indian use of the term Dalit gets crystallised much later in Tamil Dalit discourse, coinciding with the centenary celebration of Ambedkar in 1990. L. Elayaperumal (1924–2005) worked for the rights of the marginalised castes to lead a life of dignity. He organized protests against the casteist practices like the beating of the *Parai* drum, removing of the carcass that were imposed upon Paraiyar and other lower caste communities. He represented the Congress party in the first Lok Sabha but had an unstable equation with it until 2003 when he re-joined the party. His life narrative, like Srinivasan’s, is an important documentation of an individual’s organized movement of protest against multiple facets of casteist discrimination in institutional spaces through the channels of constitutional guarantees.

Both Srinivasan and Elayaperumal conflate the personal and the communitarian engagements with caste, documenting the struggles, lived experiences of the community in their writing. Their narratives adopt the structure of a document that serves as a testimonial of a representative voice of the community on behalf of the community. As they share their individual interventions in the movement, they foreground the community's struggle, the processes of the protest over denial of education to Dalits, the fight against unequal wages on the grounds of caste and gender. Their documentation of defiance of imposed identities on the oppressed communities takes precedence over detailing of the personal or a biographical profiling of the self. Elayaperumal's *Cittirai Neruppu* was published by a Dalit publishing house in 1998. Other genres like the novel, poetry, essay, plays written by Dalit writers had garnered critical attention in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Elayaperumal's life narrative, thus, assumes greater significance as a documentation of the struggles of the community that offers a historical perspective to the corpus of contemporary Dalit literature.

K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* (2005) is the first life narrative in Tamil that affirms the Parayar identity and space in the cultural domain in contemporary Dalit literary discourse. His documentation of the *Cheri* (Dalit hamlet) in rural, semi-urban spaces is a significant intervention in foregrounding a systematised marginalisation that remains neglected in post-liberalisation India despite its disturbing, ubiquitous presence. Gunasekaran renders a visualised representation in his life narrative of spaces, physical structures/buildings/institutions that push Dalit communities to a ghettoised social space, denying its inhabitants, civic rights and social interaction with the mainstream society. He documents modes of labour allowed and disallowed to Dalits by the oppressor community and how an exploitative attitude towards the intellectual, artistic strengths and physical labour of Dalits continues in Independent India in utter violation of constitutional guarantees. Gunasekaran's *Vadu* lays bare the continuities in practices regarding social segregation, denial of fair wages to specific castes, discrimination against Dalit students at hostels, at dining halls in school hostels and violence against Parayars in rural spaces including fields, markets and the pathways which intersect fields and the village, effectively blocking accessibility to the *Cheri*. He recounts his life from childhood to his days at the University, the struggles of his parents to educate their children, his face-offs with casteist discrimination at different points during his growing-up years. The book also depicts the marshalling of his talents as a performer to resist caste hegemony. It is disconcerting to note that the practices opposed by the Parayar community under the leadership of Rettamalai Srinivasan in the 1890s and under Elayaperumal in the 1940s continue to prevail in the 1960s and the late seventies as depicted in Gunasekaran's *Vadu*. The book concludes with a harsh reminder that the modes of critique deployed during Gunasekaran's student days as pertinent at the time of publishing his life narrative, when he was the Dean and Professor at the School of Performing Arts in Pondicherry University (6). Dalit life narratives in Tamil act as revealing documentation and critique of caste oppression that continue to control a social culture like that of Tamil Nadu where anti-caste movements rose in a far more substantive way than elsewhere in India. Life narratives, in such a context, function as a stringent critique of those institutions that are cited as the pride of our Republic but have failed to uphold those democratic ideals. *Vadu* points out how no substantial gains have filtered down to the Dalits inhabiting the *Cheri* in contemporary India. A juxtaposing of Srinivasan's *Jeeviya Sarithira Surukkam* (1939) and *Vadu* (2005) shows us recurring patterns of oppression, recounted by two eminent public intellectuals of their times. Life narratives, therefore, require to be posited as the most damning, graphic and subversive critique of our social structures, in particular, the inflexible caste structure that undermines the discourse of democracy, development and civic rights.

Life narrative as documentation of a community's place and status in our society is a subversive, non-official record that merits attention as a citizen's alternative version of authenticating the lived reality of an individual, of a community, and that of the nation. The individual from the oppressed community, in this instance, the Parayar community from Tamil Nadu, is not recounting merely his personal tale of struggle and success but locates the same in the context of the social, economic, cultural conditions of his community within a historical timeframe. While Srinivasan and the Parayar community petitioned the colonial government for civic amenities, political representation and the right to education, Gunasekaran negotiates a more formidable task of recording the denial of rights to Parayars by his fellow citizens from educational institutions and centres of religion in a secular, democratic republic where equal rights and opportunities to all citizens are guaranteed by the Constitution. He also documents the nexus between socially privileged communities and official institutions in perpetuating discrimination against the socially marginalised communities.

The Paraiyar *Cheri*, located on the outskirts or beyond the *oor* ensures the spatial and cultural alienation of the Dalit community from the mainstream social life as shown in *Vadu*. Gunasekaran grows up in the villages of Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. His father is a school teacher, his maternal grandfather is the village veterinarian, but the family lives in acute poverty and deprivation. Despite the respect towards the profession of teaching and medicine in rural India, his father and grandfather are subjected to humiliation and abjectness on account of their caste. Gunasekaran's schooling and his stay at a hostel meant for 'Harijan' students from the district leave him sour with memories of heckling, caste-shaming and denial of a decent meal or personal toiletries despite the government dole received by these institutions. Unable to pay the rent for their one-room hutment, barely eating one meal a day or sharing soaked and peeled tamarind seeds with his siblings as breakfast, sustaining his schooling by borrowing books from upper-caste students, receiving charity from their Muslim neighbours to pay the school fees – these memories are recounted by the writer as facts that defined the living conditions of his large family and those of his neighbours in the *Cheri* (2005:29-35).

Gunasekaran's depiction of his neighbourhood offers an inclusive society, albeit one that brings together multiple marginalised communities of Muslims, Christians and Dalits. Gunasekaran's comradery with homebound Muslim women during his childhood and adolescence unravels loads of fun, storytelling and affectionate conversations. The women trust him, treat him as a member of the household, send him on errands to get snacks for them and share the same with him. Often, they ask him to eat first at the shop and bring home the eats for them. They give him money to watch a movie and narrate the story to them as they sit down to weave mats (2005:37-38). The most endearing sections of the book relate to his association with the Muslim neighbours or putting up a play, singing songs during Christmas with his friends. The absence of unease among Parayars, Muslims and Christians acts as a critical pointer on the prevalence of caste amongst Hindus. Gunasekaran's parents counsel their children to not reveal their caste in public but identify themselves as Christians to avoid a backlash, a violent assault on their bodies. Gunasekaran recalls how as a young lad returning home with a bottle of cooking oil, singing merrily to keep thoughts of loneliness away, he was violently pushed down, slapped hard and abused for walking on the village pathway and not stepping aside to let an upper-caste man have his right of way. He is shocked out of his wits as he cannot comprehend the rationale behind the violence heaped upon him:

"Why did that fellow slap me? What wrong have I done? Why did he abuse me as a wretched Paraiyan? Such questions crossed my mind but I could get no answer... My cheek got swollen and flushed by the time I reached home. I broke down when I narrated what had

happened to me to my *ammachi* ... She consoled me and explained that we are Parayars who need to make way for the masters and mistresses who have the right of way... She wiped my tears with the *mundhanai* of her sari and applied castor oil on my swollen cheek." (2005: 71, translation mine).

Even boys of his age from the upper caste slap Gunasekaran for singing merrily or winning a game. These oppressive acts that seek to undermine the self-esteem of Parayars, to show them their place in a hierarchical, feudal society, are resisted by Gunasekaran by pursuing his studies under the most trying circumstances and by honing his talent of singing and play-acting. His repeated encounters with casteist discrimination enable him to evolve a rationalist analysis of the social structure and not wallow in the discourse of self-pity or resentment against his oppressors. He notes how the hegemonic, hierarchical social matrix pits each community against another, how his immediate oppressor is placed in a subordinate position in relation to another and such a context proves to be further exclusionary and discriminating at multiple levels. He records the colossal grip of the caste structure over his community despite changing times, location and altered social standing, regardless of accomplishments by way of acquiring a professional degree, higher education, success in business or a place in the cabinet.

Gunasekaran's cousin, Muniyandi, is a qualified doctor who works at a hospital in Madurai, provides diligent attention and medical care to upper caste patients from his village. They are happy in receiving the best possible treatment in a strange city on account of 'our village boy Muniyandi'. However, while they address him respectfully as 'doctor thambi' within the hospital premises or request him to deliver medicines to them whenever he visits the village, at the bus depot, they treat him with disdain, address him disparagingly and make it plain that he is only a Paraiyan who deserves no respect or a courteous greeting from them. (2005: 91-93) A Dalit couple's wedding procession is not allowed to enter the village pathway, the only motorable road that could let their car reach their home in the Cheri. Both the bride and the groom are working as teachers, the bride's father is a minister but the upper caste villagers force the couple to get off the car. Gunasekaran's grandfather, a Vaidya, reminds them (most of them his regular clients) that Paraiyars are employed as drivers and drive their cars to drop them at their doorstep through the same pathway. They retort, "Look here, Karuppa! We can take the car to our residences but how dare you expect us to watch your fellows enjoy a car ride through our area?... Caste does not vanish on getting educated... If you manage to read and write, does that mean you could forget the traditions and practices of our village?" (2005:84, translation mine).

Caste structure impacts Dalit women's lives the most. The fact of the intersectionality of gender and caste as well as a critique of Dalit patriarchy found a voice in the writings of Tamil Dalit literature right from the 1990s when the writings of Bama and Sivakami stormed the literary domain. Gunasekaran's plays invariably reflect a self-reflexive critique of the dual oppression of Dalit women on the grounds of caste and gender. In his life narrative too, he foregrounds the incessant labour of Dalit women and its undermining by the employers and by Dalit men at home. He recounts the fate of a Dalit woman Mikelamma who is beheaded by her Odayar lover when she points out to him that the possibility of an inter-caste marriage is ruled out as his community would wipe off her family owing to their identity as Pallars. The lover hacks her head off, for he cannot take a "no" from a Dalit woman. We are told that he was working as an attendant at a hospital after completing his jail term, but his gruesome act put an end to the possibility of inter-caste marriages in the district. Mikelamma's tragic life is heard as a ballad in the nearby villages, sung by women while working in the fields -- sowing, transplanting or harvesting.

How does Gunasekaran cope with the pressures of caste during his student days? What are his strategies of resistance? It is interesting to note that Gunasekaran resists caste

oppression primarily through the dynamics of performativity. Performing the Dalit is evolved by him as a mode of resistance, a subversive praxis to make a dent in the domain of culture and social role-play, contexts most impacted by the rigours of caste. Gunasekaran as a folk singer, composer and practitioner of theatre, fuses folk arts practised by Dalits to subvert casteist hegemony, initiates a dialogue with the oppressor as his auditor and spectator. His singing wins him awards, fame and the hearts of fellow students from dominant castes. At college fests, he sings undeterred by the hooting and heckling on account of his caste, winning prizes and wins over the hearts of his social “betters”. The notion of merit and privilege is subverted by Gunasekaran by positing his Dalit identity as an empowering one by politicising performativity. Folk performative arts like Karagattam, Oyilattam, Paraiyattam are deployed in his plays to subvert mainstream, classical arts that have enjoyed unquestioned hegemony in Tamil cultural space. The drumming of the Parai, imposed upon the Paraiyar community as a demeaning task, is problematised by Gunasekaran. He posits it as an art form in his theatre. He choreographs movements of the drummers and synchronises its beats with the body language of the actors to indicate affirmation of Paraiyar identity, instead of camouflaging it to escape social derision or segregation. His popularity as a singer of folk melodies, of Bharathi’s songs, the recitation of his poems or participation at literary talks and workshops at Madurai University pave the way for social acceptability and validation on account of his “talent/skills”: “my caste took a backseat, and I won accolades as a performer.” (2005: 97) Students from oppressive castes reach out to him, pen down apology notes, and this strengthens his resolve to subvert caste in the domain of culture and public performances. The choice of his name as an artiste at the AIR is “Elayankudi Gunasekaran”, much to the chagrin of upper-caste villagers of Marandai, his birth place. His argument that Elayankudi Muslims do not practise caste segregation or untouchability and hence he would affirm his affinity with them makes his village *savarna* landlords squirm in pain and discomfort. *Vadu* concludes with a reference to Gunasekaran’s founding of a *Kalai Kuzhu, Tannane*, his very own troupe to disseminate folk arts, Dalit performative arts and theatre.

Gunasekaran’s life narrative fuses the personal and the political consciousness, the individual and community’s experiential reality in his documentation of struggles and subversions in the context of oppression of Dalits. An incident reported by his cousin Muniyandi is rendered as a play *Thodu* by Gunasekaran a few years later. A well-known, much performed and translated play, *Thodu* is based on Muniyandi’s experience that is at once bizarre, absurd and provoking. He notices a farmer lying unconscious in his field and suffering from an epileptic seizure. As a medical student, Muniyandi rushes to help the farmer, a Konar (a caste equivalent to the Yadav in the North). Muniyandi fans with a towel, lifts him and lays him down under the shade of a tree and sprinkles water from the Konar’s *Kanji* pot to revive him. The farmer regains his consciousness and throws a fit, this time, a non-clinical one. He abuses Muniyandi for being a wretched Paraiyan who dared to touch him and his pot. He asserts that he would have preferred to die rather than be touched by a Paraiyan. (The term *thodu* in Tamil connotes touch, as an operative verb.) The Konar farmer summons the Panchayat that sympathises with him and holds Muniyandi arrogant and high-handed towards his betters. “Why did you touch me? Why did you carry me in your arms? ... Your conduct reeks of arrogance... being educated ...” (2005:89, translation mine). The Panchayat lets him off as he is the grandson of the village Vet, Karuppan. Nonetheless, Muniyandi is made to fall at the complainant’s feet and apologise. His humane gesture to help a patient is challenged by the hegemonic caste as untenable and unacceptable. The touch of an untouchable (in the late sixties or mid-seventies) is perceived to be a criminal act that gets resolved by the Panchayat, dominated by the hegemonic castes. The due process of the law is not invoked or adhered to and the

verdict is biased and humiliating to the Dalit community. It is an utter mockery and betrayal of our constitution and institutions of governance.

Gunasekaran weaves this incident into a social critique in his play, *Thodu*. He focuses on the body language, silence and drumming of the Parai instead of dialogue and narrative. The absence of verbal communication foregrounds the silences, spatial distancing between the communities that get ruptured by an act of touch by a Dalit. The placing of the mud pot at the centre of the stage serves as a visual symbol of the privilege of touch. A Dalit character protests in the play, “We may touch a goat, a dog or even a pig. But can we touch our fellow men?” (7). The use of Parai drum in many of Gunasekaran’s plays offers a subtext of identity affirmation, a celebration of Paraiyar culture. The use of songs, masks, synchronised movements of actors and subversive humour are the chief markers of Gunasekaran’s theatre. His *Vadu* incorporates subversion by politicising performativity and positing it as a marker of Dalit protest culture.

Dalits employ writing as an act of resistance. Dalits have been denied access to education for centuries but the right to equal opportunities as a constitutional provision is looked at as an act of condescension by a feudal, hierarchical society that invokes “merit” as its cultural capital, while the Dalits struggle hard to acquire formal education. Gunasekaran’s trajectory in his life narrative is, at once, an extraordinary and an unexceptional one. The simultaneity of the general and the particular condition of Dalit life/lives reflects the core of *Vadu*, in terms of content and form, in its narrative and structure.

This life narrative avoids a teleological perspective and is structured in an episodic, non-linear mode of narrative. It documents an individual’s life as typical of his community’s lived experience. A collage of narratives on Dalit lives of the young and the aged men and women from both rural and urban spaces of our society is represented in *Vadu*. Its representation mirrors the shackles of a tradition and worldview interrogated by the oppressed who affirm their share over this land, culture and a right over its institutional spaces. Gunasekaran’s *Vadu* is remarkable in its use of photographs of structures — ruined temples that have risen over demolished Viharas, rare statues of Buddha, Tirthankara jostling for space in a Shiva temple as evidence of violent friction and appropriation of spaces. There are photographs of a Dargah and a Church affirming a pluralistic, inclusive lifestyle available to Dalit communities. An image of a mosque with a *baoli* invokes access to water bodies through non-Hindu spaces for Dalits who are forced to live beyond the caste-bound, Hindu Oor/village. Years ago, Rettamalai Srinivasan had observed that Dalits are “a distinct caste group”, outside the fold of Hinduism (2012:182). Hence, he did not, unlike Ambedkar, feel the need for conversion. Gunasekaran assimilates an inclusive but rationalist identity wherein he presents the Islamic, Christian and Hindu community bonds, celebrating the festivals, literature and their arts to affirm his faith in a humane, non-sectarian social vision. His social identity is constructed as a performer, a folk-artist, a theatre practitioner who initiates a dialogue with the oppressor community, interrogates social inequalities through the medium of art, writing and performance. The core principle of his writing lies in the affirmation of performing the Dalit as an identity and conviction to offer a subversive critique of oppressive structures.

Notes

- ¹ Ravikumar's foreword to K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu*. (Gunasekaran. K.A. *Vadu*. Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2005, p.16). All subsequent references to *Vadu* are to this edition, translation mine for the purpose of this paper, hereafter incorporated in the text.
- ² For a more detailed reading of this context: <https://m.thewire.in/article/caste/remembering-rettamalai-srinivasan-the-lasting-emblem-of-dalit-political-aspirations?utm=authorpage>. visited on 18.9.2021 at 11.15 hrs. <https://www.epw.in/node/156379/pdf>. Accessed 18 Sept 2021.
- ³ *Tamil Dalit Writing* ed. Ravikumar and R. Azhagarasan. Delhi: OUP, 2012, p.182.
- ⁴ An excerpt of *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* was published in *Dalit*, May-July, 2002, pp.44-62; an annotated, critical edition, *Jeeviya Sariththira Surukkam* ed. Stalin Rajangam, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2017.
- ⁵ Elayaperumal, L. *Cittirai Neruppu* (Flames of Summer), Neyveli: Dalit Veliyeedu, 1998; excerpted in *Tamil Dalit Writing*, eds. Ravikumar & Azhagarasan. Delhi: OUP, 2012, p.192.
- ⁶ Gunasekaran concludes by quoting from the poem, *Manusangada*, written by the Marxist revolutionary Poet Inquilab:
 "We are men, we are your fellow-men / Like you, like him, like her / ...our bones and flesh burning in the fire that you set aflame / Your government and your courts add oil to its flames / You announce random schemes in the name of welfare / But when they burnt us alive / With whom were you bloody busy fornicating?" (As quoted in *Vadu*, 2005, p.127, translation mine).
- ⁷ K.A. Gunasekaran. *Thodu*. (Chennai: Thamarai, 2004) p.54, translation mine.

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