‘Not a literature of luxury’

Who is a Dalit? What function does Dalit literature perform? Such questions found a platform in a first-of-its-kind lit fest at Delhi’s Kirori Mal

I

t was a foggy winter morning that heralded the launch of the Dalit Literature Festival, with the cheery laughter of the assembled crowd mingling with the rising steam from numerous cups of hot chai at Delhi University’s Kirori Mal College. B.R. Ambedkar jested for space with contemporary writers like Laxman Gaikwad and Anand Telumbde at the bookstalls set up at the venue, where literature lovers, activists and students from across the city assembled for the two-day fest held earlier this month. The usually blank wall near the canteen was taken over by a visitors’ banner, which would later fill up end to end with comments, including those from the chief guest, activist Medha Patkar. “A literature of luxury,” was how noted writer Mohandas Namishray defined Dalit literature at the festival. “(It is) a literature of suffering, strong voices, and struggles,” Namishray added, setting the tone for the two days of open discussion and debate that followed.

A new positive direction

Dubbed the first of its kind, the Dalit Literature Festival was organised by a mix of Dalit organisations, university departments and literary societies including the Ambedkarvadi Lekhak Sangh, National Alliance of People’s Movements and Kirori Mal College, among others. The festival was an attempt to develop Dalit literary criticism, said Professor Pramod Mehra, co-convener. “We wanted to look at the historical, contemporary and future prospects of the Dalit literature movements, especially how literature has performed as an agency, and the need of the hour,” said Mehra, outlining the main goals of the event.

“This is an attempt at a response to the corporate-sponsored big events, where Dalit issues are spoken about in one session and then forgotten. These are not issues that you can discuss in isolation,” he added. “There are identities, ideas and value systems not recognised in the mainstream and given due space.”

Echoing that thought was Patkar, who said that Dalit literature brought to the forefront the suffering and the pain of oppressed people. “The Constitution gives the right to equality and there are strict laws against caste discrimination in the country, but open mass-killing is still possible that we will hold an edition next year? Mehra was not sure — “But we’ve got a good response from all walks of life. Actor Nandita Das has also made a public statement saying she’s keen to collaborate with us. So it is possible that we will hold an edition next year. We’ll see.”

“Not a literature of luxury’

BY JANANE VENKATRAMAN

BY JANANE VENKATRAMAN

Songs of identity

The two days of the festival were packed with panel discussions exploring the past, present and future of the Dalit literature movement as well as the challenges inherent to it.

“Patriarchal structures against which Dalit women have been fighting are not just oppressive from the point of view of reservation for women in Parliament, we need to also look at how that idea of equal participation is just symbolic. We need to discuss how that can be addressed,” said Mehra.

“If you read women’s literary narratives, especially where Dalit women writers are concerned, it is very emancipatory,” he said.

“These narratives are not included in the debate when we talk about radical feminism in mainstream media. That needs to change,” he added. An important theme was the question of Dalit identity and the use of the word ‘Dalit’ itself, over and above the existence of other phrases like ‘Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe’.

“The word ‘Dalit’ comes with a pan-India social identity. It is an umbrella term that talks about bringing together those who have been facing exploitation and deprivation, whether it be in the farmer community or the LGBTQ community. They want a word that reflects their sense of pain and crisis,” said Mehra. “Dalit literature is not only of Dalits but of all those people who are struggling against atrocities,” added Namishray. The question of identity was further explored in several panel discussions on day 2, with the event culminating in a discussion that looked into the future of Dalit literature.

The issues debated in the panels found an echo in the musical performances by various artists who sang about identity, caste and politics.

Dalit women’s narratives are not included in the debate when we talk about radical feminism in mainstream media.