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Writing Dalit Autobiography in Colonial India: The Story of Rettaimalai Srinivasan

Speakers: Malarvizhi Jayanth (independent scholar) J. Balasubramaniam (Madurai Kamaraj University)

Monday, December 7th at 6 pm in India (2.30 pm Israel, 1.30 pm France, 12.30 pm UK)

How to connect: https://huji.zoom.us/j/89779481125?

PASSWORD to the session is the date of the session in the format DDMMYYYY. That is, if the session would be on December 1st 2020, the password would be 01122020. Please contact Marina (marina.rimscha@mail.huji.ac.il) should you have trouble connecting.

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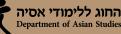
While Dalit autobiography is often demarcated as a genre that rose to prominence in the 1990s, the work of Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860-1945) shows its longer genealogy. Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Dalit writing in Tamil such as his autobiography and other examples of flourishing Dalit journalism and political engagement from the period are yet to be admitted into either the literary canon or much of existing literary or political histories. Srinivasan was a Dalit leader in colonial India, whose autobiography, written and published in the Tamil language in 1938, is likely the first Dalit autobiography. This book provides a missing piece of anti-caste history, detailing the work of a Dalit leader who stood by the national leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the struggle for freedom from caste in colonial India. Rettaimalai Srinivasan is known at the national level for having accompanied Dr. Ambedkar to the Round Table Conference in London to discuss the question of equitable representation. As he notes in one of his works, there were two kinds of freedom struggles being waged in colonial India - one against the British and the other against caste. In the anti-caste freedom struggle, people fought for such freedoms as the right to walk on public streets and the right to represent their people on the international stage. Srinivasan notes in his autobiography that "I helped people, not only in Madras Presidency, but all over India achieve national freedom and win their rights" - calling his struggle a freedom struggle then is consonant with the vocabulary that he himself used to describe his work. Demonstrating the truly national scope of the anti-caste movement in late colonial India, his autobiography sheds light on the struggle for a different kind of freedom waged by Dalit leaders of the time.

Srinivasan is slightly better known in the state of Tamil Nadu due to the publication of his autobiography and the pamphlets he published in Tamil. A forthcoming translation of his autobiography and newly discovered letters and documents will demonstrate how he worked at the national level as well. His autobiography is more of a political biography, chronicling his work for the betterment of Dalit groups both at the regional level in Madras Presidency and at the national level for British India. In it, he often conflates his well-being with that of Dalit castes as a whole. Along with his other work, this autobiography further demonstrates his work as a national leader of the Depressed Classes (as the Dalit castes were known during the colonial period), especially during the Round Table Conference, the runup to the Poona Pact, and in the campaign against opening up the Civil Service exam. He also published an open letter to Gandhi, detailing the nature of caste discrimination and protesting Gandhi's support for separate schools for Pariah children. Together, his works demonstrate the vibrant diversity of Dalit political thought and action in late colonial India..

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Malarvizhi Jayanth holds a PhD in South Asian Studies from the University of Chicago. Her research and teaching interests include slavery, caste, religion, and colonialism in southern India. She has completed a study of the abolition of slavery in southern colonial India for her dissertation and is currently working on translating and editing the works of Rettaimalai Srinivasan in English.

J. Balasubramaniam teaches journalism at Madurai Kamaraj University, Tamil Nadu, India. He specializes in the area of Dalits and print culture, intellectual history and digital media. He has published a book on 'History of Dalit Journalism from 1869 to 1943' in Tamil. Presently, he is working on a book on Rettaimalai Srinivasan in Tamil.



Co-conveners:

Judith Misrahi-Barak, English Dept, EMMA, University Paul Valery Montpellier, France (judith.misrahi-barak@univ-montp3.fr);

Marina Rimscha, India-Indonesia Program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel (marina.rimscha@mail.huji.ac.il);

Nicole Thiara, Postcolonial Studies Centre, Nottingham Trent University, UK (nicole.thiara@ntu.ac.uk).

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