

# Review:

## Dalithan by KK Kochu

By

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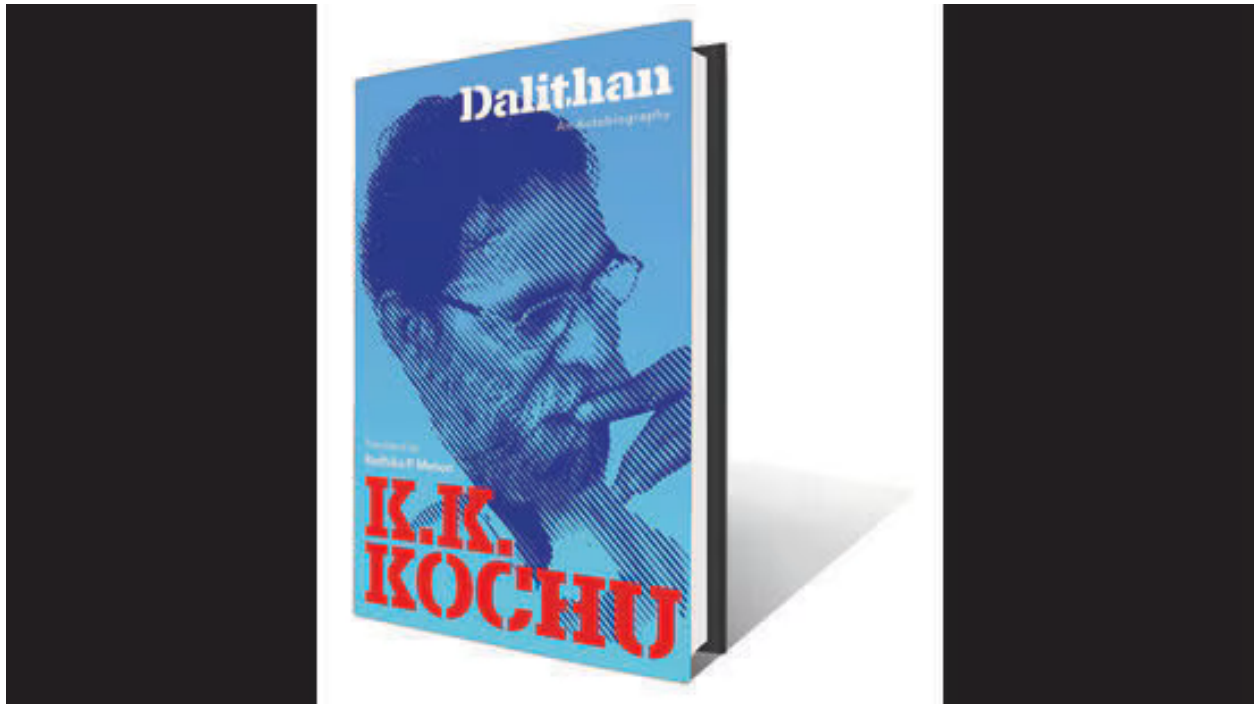
The literary critic and activist KK Kochu's memoir, translated from the original Malayalam, shows that, despite the communist revolution in Kerala, it has been difficult for the subaltern to rise

Kerala's story is now part of folklore. Amidst the Brahminical influence gripping north India, the southern state comes across as a liberal enclave of beef eaters. As one of the earliest post-colonial communist states in India and the colonies, the Kerala story is prefixed with the influence of communism. Like any well-crafted piece of propaganda, there is another side to things but we are unsure of where to find a credible version of the complete picture. *Dalithan*, a memoir of one of the state's finest literary critics and activists, might serve us well in this regard.



Field workers in Palakkad, Kerala. (Shutterstock)

The first autobiographical reflection written in Malayalam by a Dalit, it begins with the childhood story of the author, KK Kochu, growing up in Madhuraveli, a flood-prone region of Kottayam. Last year, my friend, Sunny Kappikadu agreed to take me to the Dalit settlements, earlier known as Harijan colonies, that I had read about in Maya Pramod's doctoral thesis. The Kerala monsoon interrupted and the colonies became inaccessible. We had to park on a bridge that overlooked some helpless homes. The houses were an island surrounded by the scenic beauty of the country. For a passerby, it was a majestic visual, but if you zoomed in just enough, you would have been shaken. There were no boats or any means to help the trapped residents. Walking through the muddy waters was risky. One wrong step, and anyone attempting an escape would have been swallowed by the swirling current. Sunny said this was a snapshot of the Dalit colonies we had intended to visit. The homes were on 10 cents of land apportioned by the communist government, which expected these Dalits to be grateful and loyal servants of the party.



344pp, ₹599; Speaking Tiger

To get a grasp on the character and complexities of Kerala, the reader has to understand the Land Reforms of the 1960s that created a new class of middle-caste landowners. Dalits, however, remained on the margins of development in rural and urban areas. Thus, Kochu's description of the lifeworlds of his upbringing is dark and challenging. Unlike many Pulayas and other Dalit castes who worked in the fields of the Namboodris, Nairs, and Syrian Christians — the dominant castes around whom the historiography and sociology of Kerala is built with even conflicts, disagreements and wars located around the arc of these three communities — Kochu's father owned a piece of land from which he earned a pitiable but honourable income to support the family. Kochu caught the winds of politics early on and it was through reading that he came in contact with the political world and with literature. As a justice-seeking individual, he sought many political options but was deterred by the CPI(M) of EMS Namboodiripad and its later iterations due to its bullying of Dalit peasants and partnership with landowners. Kochu found this contradictory and saw through the self-serving agenda of the communist leadership, that emerged chiefly

from the trinity of Kerala's dominant castes, and of the Kerala Congress, that was influenced by dominant caste Christians.

Since caste was not a considered factor, he experimented with various factions of the communists including the Naxals, the Communist Youth Forum, and a couple of other left-oriented groups that were up for a peasant revolution. At Maharaja's College, Kochi, he was shamed by upper caste students for being a reserved category candidate who had to collect a stipend. He had hoped to study medicine and become a doctor leading his family out of poverty. However, the attraction to literature and experiences of his background pushed him to abandon biology at college. Still, coming from feudal rural Kerala, he sought to improve the life of the Pulayas who worked on the lands of a Namboodiri Brahmin clan. It was then that he discovered that the CPI(M) was a tool of the dominant castes who collected crowds of Dalits for agitations but worked professionally with the landlords.

For example, in the paddy fields at Kappikakadu, CPI(M) activists had secretly taken a field on contract and deployed the very peasants they had chosen to represent for their rights and dignity to work extra hours. They acted as an organizational force to profit off the labour of Dalit workers. "The peasant's union behaved like a landlord in making the labourers work like slaves," Kochu writes. The CPI (M) reacted by accusing Kochu of being a Naxal. Clearly, communism had been corrupted by the casteist attitudes of the settled discourse of *chaturvarna*. Fatigued, he realised the life goal of his activism was to liberate outcastes from the shackles of Brahminism, and by degrees, has turned to Dr Ambedkar and Phule.

### **Exploring Indian communist hypocrisy**

Though the communist revolution has excited the poor and the oppressed in India, it has been almost impossible for the subaltern to rise. The lacuna lies in the organizing. There are close to 90 factions of communists in India. Most are operationally held by dominant castes. Given that they have been cheated by the cause that they fought for, it is natural for Kerala's Dalits to be antagonistic towards communism.

Thus, many like KK Kochu tried to explore new models, and the unorganized left became the “true Left” for them. Kochu is part of the generation of pioneering anti-caste Ambedkarite Malayalis. Today, there are many articulate Dalit activists from Kerala, who have gone to study outside the state and carry with them the experience of being part of the community of pan-India Dalits. The young brand is still trying to find a strong place nationally with some like Sajan Mani, Maya Pramod, Dinu Veyil, Anandu Raj and Vinil Paul, among others, practising their own style of politics rooted in caste, colour, and Dalitism.

### **A scientific approach**

A reader and hard thinker, Kochu has a scientific approach. Any issue presented to him is followed by independent, unbiased research. A similar politics was followed by Kanshi Ram and continues to be followed by Aahuti, leader of the Scientific Socialist Communist Party of Nepal too. Kochu’s major achievements are in the field of literature culminating in publications and seminar rooms where he brought important interventions to forums, movements and social organizations. He does not hesitate to talk about matters that would affect his relations with colleagues and collaborators. His aim is to fix the causes affecting his caste folk. Towards that end, he also took part in agitations, sometimes organizing them and at other times, spontaneously joining them on the streets. A window into the history of Kerala and of Malayalam literature of the past 50 years, *Dalithan* presents the recent history of Dalit activism in the state and the essential feudalism of its communist party politics.



Author KK Kochu (Courtesy the publisher)

### **Limits of activism**

Like many Dalits in the communist movement, Kochu has come full circle and embraced an Ambedkarite sensibility. This book puts the spotlight on various Dalit organizations such as the Kerala Harijan Federation launched in 1970, the Kerala Pulayar Mahasabha, Dalit Christian organizations and movements such as PRDS. The non-native reader also learns about the caste significance of the Vaikom Satyagraha, and becomes acquainted with leaders of the Kerala Renaissance era such as Ayyankali, Narayana Guru, Apachan, and Sahodaran Ayyappan, who were central to the consciousness of liberation thought in the state. Though communist narratives sidelined these figures, people like Kochu and others popularized them through weeklies such as SEEDIAN. However, unlike the SNDP for the Ezhava community, NSS for Nairs, Kerala Congress for Christians, and Muslim League for Muslims, Dalits in Kerala do not have a strong political front.

From the book, it is clear that activism for justice needs to be professionalized. For economically weaker groups, expecting the poor to lead the cause is a travesty of it. The Dalit community has an

unwritten rule wherein activists are supported by locals honouring them with a bare minimum. The NGO-izing of the movement has compromised its radical edge, and that too needs to be put in check. Even the activism that people like KK Kochu do relies on begging for funds from strangers, as was seen in the case of the Pokkali cultivation strike. The author, like many principled activists, has faced poverty and pushed his family to endure crises.

KK Kochu tries hard to place his own life in the larger perspective of the things happening around it but a memoir needs anecdotes that are not just about activism and politics. Some of the terms used and the complex and culturally-specific ideas referenced in the book are also lost in translation, which is occasionally bewildering for the reader. Nevertheless, Kerala's story will not be the same for you after reading *Dalithan*.

*Suraj Yengde is a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University. His forthcoming book, Caste: A New History of the World, is a study of castes outside India.*

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