

Dalit and Religion, Tagung vom 4. bis 6. Juli 2017 im Augustinerkloster Erfurt

An interdisciplinary group of researchers from India, Mexiko, USA, Canada, Sweden und Germany met in the premises of the Augustinerkloster in Erfurt between 4th and 6th of July 2017 to discuss the topic *Dalit and Religion*.

Dalits (a modern self-designation for “Untouchables”) and other disadvantaged people had to negotiate modes of religiosity and religious power structures continuously. Dalits had to face the denial of inclusion, and encountered severe problems when trying to establish spaces for themselves. At the same time, Dalits invented ideas, practices and agendas of their own. Throughout Indian history the socio-religious hierarchy and the dominant, even hegemonic religious strands and traditions have been accompanied by counter-imaginaries, which represent universalistic concepts, but have never become dominant.

This conference has set itself the task to approach the field of religion in India from the perspective of discriminated, although differently positioned groups of people, and, therefore from an angle that differs from the perspectives enshrined in the dominant religious discourses. It also put forward the ways religious practices and ideas are being articulated and appropriated by the various actors as well as on the ways new experiences and imaginaries are being formulated and expressed both historically and contemporaneously. The religious traditions and strands covered included forms of Hinduism and forms of bhakti, forms of Islam, forms of Christianity and the new or Navayana Buddhism. Martin Fuchs (Max-Weber-Kolleg) gave an introduction into the topic. G. Aloysius (Puducherry) focused on the dilemmas facing excluded social groups in India and the ways their sense of religiosity changes. Saurabh Dube (México) insisted that the question of religiosity for Dalits does not admit singular solutions.

Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (Karnataka) discussed the relationship between Virashaiva bhakti and Untouchability in the 12th century; he followed this up by discussing how Untouchables themselves in a later period, since the 16th century, produced critical epics. Ishita Banerjee-Dube (México) foregrounded the ambivalences of (graded) inclusion, taking the case of Mahima Dharma (Odisha). She asked to what extent a change of faith could guarantee dignity and an erasure of negative discrimination. Beatrice Renzi (Max-Weber-Kolleg) explored Dalit counter-discourses and their relation to Brahmanical Hinduism in Madhya Pradesh and highlighted the critical importance of re-appropriating the divine to reclaim rights and dignity. Sanjay Jothe (Mumbai) focused on the contradiction among followers of the Kabirpanth between notions of a “mystic” Kabir and a “social revolutionary” Kabir. Differently, Valerian Rodrigues (Mangalore) elaborated on the presence of Kabir as the “absent guru” in the life and work of B.R. Ambedkar.

Milind Wakankar (New Delhi) took up the instance of the 17th century poet of the Qadiri Sufi sect, Sheikh Muhammad, who wrote Varkari (i.e. bhakti) poetry in Marathi, focusing on interiority and negativity. Joel Lee (Massachusetts), taking the case of the Halalkhor, Dalit Muslims in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, discussed the ambivalence of dissent and resistance, swaying between intimate untouchability and intimate touchability. Ajay Bhardwaj (Vancouver) presented both a documentary and a paper in which he presented a case of close association of Dalits with Sufi shrines in Punjab.

Joseph M.T. (Mumbai) covered the variants of positions among Dalit Buddhists in Aurangabad (Maharashtra). Jon Keune (Michigan) discussed the relationship of Dalit Buddhism with transnational Buddhist activity in Nagpur (Maharashtra). P. Sanal Mohan (Kerala) discussed the case of autonomous Dalit churches in Kerala, new forms of prayer and a new concept of the body, reviving pre-Christian traditions. Heinz Werner Wessler (Uppsala) presented various position regarding the question of conversion among North Indian Dalits who resist the call to Buddhism as part of the Dalit awareness movement.

A thorough study of Dalit experiences with the different modes of religiosity will have an importance beyond India and South Asia. Within the field of religious studies it will realign the focus on inter-

subjectivity and the quality of human relationships, paying particular attention to the significance that dimensions which transcend the world of materiality and immediacy have for the people concerned.

Martin Fuchs