

Ramnarayan S. Rawat, K. Satyanarayana, eds.. *Dalit Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-6132-9.

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Mechanisms of ethnic and racial inequality have always interested social scientists all over the world. The caste system is one such mechanism of inequality. Caste is practiced primarily among the Hindu populations of South Asia, but it also exists among the Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian religious communities in India. It has been described as a system of graded inequality, a division of labor and of the laborers in which every caste in the hierarchy oppresses some other caste below while being oppressed by the castes above. People at the lowest rung of the caste system were considered “untouchables.” They were deprived of resources, human dignity, and opportunities. Consequent to a sustained movement for their emancipation over the last two centuries, the former untouchables in South Asia are making inroads into the mainstream of education and employment. Galvanized by the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), they have come to prefer to be called *Dalits*--the down-trodden people. A new field called Dalit studies, which is based on the lived experiences and worldviews of the Dalits, has emerged adjacent to the field of South Asian studies. Several scholars from India and outside, writing in the Indian languages as well as English, Japanese, German, and French, have offered insightful academic analyses of the various manifestations of the Dalit way of

life. *Dalit Studies*, edited by Ramnarayan Rawat and K Satyanarayana, is a volume that makes a self-conscious and authentic addition to the field. Authentic, because most of the authors contributing chapters to the volume are themselves born Dalits, and have a firsthand experience of being Dalit. Conscious, because the authors are aware that they represent the transition in the field of Dalit studies where Dalits initially were mere objects of study, but now with research contributions such as the present volume, they are also the subjects who are contributing to the study of Dalit lives.

The volume is divided into two parts preceded by an editorial introduction and a stand-alone chapter by Professor Gopal Guru. Part 1 is entitled “Probing the Historical” and contains four chapters that deal with historical themes and case studies. Part 2, “Probing the Present,” is composed of five chapters on issues of contemporary relevance. The introduction outlines the salient features of the new field of Dalit studies as well as the significance of the present volume to the field. The editors explain that the field was hitherto neglected because the dominant paradigm for studying the Indian history was focused around the issues of colonialism and nationalism. The primary reason was that the gaze which studied the Dalits would always belong to the non-Dalits. It was only

after a few decades of the affirmative action policies implemented by the Indian government that a class of Dalit intelligentsia appeared in the locations where knowledge about Dalits was created. In fact, the editors spell out the larger motive of the volume, namely, to outline a new historiographical agenda for the study of India by recovering the histories of struggles against caste discrimination and for human dignity. The volume indeed is an intervention to demonstrate that Dalits were neither passive victims nor “wannabe” high castes, but actual strugglers against caste discrimination. They were aware of the spaces created by the colonial modernity and used them to engage with the issues such as human dignity and representation. The volume is all the more valuable because the contributors have extensively used source materials in Indian regional languages. Building on insights provided by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the volume works towards restoring agency to Dalit activists and critically engaging with the persistence of caste inequalities in the Indian society.

Gopal Guru's chapter is entitled “The Indian Nation in its Egalitarian Conception.” It is a fine example of self-reflexivity as it fiercely criticizes the way Dalit interests have been co-opted by the ruling elite in contemporary India with remarkable success. He draws attention to the fact that the *sarvajan* (all people) model implemented in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has brought about a desirable inclusion of Dalits in the political elite. However, he warns that this will not necessarily help in alleviating the sufferings of the Dalits in the social realm. He uses a Marathi-language proverb that foregrounds the inherent deprivation of the Dalits even as they celebrate the symbolic co-optation or even accomplishments of their leaders: “The horse belongs to the Village Chief but the untouchable feels proud of it” (p. 46). Taking the self-critique even further, he puts the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the Dalit middle-class intelligentsia to expose the limits of this model. Thus, the introduc-

tion and Guru's chapter together set the tone for the volume, whose focus is not Dalit victimhood but rather their agency as makers of their own future.

Part 1 of the volume has contributions by Ramnarayan Rawat, Sanal Mohan, Chinnaiah Jangam, and Raj Kumar Hans that take a nuanced look at the diversity of historical source materials, agendas, caste, and religious locations of various Dalit communities. Rawat's essay argues that researchers in the field of Dalit studies need to recognize that the imperial archive contains genres of documents that were motivated by multiple, and often contradictory, objectives and concerns. He also underlines the importance of the distinctive qualities of local archives in contrast to colonial sociology to highlight the role of locally embedded ethnographic investigations in constituting the local archives. The point is proved with the case study of Chamars in North India. Using Chamar histories in the Hindi language as well as the police reports of their meetings as his historical sources, Rawat successfully argues that Chamars were not passive recipients but active agents of social and political change. P. Sanal Mohan also tries to rescue the active role of Dalit movements in Kerala from the depths of historiographical neglect. He accuses most historians of failing to view colonialism from the multiple locations of the colonized, as the former had a one-dimensional view of colonialism. Taking a historical review of the Dalit movements in Kerala from the nineteenth century onward, he concludes that conditions resulting from modernity were crucial for Dalit movements as they enabled the Dalits to protest. This, he argues, explains why the Dalits, especially of Kerala and more generally all over India embraced modernity as their own tradition. Chinnaiah Jangam also argues that colonialism may be regarded as an enabling factor in the processes of articulation and emancipation of untouchable communities. His case study concerns the activism among the Mala community of the Telugu-speaking region. Their leader, Bhagya Red-

dy, seemed to oscillate between construction of a separate identity and history for the untouchables and attempts to integrate them into the Hindu reformist framework. The article claims that Dalit leadership in Telugu country of the early twentieth century was confused. There are some loose statements in this chapter which would have benefited from editorial attention. Some are unclear. For example: "Their independent initiatives to build parallel politics evaporated" (p. 123). A few others, such as that Bhagya Reddy provided the first organized leadership among untouchables, are factually incorrect—as can be seen from the cases of untouchable leaders over half a century earlier, such as Umaji Naik and Shivram Jamba Kamble from Maharashtra, to name only a few (p. 127). Gandhi's hold over the untouchables is exaggerated (p. 126). The last chapter of this part, by Raj Kumar Hans, can be described as an important attempt to recover Dalit Sikh pasts. Drawing the reader's attention to the assimilative character of Hinduism, he also highlights the role of colonial legal system in perpetuating the caste hierarchies where none were supposed to exist. The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901 prevented non-agricultural communities from buying and occupying lands, and Hans shows how it proved to be a grand colonial gift to the higher castes. Dalits were deemed "non-agricultural" and this left vulnerable Dalits landless and homeless (p. 147). Thus, part 1 provides a very useful historical context for contemporary Dalit struggles.

The contributors to part 2 include K. Satyanarayana, Laura Brueck, Sambaiah Gundimeda, D. Shyam Babu, and Surinder Jodhka. Satyanarayana offers, through Telugu literary source materials, evidence for his contention that "formation of identity based on social origins is at the core of Dalit literature in Telugu" (p. 166). He further argues that the Dalits' struggle for power even in the sphere of literature is indicative of their desire for democracy. Citing examples from Telugu Dalit literature, he goes on to show that the caste collectives as manifested in literature should

not be trivialized as casteist and premodern because such labeling suppresses the Dalit authors' desire for democracy and possibilities of alternative modernities and subjectivities. Laura Brueck's chapter also deals with a case study from literature. She weaves a complex but nuanced storyline out of the protests, book burning, and subsequent debate around the representation of Dalits in the literary works by Munshi Premchand—one of the most widely acclaimed literary figures of twentieth-century Hindi literature. Without being a partisan to this or that side, her conclusions are varied, and pertinent. She shows that caste, class, and gender identities are regularly repositioned for competing interests of diverse social groups. However, these very debates sustain the vibrancy of the Dalit public sphere as a discursive space. She also goes to show how literature has emerged as a corrective space for contemporary Dalit identity construction, as members of the Dalit literary sphere are united in their resistance to being silenced. A different manifestation of this resistance can be seen in the case study of the Madiga caste, by Sambaiah Gundimeda. He argues that there is an unequal distribution of affirmative policy benefits across the subcastes within the scheduled castes (SCs). Gundimeda's case study sides with the Madiga caste against the Mala caste, which has, according to him, reaped more than a fair share of the benefits of affirmative action policies. Consequent to the unequal distribution of benefits across all scheduled castes, he argues, the common identity of being SC "could not erase the socioeconomic and political differences among the different castes" (p. 226) that were grouped as the SCs. D. Shyam Babu's chapter hopes to find answers to the question: are Dalits moving away from the caste framework towards the class framework? He maintains that the Dalits followed two routes to escape the stigma of their identity: religious conversion and education. Conversion, he claims with the example of Dalit Christians, could not achieve the aim. It is surprising that the largest conversion in the subconti-

ment in the modern period--the conversion of millions of Dalits to Buddhism, especially in western India--does not find any place in his scheme of things. This is only one of the larger issues with this chapter, which seems to have no clear argument, nor any empathy towards Dalits. In fact, the last chapter, by Surinder Jodhka, makes the exact opposite point with respect to the Ravi Dasi community in Punjab. He argues that the Ad Dharmi movement was successful in instilling a sense of autonomy and autonomous community among the followers.

Given that the volume is a collection of papers presented at a conference in 2008, the editors have done a commendable job in bringing together the diverse strands of scholarship for a Western audience. Since there are future conferences on the same topic being planned, it might be useful to consider a chapter or two on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to the making of the Dalit movement in India. A couple of case studies on the Dalits of Maharashtra, who have successfully created and sustained the culture of Neo-Buddhism, would be a welcome addition, too. There could be more discussion of Dalits from non-Hindu religious backgrounds. Future projects apart, the present volume is a useful addition to the field of Dalit studies.

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