

**Aniket Jaaware.** *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching.* Commonalities Series. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 256 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-8226-5.

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At a dinner at a prestigious US university, a senior scholar, Mr. Sharma (pseudonym), asked me about my choice of food that evening. I replied that I would like fish. He laughed loudly at my response and blurted, “you should be eating beef [because you are a Dalit]!” Even today he might dismiss it as a joke, but I immediately was deeply hurt at his casteist remark. I did not reply to his comment at the time. But I mulled over the mockery. At another time in 2008, during an evening stroll with my neighbor’s mother, Mrs. Kulkarni (pseudonym), in a suburb of New York, she asked me: “you eat sausage?” I replied, “yes!” She continued, “so you are a Maratha [another backward caste] [a long pause]?” The verbal pause was actually her way to guess my caste background but not name it clearly. I was both amused and shocked that I was encountering this investigation over food again outside India, in the progressive state of New York in the United States.

Sharma and Kulkarni, both Brahmins in their early sixties, were well acquainted with the codes of the caste mechanism and their various Brahmanical markers. While Sharma already knew my caste, Kulkarni failed to deduce my caste because of my middle-class status. As a result, she tried to decipher some systemic caste codes related to food habits to get to my caste roots. As I was trying to grapple with my shock over this casteist

probing, I avoided a direct answer and instead emphasized to Kulkarni, “Yes, we eat pork, beef, all kinds of meats!” Now she was compelled to conclude, “yes, so you are a...?” In other words, although her intentions differed from Sharma’s, she, like Sharma, inferred that especially because I consumed beef, I was Dalit or vice versa. By this time, I was distraught, and I loudly asserted, “there is something called *streevad* [feminism]—we eat everything, and we are *streevadi* [feminist].” Actually, I wanted to tell her that I ate vegetables, beef, pork, because I am human. But somehow, I replaced human with feminism, for that is my practice. Anyway, my answer ended her caste games. She did not have anything to say and left after some time.

Aniket Jaaware analyzes the operations of the above metaphors and metonymies in the functioning of caste-as-system and caste-as-practice in India. Jaaware’s *Practicing Caste* offers us a metaphysical and philosophical analysis of the practice of caste through the opposition of touch or no touch. He begins with a tropology of touch and extends into a rhetoric of touch. The idea of the “Untouchable” is essential to the notion of touch and moreover untouchability as a social practice involving touching and untouching. Jaaware’s main aim is to expose what he terms the “promiscuity” of caste, to take “caste and caste studies” out of

their academic enclaves, and instead reveal the actual and concrete working of caste in terms of touching and not touching (pp. 190, 3).

Although he does not mention it in his book, the caste practices of touch and touchability are not merely physical acts but are rooted in the actual vernacular words: *sparsha* (touch) and *asprushya* (untouchable) in Marathi and *achhut* (untouchable) in the Hindi language. *Asprushya* and *achhut* are pejorative words used by upper-caste Hindus to refer to the Untouchables. They actually mean those who cannot be touched by other castes, that is, the “Untouchable,” who manifests untouch within a person. Due to the system of caste, the person is untouchable whether or not they come in contact with another person. We know from sociolinguistic studies that languages are practices in themselves, not mere descriptors. Jaaware might have dwelled further on linguistic praxis: the rapid power of words to reproduce meaning within a community.

Methodologically, Jaaware’s book breaks from traditional studies of caste. By deploying historical, sociological, anthropological, and political lenses, he strives to focus on phenomenology, structuralism, and poststructuralism to think about the body and touch as caste. To this end, Jaaware thinks with both “Western” and “Indian” philosophers—Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, B. R. Ambedkar, and Jotirao Phule. He delves directly into the ethical relations that caste entails regarding the politics of touchability for the communities at the two ends of the hierarchy—Brahmans and Dalits. Both communities have different phenomenological experiences of the same “touch.”

Jaaware’s main purpose is to “invite [the reader] to think along with [him] and the argument” in order to produce new knowledge, to think anew, an act he refers to as “*Oublierring*” (oublier+err), that is, the act of forgetting and thinking anew (pp. 10, 3). Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the materiality of touch to anatomize philo-

sophical-metaphysical issues by an analysis of the sociality of touch. This will anatomize the sociology and anthropology of caste by a philosophical discussion of touch. Jaaware analyzes “good” and “bad” as well as “literal” and “figural” touches that mark the boundaries of communities. “Ritual reinforces the distinction between figural and literal by forming communities around values” (p. 55). He argues that primary sociality is dependent on altruistic touch and its regulation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the distinction between “societies of inheritance” and “societies of acquisition” (p. 66). Some significant feature of societies of inheritance are that they are feudal, based on classification per cultural activities, and to them the notion of inheritance becomes a source of value. These societies focus on the tight and uncompromising fit between caste and birth and a complete formed religion, and they relegate economic activity to the mundane, and even the vulgar. By contrast, societies of acquisition emphasize that “birth within a particular family does not confer any special rights” (p. 67). Therefore, they come closest to “capitalistic societies” (p. 68). They are open toward religious conversion and the acquisition of selfhood, and they aspire toward individualism and work on upward economic mobility. To Jaaware, the “struggle between societies of inheritance and societies of acquisition is also the struggle between tradition and modernity, with their special cultural encoding” (p. 111). While societies of inheritors, that is the Brahmans, focus on memory and repetition, societies of acquisition, that is, Dalits, are always creating something new. As a result, the anti-caste struggle “is fully and fundamentally committed to a notion of time in which the future *must be* different from the past and the present” (p. 113). Phule, Ambedkar, and other resisters thus deployed modernity to transition from inheritance to acquisition.

Chapter 4 continues the conversation begun in chapter 3 to focus more on “Brahman” and “Dalit” bodies. Chapter 5 discusses the issue of

“classical texts” to argue that we need to shift our focus from the origins of caste to the history of the practice of caste in the everyday lives of people (p. 125). The ontology of the sociality of caste needs to disseminate itself through a whole system of phenomenal visual signs, and through speech patterns as well. In the process of modernization, for example, the agency of printing press and written texts cease to be sacred or even “secret objects” (p. 129). Jaaware analyzes some contributions of “dalit texts” which to him signal the “entry of dalits in the field of writing that marks modernity in Maharashtra” (p. 130). However, the movement is also plagued by “authenticity” because “there is a specific relationship between dalit literature and caste. Some saw dalit literature as the literature written by born dalits” (p. 126). The agent is missing here, but I am assuming Jaaware is referring to both Dalits and non-Dalits. The issue here to Jaaware is not of “birth [in a particular caste] but of speech patterns and their use for identification of caste in society” (p. 127).

Jaaware discusses briefly the issues in “Destitute Literature” produced by Dalits, a new literariness and primordial storytelling. To him the “confusion between the literary and the political, and the political and the ethical haunts the discourse of dalit literature” (p. 146). The writings of Dalits in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were political and social in orientation; the new literature adds fiction and poetry. Jaaware focuses on Baburao Bagul as a “modernist author” who examines the intimate relation between truth and fiction and highlights their ethical complexity (p. 143). That is to say, the ethical is the consequence of the literary, or as it is claimed by Dalit politics, “literary production [is] the consequence of the ethical superiority of victims of political and social domination, exploitation, suppression, oppression, and hegemony” (p. 147).

Chapter 6 dwells on the un(touchability) of things like food so as to focus on the practice of caste and chapter 7 focuses on “society, sociality,

and sociability.” Herein Jaaware argues that caste segmentation or segmented sociabilities can be traversed when we actually “unlearn our privilege *and our* disprivilege” (p. 183). For example, when “we begin to cognize the possibilities of using other sociabilities,... [we are freed] from our habitual invention of our own kind of sociability. I say namaste instead of zohar.” “Alterity thus ceases to be an opaque wall of division ... becoming a hinged turnstile which can open both toward the inside and toward the outside” (p. 184). Certainly, upward mobility, acquisition of education and employment, and access to resources have not changed caste segmentation. Thus, only a traversal of caste segmentation and recognition of the possibility of using other sociabilities free us of caste society and its institutions. To Jaaware, we would have to give up the caste identities we give to ourselves as well as the identities others give us and we have to unlearn our privilege and un-privilege, because we will have to keep changing and nurture change.

Jaaware extends the important recent work on the phenomenology of untouchability by Sundar Sarukkai.[1] Yet, ignoring the scholarly work by historians and anthropologists and critiques of Louis Dumont for over two decades, Jaaware’s analysis of caste like that of Dumont remains a deterministic problem reducing Brahmanical Hinduism to a single essence of purity and pollution between two so-called antagonists: highest “pure” Brahman and lowest “impure” Dalit. Nicholas Dirks (*The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* [1987]), Susan Bayly (*Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* [1992]), and most recently Sumit Guha (*Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* [2016]) have analyzed the political and economic logic of caste structure.

Nevertheless, Jaaware incisively illuminates a theory of caste as a practice of touching and not touching. In posing caste as a problem for ethics,

Jaaware examines the relationship between Untouchables and Touchables to offer new ways of thinking about sociality in and beyond India. The book will be a significant resource for students studying the phenomenology, politics, and sociology of caste-as-practice, comparative accounts of modernity, and ethics.

Note

[1]. Sundar Sarukkai, "Phenomenology of Untouchability," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 37 (September 12, 2009): 39-48.

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