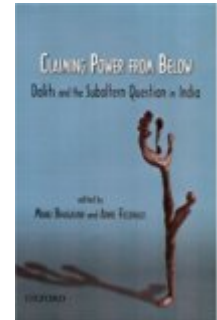


Manu Bhagavan, Anne Feldhaus, eds.. *Claiming Power from Below: Dalits and the Subaltern Question in India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008. x + 222 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-569304-1.



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Over the last two decades, the South Asian landscape has experienced a resurgence of untouchable voices challenging the dominant social, economic, political, cultural, and epistemological structures, and questioning the traditional mechanisms of oppression. Even though Indian society and its traditional institutional structures have been critically interrogated throughout its history, the perspectives from the most oppressed sections of the society, like the untouchables (Dalits), did not form a part of mainstream intellectual discourses and analyses. Historically, criticisms of caste, gender, and other oppression and exploitation are as old as the institutions themselves—a fact that has often been discounted or glossed over by the dominant, largely Brahmanical, canon. To a certain extent, the colonial (modernist) intervention provided a distinct ideological and institutional framework for the oppressed, like the Dalits and women, to contest their subordination and oppression, one in which the most oppressed sections of society envisioned anti-caste egalitarian ideas and strove to build an

alternative world free of exploitation and inhumanity. However, the mainstream writings focusing on colonial and postcolonial South Asia did not integrate Dalit visions and their articulations as part of the South Asian experience of colonialism and modernity. Because of their own social location and ideological limitations, even many caste Hindu scholars refused to accept and dwell on caste-based oppression and exploitation.

The contemporary upsurge of Dalits in Indian cultural and political mainstream, therefore, not only challenges the existing historical and sociopolitical scholarship on South Asia, but also tries to provide new epistemological alternatives by bringing the ideas and articulations from the margins to the core in the rewriting of history, culture, and politics. Dalit articulations provide new ways of understanding and interrogating the notions of caste, colonialism, nationalism, democracy, equality, and freedom. The volume under review, *Claiming Power from Below*, edited by Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus, is a cogent expression of rising Dalit aspirations and their

critical role in redefining the South Asian cultural and political landscape. The volume honors a most distinguished contemporary historian, Eleanor Zelliott, who not only sowed the seeds of Dalit studies in the North American academy but also dedicatedly carried the voice of the Dalits to international forums. Significantly, most contributors have been influenced directly or indirectly (as is true for almost all of the contemporary scholars of Dalit studies anywhere in the world) by Zelliott as a scholar and teacher. It is, therefore, not surprising that the essays in this volume are centered on the themes that were central to her writings, such as literature, politics, and specifically the historic role of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as an activist and thinker.

While acknowledging the seminal contribution of *Subaltern Studies* in rethinking South Asian history, culture, and politics, the volume rightly points out the limitations of *Subaltern Studies*, especially its failure to integrate the distinct voice of Dalits in interrogating colonial modernity and challenging dominant theoretical narratives. In particular, the volume represents an uncomfortable reminder of the failure of South Asian scholarship to delineate "caste" (unlike race in Western academia) as an analytical category in understanding the nuances of sociocultural and political formations and their intricacies. Anupama Rao, in her essay "Who is the Dalit," powerfully brings out the notion of Dalit as a political category with its claim on the history of humiliation and suffering and also as a field of contestation and significance. For her, Dalit as a political and ethical subject is the product of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century struggles that contested the dominant narratives of history, politics, and culture. She analyzes the role of Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar in creating Dalit subjectivity outside the purview of Hindu Brahmanical hegemony and anti-caste egalitarian ideology. She also points out the significance of Dalit experience of humiliation and degradation in renegotiating the relationship between colonial modernity and

democracy as opposed to the nativist nationalist narrative, which blindly opposed any influence of modernism.

Ramnarayan S. Rawat, while extending the argument of evolution of Dalit identity outside the Hindu Brahmanical world, brings out the fascinating history of Scheduled Caste Federation in Uttar Pradesh in which Ambedkar played an active role as both an organizer and an ideologue. His essay illuminates the historical nuances behind the current upsurge of Dalits of Uttar Pradesh in Indian political mainstream. Rajendra Vora further complicates the evolution of identity politics in South Asia by showing multiple identities of Muslims and examining how the reality of their everyday existence goes against the stereotyped monolithic community. By extending the inclusiveness of Dalit experience and historical affinity between lower-caste Muslims and Dalits, Vora opens new ways of understanding the past and current alliances between Muslims and Dalits in South Asia.

Abigail McGowan powerfully indicts the colonial education system in disempowering the artisanal communities by pushing them back into the lap of traditional occupations, providing neither the tools of technical innovation nor the capital to invest and compete with Western industrial economies. Thus, colonialism covertly helped retain the Brahmanical social structure through its industrial education policies, which adversely affected the artisanal castes in two ways. First, by not providing secular educational opportunities, it made them succumb to the caste-based occupational social order. Second, it destroyed their economic independence by denying them access to technical innovations, thus making them uncompetitive vis-à-vis Western industrial goods. The essay also rightly points out the role of artisanal associations in contesting Brahmanical domination.

Shailaja Paik's contribution narrates the gripping stories of Dalit women's quest for education as means for their emancipation. The gender di-

mension complicates the Dalit experience of humiliation and degradation by focusing on how Dalit women are victims of dual discrimination based on gender and caste. Vijay Prashad, in his insightful piece, debunks the myth of equating caste with race, and echoing Ambedkar, he argues, "Dalits are not always distinguishable from other Indians and the apartheid like conditions can be imposed upon people who are marked by history not by appearance" (p. 134). While placing the caste problem in global context, he argues that caste is not a problem internal to India and it should be seen as part of other forms of discrimination elsewhere. However, the argument falls flat when he tries to equate the problem of untouchability to class struggle. In the South Asian context, the mainstream Left has consistently failed to understand and incorporate the complexity of caste into their agenda and they have paid the price for their dogmatism in recent electoral politics. His overt political stands, such as describing the Bahujan Samaj Party as opportunistic (p. 143) and portraying Communist Party of India (Marxist) as the vanguard of the Dalits, makes a mockery of academic scholarship (especially if one considers how in the recent general elections, Prakash Karat hastened to form the anti-Congress and anti-Bharatiya Janata Party Third Front alliance with Mayawati being projected as a key leading figure).

Sukhadeo Thorat's essay, focusing on Ambedkar's ideas on economic development and its role in the emancipation of Dalits and other marginal subjects, throws new light on the issues beyond politics and culture. Moreover, he highlights the role of Ambedkar in formulating policies on such crucial sectors as agriculture, water, electricity, and industrialization, which became significant in independent India. Mani Kamerkar's contribution, although it does not deal directly with the issues related to caste and Dalits, depicts the oppression and exploitation of peasantry under colonial rule in western India. Focusing on the adverse effects of British land policies and imposi-

tion of taxes on the local population of a *taluk* (subdivision) in Bombay presidency, the essay enhances the understanding of the mechanisms of colonial exploitation.

The uniqueness of Dalit literature perhaps lies in its ability to give meaning to and capture the anger, oppression, and exploitation embodied in poignant and yet powerful literary and cultural expression. Dilip Chitre's perceptive piece focuses on the powerful poetry of Namdeo Dhasal and its role in destabilizing the traditional Marathi literary landscape while also galvanizing the Dalits to form the Dalit Panther movement in the Bombay slums. Veena Deo's essay on Urmila Pawar's short stories and autobiography not only complicates the Dalit experience in terms of gender but also brings to light the fascinating use of the pen by a Dalit woman writer to tell the stories of oppressed women in their everyday relationships inside and outside the family. Finally, Bali Sahota's contribution theoretically locates the paradoxes of Dalits in the larger context of liberal democracy in India. He rightly points out how the politics of the dominant not only excludes Dalits and other oppressed people from the power structures but also makes them vulnerable to reactionary politics for their survival. By using D. R. Nagaraj's remarkable writings, which located the precolonial roots of an anti-caste indigenous tradition, and by linking them to contemporary Dalit politics and poetics, the essay urges one to look beyond the state and its institutional structures leading to a new direction in the politics of the oppressed.

Overall, the volume gives a brilliant perspective on Dalits and their critical role in redefining the destiny of contemporary South Asia. The collection also has the potential to persuade writers and thinkers on South Asia to rethink and rewrite the history of the subcontinent from the perspective of the Dalits (and other oppressed sections of society), entailing an anti-caste, inclusive, and egalitarian vision.

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