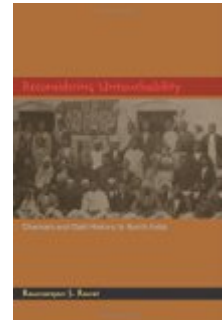




Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xix + 272 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22262-6.



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It is a mark of the distance that has been traveled in the scholarship on identities in recent decades that we now have, as well as a wide variety of interpretations of caste as identity, a wealth of more analytically inclined perspectives and a veritable school of “political” readings of caste, a further tradition which is characterized by taking caste seriously as a matter of *historical* agency. This is in spite of criticisms that the framework of identities, while focusing on the social construction that goes into the categories by which people label themselves and others, has been less attentive to how the construction process actually works. One of the attributes of such readings is that they engage both with the categories people employ as they deal with each other and also incorporation of those same categories into explanations of the identity dynamics under examination. Ramnarayan Rawat’s *Reconsidering Untouchability* is a valuable addition to this recent tradition of caste interpretation, and conspicuously partakes of this virtue. Rawat elicits from the history of the Chamars of the North Indian state

of Uttar Pradesh a historiographical and sociological position which is both viable and distinctive, identifies new departures for a history of “untouchability” itself, and defends the position from challenges; at the same time he demonstrates a keen understanding of the dominant narratives and assumptions which have most directly influenced thinking and action in this area, in particular the grounding of Dalit identities in cultural stereotypes based on occupations considered impure and defiling.

This engagement with cultural stereotypes grounded in occupational identities is crucial since Rawat sets up the book by arguing that some of the most central themes of Chamar activism in North India took shape in response to perceived shortcomings in the dominant interpretations of their occupations and identities; indeed that “in the face of contradictory archival evidence, the salience of occupational stereotypes, not only for Chamars but also for other caste groups similarly regarded as ‘untouchable’, is puzzling and needs to be explained” (p. 5). Working off district and

provincial repositories—in fact positioned as sources that serve as a counterpoint to the imperial archives located in the metropolitan centers—Rawat contends that Chamars were much more likely to have been agricultural peasants than leatherworkers; and, what is more, that if the Chamars came to be strongly linked with the leather trade and industry, it was “the colonial and nationalist discursive practices that transformed the caste Hindu textual understanding of Chamars as leatherworkers into a social and administrative category in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (p. 11). The book also relies substantially on Chamar narratives present in Hindi-language sources (and produced throughout the twentieth century) to put together a picture of the agendas laid out by Chamars in their own histories and politics. Chamar histories and politics of the early twentieth century, which negotiated their position within Hindu religion (especially within the form of religion propagated by the Arya Samaj) and sought to establish high-caste origins for the Dalits, soon transmuted into claims (in the context of the Adi-Hindu movement of the mid-1920s and thereafter) rejecting Hindu religion and marking the frontiers of a Dalit identity as the original inhabitants of India. Rawat is particularly concerned to draw attention to the fact that the latter movement, at the forefront of which were Chamars, translated into a “new politics of intervention, in which an *acchut* agenda for social and political transformation through state action was put forward” (p. 150); indeed that “Ambedkar was not the only one to broach such ideas ... [t]hey were already circulating amidst a much broader base than is generally acknowledged” (p. 157).

Central to his project then as Rawat sees it is a way of forging an understanding of Chamar history and society over the last 150 years in which they are the active subjects of that history. Seeing Chamars and Dalit history in this light leads to a take on the dominant narratives that have produced accepted versions of Indian history: “Be-

cause the ideas, struggles, and movements of Dalit writers and activists do not help to advance the historiography of colonialism versus nationalism, they have found little space for recognition. When not completely ignored, Dalit perspectives have typically been rewritten to conform to nationalist agendas” (p. 12). Accordingly, in rethinking the history of Dalits outside of this colonialism-nationalism dichotomy, Rawat is concerned to bring “Dalit perspectives and historical writings more centrally into the writing of Indian history, where they properly belong” (p. 23). The position is fully expounded in the course of five substantive chapters and by a much more detailed attention to provincial archives and Hindi sources across Uttar Pradesh than can be summarized here, but I think what I have said captures its essential orientation.

This is a resourceful way of making sense of Chamar (and Dalit) activism and makes for stimulating reading, but it is hard not to wonder whether caste histories are quite this open to the possibility of revision: is the account of the history of Dalit identity given in the various stages of the articulation, for example, one that Chamar activists and ideologues would be happy to give up or relegate if a more comprehensive perspective on the subject came along? It seems much more plausible to suppose that activists and ideologues simply think they are writing here the true history of caste for the first time, and Rawat’s frequent allusions to the need to measure up to the questions posed by his Dalit interlocutors about the importance of facing up to unpleasant “truths” about Indian sociology and history seem to chime in with this. But are we, in facing up to these claims and working off the histories underscoring them, conflating (what students of contentious politics have termed) “categories of practice” and “categories of analysis”? To be sure, any analyst of a process of politics must pay attention to the categories people employ as they deal with each other, but must also stringently avoid the straightforward incorporation of those same categories into

explanations of the process of politics under examination. Indeed, practices in which people identify themselves or others as members of groups with distinctive ethnicities become objects of analysis rather than causes of mobilization, conflict, and struggle, or sociopolitical differentiation. In keeping with this distinction, therefore, one is urging Rawat to more closely analyze the process of construction underwriting Chamars and the *Dalit* history that is part of their very definition. The conditions that obtain within and make possible a certain process of construction of identity and identification cannot also be retraced as a story of its effects. The reservations I am expressing here is that Rawat's reworking, which incidentally is in accord with the assumptions and actual descriptions of Chamar lives over the last 150 years, presupposes a subtler grasp of the conditions of possible histories enabled by oppositional consciousness and subalternity. This is, as yet, a larger infirmity in the historiography of India/South Asia, which in absolutizing colonialism and its effects misses out on the moments specific to a re-reading of the present.

All the same, Rawat's questioning of the occupational stereotype that has underscored anthropological and historical accounts--where every Dalit caste is defined solely in reference to a supposedly impure occupation that provides the basis for their untouchability--is a deft move and certainly needs to be taken seriously. An intellectual genealogy of caste and untouchability cannot come about as a simple laterality; and it is definitely as raising the Chamars' approach to such questions in an exceptionally informed and admirably clear manner that I would commend Rawat's book.

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