

Charu Gupta. *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. 352 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-99564-9.

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A new historiography of modern India is emerging—a historiography that reveals the constitutive role of late colonial conflicts over untouchability in the formation of the contemporary political landscape. With some exceptions, earlier historians who took cognizance of Dalit lives in the archive used such material to make arguments about happenings on the margins of society. History’s “mainstream” remained untouched, so to speak, by untouchability. Now, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that such cardinal features of Indian political life as constitutional democracy, the secular value of tolerance, laws regulating religious conversion, and the idea of religiously “hurt sentiments”—all of which present themselves as having little to do with caste—have the contours that they do precisely as a consequence of bitter, early twentieth-century struggles over the control of Dalit labor, political agency, and social value. Recent monographs by Anupama Rao (*The Caste Question*, 2009), C. S. Adcock (*The Limits of Tolerance*, 2013), Rupa Viswanath (*The Pariah Problem*, 2014), and others demonstrate that the insight of W. E. B. DuBois into the constitutive centrality of race in American history applies, *mutatis mutandis*, with equal force in South Asia: the generative problem of the twentieth century—and indeed, of the twenty-first—is the problem of the touchability line.

Suggesting new angles of enquiry to this emerging historiography, and supplying it with north Indian archival ballast, are not exactly the stated goals of Charu Gupta’s *The Gender of Caste*. I would argue, however, that these are among the book’s signal achievements, and are elements of Gupta’s monograph that will make it a resource of enduring value to a range of fields: not only Dalit studies and gender studies—to which the book primarily addresses itself—but also religious studies, sociology/anthropology, and above all, modern Indian history. As Gupta’s analysis makes clear, representations of Dalit women in early twentieth-century Hindi print publics throw at least as much light on their “mainstream” authors as they do on their “peripheral” subjects; and such representations were foundational, not marginal, in the consolidation of Hindu majoritarian nationalism.

Gupta frames *The Gender of Caste* as a corrective to social histories of the colonial period. Such are the blind spots of prevailing historical narratives that “the implicit conclusion has been that in colonial India most women were upper caste and middle class, while virtually all the lower castes and Dalits were men.... So this book questions both the presumptive maleness of most Dalit studies, and the presumptive upper-castenness of many feminist writings of the colonial period” (p. 6).

Gupta also seeks to reveal in the historical record indications of the agency of Dalit women and men despite their structural dispossession. “Through showing and discussing dialogical counter-representations, and dissonant voices and actions, this book ... also venture[s] to decode the concealed scripts of Dalit agency” (p. 269). Such “decoding” of subaltern agency is, of course, a genuinely thorny endeavor; like other scholarly efforts in this direction, Gupta’s is more persuasive in certain domains and less in others.

Equally as significant as the book’s explicit aims, though, are some of its unheralded accomplishments. Anchored in the archives of Hindi print publications in the first half of the twentieth century, *The Gender of Caste* considers topics as apparently disparate as conversion to Islam, labor migration to Fiji, sartorial revolutions, folktales of the witch-goddess Nona Chamarin, and stories of women who were militants in the revolt of 1857. But this is no miscellany. Rather, Gupta is stitching together a fabric of north Indian Dalit lifeworlds that the division of scholarly labor has long rended asunder. Instead of relegating conversion to religious studies, Nona Chamarin to folklore, and Fiji to labor history—as norms of academic specialization would tend to encourage—Gupta demonstrates that for Dalit women in the 1910s, each of these phenomena was readily at hand, and represented a potentially emancipatory path or agentive model; for the Hindi writers and publicists that depicted these phenomena in word and image, they represented a collective threat to caste Hindu dominance and nationalist integrity.

Another of the book’s contributions is the opening it provides for theorizing caste in terms of intimacy. While the application of this category may seem, at first blush, counterintuitive, Gupta deploys it for good reasons: “Intimacy provides us with a new way to talk of caste, not only through identity categories, politics, and structural and institutional inequalities, but also as an idea made material through the physical body. It allows us to

see the subtle manner in which caste functions as body history and body language, the politics of which permeates the most intimate spaces of our lives” (p. 15). Caste’s intimacy, that is, is part of its insidiousness: we can neither leave it at the door nor shed it with our clothes; our very bodies, styles of comportment, and modes of intimate engagement with the world are trained by our social location. That caste works upon us intimately, and that its intimacy is essential to its power, is among the most fertile insights of *The Gender of Caste*.

A discussion of two arguments sustained across multiple chapters may help substantiate these observations. One of the central claims of *The Gender of Caste* is that there was a gradual but definite shift in the representation of Dalit women in Hindi print publications in Uttar Pradesh over the early decades of the twentieth century, a shift from stereotypes of filth and dangerous sexuality to stereotypes of patient and forbearing victimhood. Drawing on figures of Hindu mythology present in her sources, Gupta glosses this transformation of the represented Dalit woman as the shift from Surpanakha—the aggressive “demoness” and target of Lakshman’s disciplinary violence—to Shabari—the humble devotee who gathers fruit daily in hopes of offering it to Rama. The evidence for this claim is overwhelming, and a biting reminder (particularly on the Surpanakha side of things) of how socially acceptable the public expression of caste contempt was. For instance, in the popular Hindi monthly *Chand* in 1927, privileged-caste writers held that “They [untouchables] are completely indifferent to personal cleanliness. They do not bathe for months together. Their hair is a jungle-house of lice. Their clothes are a bundle of filth and their teeth show half an inch of grime deposit. Muck has seeped into their very veins; that is to say, they have made dirt their everyday and constant companion” (p. 62). Or consider this sample from the didactic literature aimed at privileged-caste women, warning them against closeness with their Dalit women servants: “We have to engage daily with

women like the *malin*, *nain*, *kaharin*, *chamarin*, *dhobin*, *pisanharin*, *maniharin*, and *dai*. All these women also indulge in forms of pimping. They provoke quarrels in peaceful homes. They roam around criticizing others.... These *kutnis* [home-breakers] work hand in glove with other wicked characters.... Dear daughter, be very careful of these women. They are notorious for their false and unwholesome tales. You must clearly tell them you have no time for their dirty stories” (pp. 34-35).

Having demonstrated the ubiquity of such characterizations in the archive, Gupta argues that Dalit women provided the foil against which the ideal woman of Hindu and nationalist narratives was constructed. “The crafting of an ideal upper-caste woman ... required a repeated denigration of the perceived practices of low-caste women” (p. 32). A parallel argument, notably, could be made using Urdu didactic literature of the same period; for example Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi’s influential *Mirat-ul Urus* (Mirror for brides), a story structured on the contrastive opposition of the virtuous daughter who keeps her distance from Dalit women, and the wicked daughter who fraternizes with them and adopts their putative habits, illustrates how caste contempt was as constitutive an element of ideal *ashraf* femininity in colonial north India as it was of ideal Hindu femininity.

The Surpanakha stereotypes do not disappear from Hindi print; they are, however, gradually superseded by the figure of the Dalit woman as a humble *bhakta* or as the victim of British or Muslim depredations. Gupta suggests a number of conditions that enabled this extraordinary shift. One was the migration of north Indian women—including relatively high numbers of Dalit women—to the plantations of colonial Fiji as indentured laborers, whose brutal exploitation became an impetus to and focus of anticolonial Indian nationalism in the 1910s. A key text in catalyzing organized opposition to the indentured labor sys-

tem was the account of Kunti, a Chamar woman of UP who migrated to Fiji as a worker, of an attempted rape by a white overseer in 1913. In taking up Kunti’s cause, nationalists were, probably for the first time, claiming a Dalit woman not as “Other” but as one of their own, as someone whose injuries should be understood as injuries to the nation. Other causes of the shift toward sympathy were as Hindu majoritarian as they were nationalist: the Arya Samaj, whose role in refiguring the Dalit woman as victim in Hindi print was paramount, pursued this path precisely insofar as her victimizer could be identified as Muslim, and in the interests of “incorporating the untouchables within a putative Hindu community and nation” (p. 52). Gupta adduces often startlingly frank evidence of the rationale that Hindu reformists offered for extending sympathy to Dalit women, such as this from *Chand*: “If untouchables eschew the protection of Hindus and convert [to Islam], will you clean your own toilets? Will your women do the work of midwives? Will you do the work of a washerman? Will you do all the work of Chamars?” (p. 116).

Another key set of claims, sustained across chapters 3, 4 and 6, relate to Dalit masculinity and various domains in which Dalits have had some measure of agency in representing themselves in Hindi print. One such domain is the popular literature—poems, plays, and counter-histories penned primarily by Dalit men—of Dalit *viranganas*, or martial heroines in the revolt against the British East India Company in 1857. In chapter 3, Gupta considers how the portrayal of *viranganas* in this literature counters privileged-caste stereotypes about Dalit women with “what might be termed the Dalit Amazonian,” an emancipatory yet almost superhumanly unattainable narrative figure in which “an embattled Dalit masculinity can be seen as professing itself in the public-political sphere” (p. 106). That representations of Dalit women in the *virangana* literature are mediated by Dalit men is demonstrable, and raises important questions about the relations between dis-

courses of gender advanced by dominant and subordinate castes, by women and men, in print and in oral tradition. The complexity of this terrain is acknowledged in the *virangana* discussion and at times in chapters 4 and 6; at other times, however, a somewhat reductive approach is on display, wherein acts of Dalit political and labor assertion are interpreted as *perforce* masculinist and at the expense of Dalit women, when the evidence adduced does not seem to support such a claim.

Much of chapter 4, for example, is devoted to an analysis of the labor struggles of UP sanitation workers from the 1920s to the 1940s. With considerable archival detail Gupta recounts a series of collective actions through which sweepers and conservancy workers fought colonial municipalities over working conditions and hereditary rights to nightsoil. She then writes: "During a strike the sweeper was king, ruling the city and robustly marking his presence and importance in urban civic public life.... He was claiming his masculinity through stigmatized symbols, but turning them into statements of power for that short time" (p. 151). But this is problematic; first, because it obscures the fact of women's significant participation both in the labor of street sweeping and in sweepers' strikes—the refusal of women sweepers to submit to arbitration in sanitation laborers' strikes sufficiently impressed M. K. Gandhi that he remarked on it in his mouthpiece *Harijan* in 1946. Second, the claim that strikes represented an assertion of Dalit sweepers' masculinity is made in the absence of any evidence other than a caricature by a British cartoonist, in the *Civil and Military Gazette*, of a mustachioed sweeper wearing a crown. That is, the imputation of an androcentric Dalit discourse to sweepers' strikes is given no evidentiary ground in Dalit writing or even the Hindi print sphere. The problem is not one of lack of sources that might shed light on Dalit perspectives; one could imagine mounting an effective argument about gendered discourses of assertion based on a close reading of lists of sweepers' demands, speeches made and posters distrib-

uted at workers' rallies, and other such sources. And indeed, in some of the other domains in which Gupta presents the "claiming masculinity" argument—efforts to increase Dalit recruitment in the colonial army and struggles over "respectable" women's clothing, for instance—the evidence makes for a persuasive case. In other domains, like the "marriage" of Nona Chamarin to Ravidas in twentieth-century reworkings of myth—the "Dalit masculinist ethos" (p. 163) is not so much demonstrated as assumed, when one suspects something more complex might be at work. To point this out is by no means to imply the absence or irrelevance of androcentrism in these spheres of early twentieth-century Dalit assertion; rather, precisely because the interrelations of caste and gender ideologies have been so consequential in the transformation of north Indian society, it is to call for treating them with the same care for evidentiary anchoring that the Surpanakha-to-Shabari argument—and indeed most of the book—exemplifies.

These concerns by no means detract from the indispensability of *The Gender of Caste* for students and scholars of caste, gender, religion, and modern India. The book's archival richness, its success in drawing together spheres of Dalit experience ignored or kept separate in historical narratives, and its generative suggestions about the intimacy of caste make it a landmark study. And in its demonstration of the centrality of representations of Dalit women—as indentured worker, as potential convert to Islam, as vamp and victim, Surpanakha and Shabari—to the middle-class Hindi print publics that so decisively shaped nationalism and Hindu majoritarianism in north India, *The Gender of Caste* opens an important front for the emerging historiography.

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