

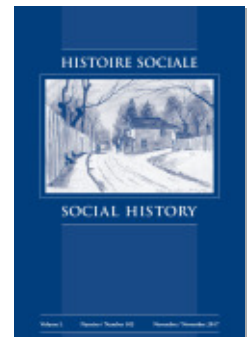


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Dalit Studies ed. by Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana
(review)

Shailaja Paik

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montrent que l'histoire de la guerre et l'histoire militaire se portent bien, à tel point qu'il est sans doute inutile de préciser, comme le fait l'avant-propos, que ces deux champs ont longtemps été oubliés ou négligés du fait de la domination des « Annales ». Après tout, la thèse d'État de Philippe Contamine, *Guerre, État et société*, publiée en 1972, citée par pratiquement tous les articles, est explicitement placée par son auteur dans le sillage de ce courant historiographique !

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RAWAT, Ramnarayan and K. SATYANARAYANA, eds. – *Dalit Studies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 304.

Over the past two decades, especially since the emergence in the 1990s of nationally visible political parties led by marginalized castes, scholars of South Asia have focused on the hitherto-unexamined histories of Dalit (“Untouchable”) communities in India. The editors of *Dalit Studies*, Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, dwell on “Dalits as subjects of study and on Dalit studies as a location of marginality” (p. ix) and critical intervention in the larger field of Indian history. In their introduction, they highlight the significant contributions of their volume: first, the entry of “non-elite Dalit scholars” into the academy; second, the struggle for dignity and the shaping of new Dalit political consciousness; third, the Dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), especially its electoral success in northern India; fourth, the emergence of Dalit feminist organizations; and fifth, the recent explosion in India and more broadly South Asia of print media, social media, and global communications and Dalits’ declaration of their “legitimate human rights” (p. 7).

Dalit Studies thus departs from colonialist historiography, Gandhi’s Harijan ideology, nationalist frames, and Nehruvian models that excluded Dalits and their perspectives, in order to focus on “the recognition of Dalits as actors in India’s history” (p. 8). In so doing, it offers a new historiographical agenda for the study of India (p. 16). This timely collection questions dominant interpretations of Indian history and brings together various archival materials, such as district and tehsil records, missionary writings, novels, poems, and pamphlets, as well as anthropological, historical, literary, and sociological investigations that illuminate Dalits’ agency and engage critically with caste inequalities in Indian society.

In his opening essay, distinguished political scientist Gopal Guru lays out the book’s conceptual framework. He argues that the leader Dr B.R. Ambedkar proposed thinking in terms of two Indias: “Puruskrut Bharat (ideal, pure India) and Bahiskrut Bharat (actual, polluting India)” (p. 34). He argues that scholarship and mainstream historiography that ignores the “spatial and ideological contradiction” between the two Indias implicitly accepts the “nationalist rhetoric of equality and unity.” He further criticizes the BSP’s 2004 shift to the *sarvajan*

(inclusive)-alliance model of politics that actually conceals caste domination and discrimination. Even though Guru highlights the continual degradation of Dalits—economic, political, and spatial—he does not actually engage with the characteristics of Ambedkar’s two Bharats, failing even to provide detailed references to Ambedkar’s formulations (p. 34 and see notes 8 and 23 on pp. 48-49).

Moreover, Guru creates a total dichotomy between the two Indias and implies that Dalits and non-Dalits had never transcended these boundaries and mutually shaped the disparate spheres. Further, he does not adequately examine the epistemological validity of his prescriptive view that Dalits should develop, along with “moral stamina” (p. 48), “moral responsibility” (p. 48) and “critical consciousness” to challenge hegemony, and should “use anger as a moral resource to sustain the critical consciousness” (p. 46). Unfortunately to him, “in addition one *must* have a [Dalit] background characterized by deprivation or underprivilege” (my emphasis) to expose the contradictions (p. 48) in Indian social life.

Such a limited viewpoint, which stresses exclusivity, may further confine Dalits and “others” to their own communities and discourage a clear communication between them—surely crucial for social change, which will also require work by all castes. Certainly, despite mainstream lip service to Dalits, huge problems remain (and scholars have dealt with them as we see in the works of Sharmila Rege, *Writing Gender, Writing Caste* [New Delhi: Zubaan 2006]; Shailaja Paik, “Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African-American Women’s Solidarity,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* [Vol. 42, No. 3-4, 2014]: 74-96). Moreover, Guru also fails to note that scholars, especially feminists—Dalit and non-Dalit—have already questioned the universalizing of upper-caste power, the exclusionary and contradictory nature of Indian nationalism, and the ways nationalists and some high-caste feminists have ignored the caste and Dalit question (Mytheli Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial South India* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); Shefali Chandra, *The Sexual Life of English: Languages of Caste and Desire in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016). Despite some limitations in their work, feminists have engaged in a productive exercise to construct horizontal solidarities between scholars and activists. Still, we have a long way to go.

Most essays in the volume focus on diverse aspects of Dalit agency and activism in the twentieth century. Part one, “Probing the Historical,” deals with the colonial period. Rawat highlights the role of “local archives” (p. 54) for Dalit history and challenges the colonial reinforcement of the textual representation of Chamars as leatherworkers. In a similar vein, for the southern state of Travancore, Sanal Mohan’s well-documented and fascinating analysis centres on Dalits’ engagement with modern social space and civil society in late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Kerala. He examines the “double-conversion” (p. 81) of Dalits to Christianity and modernity, the failure of nationalists, Communists, and reformers, and the success of modern Dalit movements. Working further on

Dalit agency, Chinnaiah Jangam uncovers the undocumented history of Telugu untouchable organizations, especially Bhagya Reddy Varma's critical role (1910-50) in creating Dalit public space in the Nizam's Hyderabad through schools, newspapers, books, and conferences. Similarly, Raj Kumar Hans uses vernacular sources to document the tensions in Sikh religion and history, for example in the Singh Sabha movement in Punjab from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. He focuses on Dalits' contributions to Sikh tradition, in terms of their heroes and achievements, as well as Sikh reformers' efforts to eradicate untouchability in their own faith.

In part two, "Probing the Present," Satyanarayana and Laura Brueck concentrate on thriving Hindi and Telugu literary spheres of recent decades to discuss Dalit writers' challenge to the dominant discourse of renowned, such as Munshi Premchand, through debates, literary controversies, novels, and poetry. Satyanarayana concentrates on the construction of Dalits' subjectivity and Dalits' claiming of rights as they negotiated with upper-caste reformers and Communists and carved out their own literary modes of poetry, dignity, and pride.

Brueck, Sam Gundimeda, and Shyam Babu's essays, also in part two, examine inequalities within Dalit communities. Brueck looks at the challenge by Hindi Dalit women activists to male-dominated Dalit organizations and the latter's blindness towards gender inequality. She also considers how Dalit women feminists have critiqued mainstream feminists' assertion of a "Dalit feminist standpoint," which actually reinforced "gendered violence as primarily constitutive of the experience of Dalit womanhood" (p. 192). Such an assumption, she observes, can reduce Dalit women to a hypersymbolic state of victimhood that helps to uphold the collective identity of a masculine community. Historically, women have been actively challenging such oppressive gender discrimination and (hyper)sexualization of women by men.

Gundimeda's essay concentrates on the conflicts between two Dalit communities—the Malas and Madigas of Andhra Pradesh—to unravel the paradoxes in the system of reservations and differences within Scheduled Castes communities. Surinder Jodhka focuses on the historical role of religion, conversion, and transition of Adi-Dharmis into the Ravi Dasi community in Punjab. He also explores the role of the Punjabi Dalit diaspora in England. Lastly, Babu focuses on caste and class among Dalits and the challenges Dalits face in their "journey" (p. 234) from caste to class.

Except for Brueck, the editors and authors of *Dalit Studies* concentrate exclusively on the male Dalit community, revealing the need for further research on women, gender, and sexuality history within Dalit studies. Further, the authors argue that they are deploying a "Dalit perspective" (pp. 19, 47, 59, 74, 181, 182), but only Gundimeda points out the contradictions inherent in the political category of "Dalit" (p. 203)—a priceless contribution in a volume called *Dalit Studies*. The editors suggest that they see "Dalit" not as an inclusive category of the kind the Dalit Panthers proposed in 1970s' 'Mumbai'—local Marathi- and Gujarati-speakers' name for the city even then—, but as one based on social "location." Certainly, the marginal location of Dalits allows a major and critical intervention.

But what are the potentials and pitfalls of constructing such an exclusive and essentialized “Dalit” identity? Is being a born a “Dalit” sufficient to fulfil this perspective? Do we need to be mindful of other marginal locations? To what extent can any *one* Dalit be an “authentic Dalit subject” (p. 169), and to what extent can a non-Dalit “reinvent himself [and herself] as a Dalit poet?”

In his essay in this volume, Sayanarayana argues that the poet Sikhamani posits “authentic” Dalit subjectivity based on “birth, life and experience” (p. 169). Yet it would be productive to outline the specific contours and terms of the Dalit “location of marginality” whence “Dalit studies” emerges. Where do dominant Dalits fit in this scheme? Or don’t they? Moreover, and unfortunately, this pioneering volume is selective in its approach to scholarship. For example, it does not provide even citations to recent major contributions to Dalit studies, especially by women historians, anthropologists, and sociologists (Rege, Vandana Sonalkar and Maya Pandit [translators of Marathi Dalit autobiographies], Rupa Viswanath, Shailaja Paik, Lucinda Ramberg, and Charu Gupta). Certainly, we will have much to lose in championing such a limited perspective on Dalit studies.

I emphasize, as I have done elsewhere, that Dalit studies as an intellectual inquiry is in fact a *conjuncture*: a potentially productive site of diverse perspectives that can initiate dialogue between disciplines and scholarships and bring together disparate analytical categories and conceptual tools to illuminate cultural, economic, environmental, political, religious, and social issues, as well as the lives of the marginalized in various parts of the world (Paik, *Dalit Women’s Education*, 2014, p. 9). I have argued that such an inclusive and expansive vision will enable a “margin-to-margin” framework (Paik, “Building Bridges: Dalit and African-American Women,” 2014, p. 1) and bridges to similar marginalized communities in a range of geographical, historical, and political locations, new solidarities, and, most of all, an inclusive and productive politics. Moreover, the creation of bonds through a shared political vision could dissolve the distance between seemingly disparate groups.

This anthology, the work mostly of Dalit and other like-minded scholars, will doubtless inspire students and scholars of caste, history, Dalits, literary studies, and the politics of India as well as comparative historians of marginality and difference.

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ROTMAN, Youval – *Insanity and Sanctity in Byzantium. The ambiguity of religious experience*, Harvard University Press, 2016, 256 p.

Le titre de ce livre original peut induire le lecteur en erreur : chronologiquement, l’étude remonte jusqu’au III^e siècle au moins et ne dépasse que marginalement l’Antiquité tardive ; hormis quelques mentions rapides d’André Salos et d’autres