



The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print, by Charu Gupta

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BOOK REVIEW

The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print, by Charu Gupta, Seattle, WA, University of Washington Press/Permanent Black, 2016, 352 pp., 33 illustrations, US\$45.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780295995649

Over the past two decades, since the political turmoil of the 1990s, scholars have focused on the marginalised histories of Dalit communities; only very recently, however, have they produced books devoted to understanding gender inequalities *within* Dalit communities. Charu Gupta's *The Gender of Caste* is an excellent example of this new enquiry. Gupta analyses the various representations of Dalit women's lives in colonial Uttar Pradesh by colonisers, nationalists, reformers, and some Dalits themselves, and makes a significant contribution to studies of caste and gender.

Gupta's first aim is to focus on Dalit women to examine practices of distinctiveness and hierarchy within the larger Hindu community. The second aim is to 'unveil the hidden archives of Dalit resistance' (p. 3). Weaving textual-literary expressions with visual images, the first three chapters concentrate on representations of Dalit women as vamps, victims and *viranganas* (militant figures in the 1857 revolt). Significantly, Gupta argues that the *viranganas*, unlike the victimised *dais* (midwives), allow Dalits to be embraced by the nation and to represent resistance and dissent. They create a 'history of pride' (p. 110) while also subverting the dominant nationalist narrative. The fourth chapter examines the ways in which men as gendered subjects seek to claim respectability and manhood and assert 'Dalit masculinity' (p. 164). Using the 'lens of sartorial desires, romances, and language of aspirations' (p. 4), Chapter 5 turns to Dalit women's conversions to Christianity and Islam, Chapter 6 focuses on alternative Dalit mythologies and reinterpretations of goddesses worshipped by Dalits, and the seventh on indentured, transnational, subaltern women.

Methodologically, Gupta integrates various perspectives and fields of history, literature, visual culture, folk culture and religion to focus on the regulation of Dalit bodies, the sociality of caste, and representations of Dalit women. This approach radically shifts the focus on the historiography of reform and Dalit politics from overwhelmingly male to female. Most significantly, she questions the presumptive male-ness of most Dalit Studies, and the upper-caste orientation of feminist writings on the colonial period. She foregrounds 'representation in print' as a critical tool for recording history, and creatively explores a range of sources from the English and mainly Hindi archive of print literature: 'popular and didactic writings in Hindi newspapers and journals, cartoons, missionary publications, police reports, women's periodicals, magazines, and so on' (p. 3). She brings together a variety of hitherto unexamined materials from the Hindi public sphere and scrutinises the representation–reception histories that contributed to and were themselves shaped by debates around caste and gender. Moreover, she works through the everyday rhythms of life and employs what appear to be 'trivia' to illuminate the reproduction of hegemonic caste structures as well as the production of spaces that offered possibilities for dissent.

Similarly to scholars of Dalit Studies such as Eleanor Zelliot, Anupama Rao, Shailaja Paik, Rupa Viswanath and Ramnarayan Rawat, Gupta identifies the advent of colonial rule, the initiation of democratising processes and the inter-war period as decisive moments that opened a rights discourse, enabled political utopias, and especially at a time 'when sexual, gender, and caste differences evolved into their modern shapes, with emergent notions of reform,

nationalism, and Dalit activism' (p. 17). Yet, as Dalit men migrated to the cities and asserted and improved their social and political status, they also disturbed the domestic balance of power and patriarchy. The author argues that the entanglements of 'Dalits with modernity was layered: they often used its rubric for more rights, greater dignity, diverse means of livelihood, less unethical portrayal of the body, and the reconstitution of patriarchies' (p. 27). Throughout the book, Gupta maintains her critical gaze on non-Dalit, upper-caste, mainstream literature that reinscribed Dalit women as objects of representation and reform; in some sections, she foregrounds Dalit women's and men's limited agency by discussing 'dialogical counter-representations and dissonant voices and actions' (p. 269) through, for example, the work of the *dai*.

Gupta's book is significant in its focus on diverse areas of enquiry, the contests between upper- and lower-caste rhetoric, the power of caste as linked to gender, sexuality, community, religion and nation, and the agency of Dalits in their workplaces and in the domestic realm, and their customs and intimate desires. The broad terrain of the work, with its intensive use of vernacular sources, makes this an important historical study.

Nonetheless, the breadth of the book is both its strength and weakness. While the sweeping documentation of pamphlets, magazines and periodicals make for an interesting read and show Dalit women in various lights, Gupta does less in the way of delineating historical contexts and changes across the different representations of Dalit women. It would have been beneficial to contextualise some primary sources in order to appreciate how they shaped popular ideas. For example, how widespread or challenging were women's gendered roles compared to caste and class? Did the ideas, rhetoric and prescriptive approach of upper-caste reformers succeed or fail in real terms and to what extent?

A few elements would have enriched the project: first, the book would have benefitted from an overarching historical question that intricately connected the disparate themes; second, the conjunction among caste and class, the gender and sexual oppression of Dalits, and the friction between different representations of Dalits call for further exploration; finally, readers would gain from an effort to situate the rhetoric and actions unfolding in Uttar Pradesh within a broader context of similar patterns elsewhere in India. For example, Gupta highlights the Arya Samaj's efforts (p. 63) and argues that upper-caste 'reformist-nationalists' sought to reclaim and incorporate the 'untouchables within a putative Hindu community and nation' (p. 52) through a politics of 'pity, coercion, care, and control' (p. 58) as well as through the paradigm of 'cleanliness'. However, she neglects similar pre-Gandhian and Gandhian discourse that focused on 'hygiene, health [and] refined religious practices', for example in western India.¹ Another example is the way she analyses the Hindu Mahasabha's 1935 Resolution in favour of 'complete liberty of inter-marriage' (p. 81) between different castes. First, she does not provide the historical context; in fact the Hindu Mahasabha and *savarna* nationalists were reacting to the communal award of 1932 which promised separate political representation for Dalits, and was therefore deeply threatening to the elite nationalist project. Second, she treats their reaction in isolation; it was at the same time that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar vehemently argued for inter-caste marriages,² which Gandhi opposed, although Gandhi changed his position later. Gupta does not tell us how and why Dalits actually arrived at certain decisions of sexual disciplining and caste endogamy at particular historical junctures.

Gupta significantly refracts different aspects of power relations in caste and gender—two areas that historians treat separately. However, as with some other scholars, there is a problem

1. See David Hardiman, *Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi/New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. For details, see Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), Chap. 4.

of reading women's history as gender history. Moreover, just as gender is replaced by women, albeit with a token inclusion of Dalit men, Gupta makes the Dalits stand in for the 'caste question'. But even notable scholars forget that caste is everywhere in the hierarchy and cannot be simply applied to Dalits, just as the study of race cannot only concern 'Blackness', but must also analyse 'Whiteness'. This has been a persistent problem among scholars and activists alike. Most significantly, due to such treatment, it is marginalised Dalits and women who have been continually burdened with the labels 'caste' and 'gender' throughout history because they are supposedly 'different', whereas dominant castes and men continue to enjoy the privileges of being the unmarked norm. A deeper engagement with the pioneering contributions of Sharmila Rege (who draws upon Black feminist scholarship) on the intersectionality of caste and gender would have helped tease out this problem of double jeopardy.³

Most significantly, in Chapter 4 on Dalit manhood, Gupta analyses how Dalit men constructed themselves as legitimate political subjects, in part by colluding with dominant notions of masculinity, which in turn strengthened patriarchal practices in the domestic sphere. She concludes that although 'Dalit masculinity was not a stable category and responsive to its cultural, historical, social, and political embeddedness...one can only hope that Dalit men will evolve and ultimately dismantle the very ideological fetters that fasten them to a corrosive paradigm of masculinity' (p. 165; emphasis added).

Unlike Gandhi, Periyar and Ambedkar, upper-caste but like women feminists of the early and mid twentieth century, Gupta returns the burden of evolution to Dalit (women and) men alone, in regrettably patronising language. Despite recognising that Dalits were historically embedded in hegemonic social worlds shaped by upper-caste norms, she deems the upper castes free of responsibility for their own construction and consolidation of oppressive social structures. Instead, it is Dalit men *alone* who are yet to 'evolve'. She does not develop this point further, leaving us wondering about its seemingly narrow vision as well as the terms of this imagined evolution. Gupta thus implicitly sees Dalits as 'the problem', reproducing the unmarked upper-caste Hindu man as the 'standard' and falling back into the traps she sought to critique in the first place.

Nevertheless, the book will be important to scholars of caste, Dalits, women and gender, and of public popular culture. I underscore that rather than continue to relegate Dalit women merely to the study of the history of 'caste', we need to also work to fully integrate them into the history of India and the history of the women's movement more broadly.

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3. Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006). See also Shailaja Paik, 'Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African-American Women's Solidarity', in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42, nos. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2014), pp. 74–96; and Shailaja Paik, 'Amchya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Bioscope of Our Lives): Who is my Ally?', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIV, no. 40 (3 October 2009), pp. 39–47.