

Book Reviews

Ghanshyam Shah (ed.). *Dalit Identity and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001. 363 pages. Indian Rs 295.00.

Edited by Ghanshyam Shah, Professor of Social Sciences at the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, *Dalit Identity and Politics* is the second volume in a series about the culture and politics of Dalits. It comprises fourteen research articles that cover Dalit culture, history, politics, and economics, and makes for fascinating reading.

The introduction, which is written by the editor, identifies the major challenge faced by the present generation of Dalit intellectuals as resolving "...contradictions that have emerged with growing stratification within the community thanks to the limitations of welfare of 'protective' measures in the capitalist economy" (p. 25). Other major challenges include addressing the dependence of Dalits on state intervention in an age of public sector shrinkage, and the persistent inability of Indian parliamentary democracy to bring about fundamental social change.

In 'Caste System and Economic Inequality: Economic Theory and Evidence', S. K. Thorat and R. S. Despande evaluate the three major theoretical approaches of neo-classicism, Marxism, and Dr Ambedkar in the light of empirical data. The neo-classical approach highlights the immobility of the factors of production in a caste-based economy. Since different castes perform specialised functions, there is a lack of competition with the attendant negative fallout on innovation and efficiency. Marxist analysis attributes the caste system to the feudal and semi-feudal economic base. Dr Ambedkar's approach, which Thorat and Despande regard as the most authentic and relevant, integrates aspects of neo-classicism and Marxism while adding the impact of Hindu philosophy, customs, and culture.

The effect of Hindu thought is eloquently illustrated by N. Sudhakar Rao's article 'The Structure of South Indian Untouchable Castes: A View'. In this case study of a village in South India, Rao finds several phenomena of interest. First, each of the three castes of untouchables claims superiority over the others. Second, the basis of such claims of superior status is the association with, and subordination to, a higher caste. Last, untouchables seek to emulate the caste power pyramid in their relations with one another.

'Dalitism vs. Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History' by Kencha Ilaiah is arguably the hardest hitting article. It asserts that "The Dalitist school represents an ideology of socio-political change and the Brahmanical school represents a kind of modernised Hindu fundamentalist social base" (p. 108). This dichotomy is the product of the Aryan invasions, which brought with it Brahmanism,

and subjugated the indigenous inhabitants of the Subcontinent. Aryan epistemology was, and is, built around belief in supernatural forces and abstract ideals. Dalit epistemology, in contrast, is firmly grounded in the productive and experimental processes.

Buddhism, an essentially non-violent philosophy of life, contravened Brahmanical ideals about purity, karma, and nature, and was successfully destroyed by militant Hindus. Islam, however, was not hamstrung by pacifism and provided some relief to the Dalits who converted. Largely, however, “From Rig Veda to modern Hindutva, one can only see the degenerated idealist discourses...to sustain the parasitic life of Brahmanical forces” (p. 111).

One man who more than anyone else contributed to the Dalit struggle against Brahmanism was Dr Ambedkar. Eleanor Zelliot in ‘The Meaning of Ambedkar’ reveals that the Dalits of today perceive him as proof that the oppressed can attain education, refinement, and respect. The reservation system, for all its imperfections, is Ambedkar’s gift to his community without which a class of Dalit politicians and bureaucrats could not have emerged. Zelliot Observes that statues of Ambedkar always show him in Western dress, quite unlike India’s other nationalist heroes, who invariably appear in traditional clothes. Gail Omvedt’s ‘Ambedkar and After: the Dalit Movement in India’ and Gopal Guru’s ‘The Interface between Ambedkar and the Dalit Cultural Movement in Maharashtra’, delve deeper into the substance of Ambedkar’s thought.

On economic issues, Ambedkar accepted the centrality of the state for equitable and speedy economic development and the basic validity of Marx’s theory of class struggle, which can be adapted to India’s historically caste-ridden polity. Economics, however, represents only one set of factors that determine the course of History. Religion and culture are just as important. In the politics, the goal was not the classless society advocated by Marx but a social democracy that ensured legal equality, economic opportunity, and fostered a sense of brotherhood. Hinduism, however, was the great counter-revolution of Ancient India and must be rejected by the oppressed. Ambedkar called upon his followers to convert to Buddhism as it is egalitarian, indigenous, and rejects the metaphysical absurdities of Hinduism.

Resistance to upper caste domination has profoundly influenced Dalit literature. S. P. Punalekar observes in ‘Dalit Literature and Dalit Identity’ that the use of marginal characters from the Hindu epics, such as Shambuk, who is killed in the *Ramayana* for the crime of hearing the Vedas, helps illustrate the injustices suffered over centuries. Contemporary Dalit writers condemn the Holy Law of Manu for its “...diabolical contents...” (p. 217) maintaining “...Manu who was a Brahmanical law-giver is an arch enemy of social equality and freedom” (p. 217). Another manifestation of defiance in the face of pervasive and unrelenting caste discrimination is conversion to Christianity. ‘Visions,

Illusions, and Dilemmas of Dalit Christians in India', by Lancy Lobo, explores this facet of Dalit resistance.

A major problem confronted by Dalit Christians is that reservations and quotas are only for Scheduled Castes (SCs) that do not convert out of Hinduism. This *de facto* legal deterrent aside, the Christian community in India is also riven by caste conflict. For example, eighty percent of the Catholics in the Pondicherry archdiocese are Dalits whereas only ten percent of the priests, none of them in an important position, are Dalits. In India, as a whole, Dalits account for seventy percent of the Christian community. This has led Hindu organisations to accuse missionaries of buying converts through offers of aid. Punalekar advises the government to base reservations and quotas on economic, rather than religious or caste, criteria.

'Anatomy of a Dalit Power Player: A Study of Kanshi Ram' by Abhay Kumar Dubey is a biographical note on the most successful contemporary Dalit politician. A vital demographic characteristic of the Dalit community is that they constitute sixteen percent of India's population but they are dispersed in such a manner that in no district does their share of population exceed thirty percent. During the first forty-five years of Indian independence, the Congress Party was dominant and Dalit leaders jumped on its bandwagon, extracting for themselves some patronage. In the present era of electoral multi-polarity, the Dalits, if properly organised, can control the decisive number of votes.

Kanshi Ram, a Dalit from army service and of small landholder background, has strived to do just that. His Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has done well in the polls, especially in terms of the percentage of votes taken. Kanshi Ram has prime ministerial ambitions and believes that if the BSP can get just fifty to sixty seats in parliament, the throne can be his. Playing the game of power politics, however, has forced him to make compromises that are unpopular amongst his party workers. Kanshi Ram claims to have inherited Ambedkar's mantle but lacks the necessary intellect and theoretical grounding. In Dubey's assessment, Kanshi Ram's "...political strategies based on manipulation with short-term goals and without ideological consideration, cannot bring about social transformation in favour of the Dalits" (p. 309).

In a holistic view of the state of Dalits in India, this book depicts political Hinduism as an utterly regressive and militant force based on self-serving sophistry, which is aimed at freezing the social, economic, and political *status quo*. The clarity and forcefulness of some of the arguments, which readily employ quotes from Hindu scriptures and Dr Ambedkar's writings, serve as a powerful corrective to the popular image of Hinduism as an innately peaceful philosophy at ease with liberal humanitarian principles. In terms of information, the fourteen research articles are nearly overwhelming for the lay reader. For students of modern Indian politics, however, this wealth of data is an invaluable asset.

Dalit Identity and Politics comes at a time when vocal, though not particularly influential, elements are urging the 'International Community' to impose sanctions on India for allowing a system of apartheid to persist. The size of the Indian market ensures that India will be spared the ordeal of being punished like South Africa or Zimbabwe for flouting Western sensibilities. The persistent inability of Indian political institutions to bring about the requisite social transformation does raise serious questions about the ability of democracy in a developing country to deliver lasting and effective change. What is important here is that the Dalits themselves are trying to organise and secure their rights through electoral politics. Their success or failure may well determine the fate of Indian democracy.

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