

Book Reviews

Suryakant Waghmore. 2013. *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications. xxxvii + 235 pp. References, index. ₹750 (hardback).

For some time now, dalit politics has occupied centre stage in critical studies of caste, partly due to the spectacular rise of one political party (the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)), but also partly due to a tacit view that dalits are the quintessential subjects (sociologically, economically and morally) capable of making an Indian history that would be truly emancipatory. Scholarly debates here revolve around how the category dalit or Bahujan would enable mobilisation and collective action against caste and whether (and if so, how) dalit politics would take up the question of opposition to caste and casteism systematically. Not surprisingly, the notion of 'civil society' and its potential to radically shape the character of Indian democracy became central to this debate.

This book attempts to show how dalits make their own histories and in that process, remake basic ideas of democratic life (namely, politics and civility) within conditions that are not of their own making and which are in fact hostile in every conceivable manner to their project. Drawing upon ethnographic work and engagement with scholarly arguments about politics, caste and civil society in India, sociologist Suryakant Waghmore puts forth four arguments with quiet certitude: that dalit politics—especially via 'new associations' such as grassroots dalit movement non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and dalit political parties—(i) *civilises* Indian society and civil society, (ii) *politicises* caste, (iii) enables *reform* of the Indian state, and (iv) *makes relevant* the positive uses of caste in India.

He makes his arguments by telling us the story of two organisations: a political party (BSP) and a grassroots NGO (Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan (MHK)). Both work for issues central to the lives of dalits in the Marathwada region (Beed district) of Maharashtra. The opening and concluding chapters frame the analytical intervention of the book—a

Contributions to Indian Sociology 49, 3 (2015): 410–441

SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0069966715592772

reworking of the idea of 'civil society' in India and an argument for dalit politics to be viewed as performing the task of, what sociologist J. Alexander has termed, 'civil repair' (p. xxxvii). Working with a notion of civil society as a space that allows for 'expanding spaces of political freedoms' (pp. 4ff), Waghmore charts out a path different from both postcolonialist and liberal views of civil society that are deeply pessimistic about civil society in India. In contrast, his objective is to illustrate how dalit politics is engaged in performing 'a revolution in the realm of civility and civil relations' (p. 200). Such a claim raises questions about the content of this 'civility' and the reasons for the appearance of this civility. This is the core of the rest of the book's substantive chapters.

Chapter 2 sets up the historical context for the emergence of the two focal organisations of this book in the wake of the Dalit Panther movement. Here we get an analytical outline of the contrasting political identities, structure and charismatic leaderships of the BSP and MHA including the Mahar and Mang dynamics of politicisation and recruitment. The next two chapters construct two elements of the context within which dalit politics arguably needs to be viewed by scholars—the continued violence and social exclusion of dalits in material and symbolic (ritualised) ways and the 'internationalist human rights' regime which dalit organisations access for grassroots struggles. Here the author points to the increasing retributive violence faced by dalits (from Marathas) when they assert their dignity on the one hand, but also how dalits play non-retributive politics and thus constrain 'caste incivilities' in civil society. He also poignantly makes his scholarly point about how dalit NGOs such as the MHA in its struggle for redistribution of land, far from depoliticising dalit politics, actually vernacularises the human rights discourse to bring the (previously marginalised) issue of *gairaan* land to the centre of local politics in Marathwada.

Chapters 5 through 8 are subtle attempts at navigating the charge made by scholars (e.g. Omvedt) that dalit politics is really *jāti* politics, not anti-caste politics. The author makes an interesting argument here about how the BSP's politics plays a role in aiding the substantialising of caste identities (and in this sense, not anywhere close to aiding an annihilation of castes) but that it does this ultimately to keep an anti-caste ideology and affective sense of politics alive. The latter is achieved according to the author by the fact that the collective sense of Bahujan is really a tapestry woven by the BSP in which each caste is a 'minority' with a consciousness

of being aggrieved by the caste system. In many ways, this chapter is one of the best attempts to soberly analyse the phenomenon of the BSP from the perspective of what it means to a dalit politics, neither valourising it nor demonising it. In an analogous fashion, the discussion of MHA and the shaping of Mang political identity presents a complex picture of how caste substantialises yet retains an anti-caste politics. Mangs attempt to create a *swabhimani* identity based on their jāti, yet manage to turn their historical and sociopolitical antagonism to Mahars into an overall anti-caste critique of Hindu and dominant caste identity. Finally, one learns how electoral politics puts pressures on dalit organisations to compromise their anti-caste ideologies in order to survive in the caste-as-arithmetic system of political parties. The concluding chapter is a brief summary of the main points about the need to view dalit politics as affirming civil society even if they appear from time to time to have not lived up to their stated principles.

The book could have been titled: Who Needs Civil Society? Or, What Dalit Politics Has Done for Indian Society? Interestingly, the last chapter is sub-titled ‘Why Dalits Need a Civil Society?’ It is a brave attempt to rescue dalit politics from being condemned to the dustheap of history, as having the potential but having failed for whatever reasons. The arguments in this book are significant for sociological and political understanding of civil society in India since they run counter to several scholarly arguments that (i) are dismissive of dalit politics as being unable to carry out its historical tasks having reached an *impasse*; (ii) view NGOs in a totalising manner as an inherently *depoliticising* force acting to aid management of society rather than its transformation; (iii) critique civil society in India as either deficient from the normative idea of a space for *voluntarist* associational life or as a *bourgeois* space that does not quite capture the needs of ‘community’ in India; and (iv) reject the possibility of the *relevance* of caste to genuine progressive politics.

While the author does succeed in locating dalit politics within the parameters of violence against dalits, social exclusion and electoral cooptation and hence opens up some space for calibrating scholarly assessment and expectations, it still leaves some basic questions for further research: what does it mean for dalit politics to survive as a force in electoral politics and yet have its anti-caste ideology marginalised? While it is clear that dalit politics has not reached any *impasse* in the sense of

lack of ideas and room to manoeuvre in politics, there is still the need to subject notions of graded inequality at the margins to greater scrutiny while shaping an anti-caste political ideology. Such a project will obviously not gain a hold over dominant castes, but if it is deferred indefinitely by dalit groups, its implications would be devastating. Though this falls outside the purview of this book, it may remain a task to be engaged with by scholars and activists alike.

This book is very readable, intellectually sharp, yet relatively free of jargon. It could be useful as a text for upper-level students of politics and caste. Last but not the least, Waghmore in some reflexive parts of the book shows how fieldwork-based research could ethically locate itself within movements and organisations in ways that do not compromise on their scholarly or political integrity.

*Azim Premji University
Bengaluru (Karnataka), India*

BALMURLI NATRAJAN

Satish Deshpande, ed. 2014. *The Problem of Caste*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. xi + 422 pp. Tables, notes, references. ₹595 (paperback).

DOI: 10.1177/0069966715592775

The Problem of Caste is an excellent collection of select articles from the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* published between 1958 and 2013. It carries 40 essays carefully excerpted into chapters and selected from 467 articles published on caste in the EPW in the last six decades. This book is a great resource for students and scholars interested in researching caste as the collection gives the reader insights into the developments and debates in the study of caste.

The chapters are organised into six thematic sections. Section I on ‘Disciplinary Perspectives’ does well to discern the apathy of certain disciplines (except law, sociology, social anthropology and politics) to the issue of caste. This section has 10 essays which cover some of the key interpretations of caste; Srinivas’s essay in some ways furthers Dumont’s thesis through Sanskritisation while Dipankar Gupta’s intervention emphasises the multiple and discrete nature or hierarchies. Kumkum Roy’s essay on Kosambi’s interest in caste highlights how caste needs to be interpreted beyond religious texts to comprehend embedded class dimensions.

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