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Restoring Dalit Agency In The Politics Of Nationalism

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DALITS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

By Chinnaiah Jangam

Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 264, ₹750.00

If we are to see and analyse the agency of an untouchable in its struggles against British imperialism and against Brahmanism, a lot more needs to be done towards documenting the same and in exposing this 'twin enemy' of the people in general and of Dalits in particular. Over the years, there has been spate of some very serious scholarly work that documents Dalit struggles against Brahmanism and the political assertion of their movement as a whole. However, their vital role in anti-colonialism and in the making of modern nation needs a lot more attention than has been given otherwise. It is in this context and milieu that Chinnaiah Jangam's work *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* breaks new ground in restoring the Dalit agency engaging the dominant discourse of nationalism in the pre-colonial times. The book provides a comprehensive archival study of Dalit struggles in carving their own dignity and modern positioning vis-à-vis colonial and Brahmanical modernity since the early nineteenth century.

In this work, Jangam covers the Telugu speaking regions of the erstwhile Madras Presidency which has been witness to the presence of Dalits in the politics of nationalism and how they gradually develop a very distinct understanding of nation and nationalism that ran counter to both the colonial and Brahmanical project of nationalism. Although, the counter culture against Brahmanism could be traced from the much earlier age of Buddhism till the recent past of Bhakti movement, Jangam's work singularly succeeds in establishing the Dalit's role in shaping up modernity and also the modern times. This differentiation between modernity and modern times as they came about in India is very significant, as it is here that one can clearly see Dalits thronging to modern practices that came along with colonialism and it is in this very process of learning, they also defined and enrich the modern times. For example, education, ever since the time of the big bang, was confined to Brahmins alone and the obvious result was a totally ignorant and obscurantist Indian society to the benefit of the former. Undoubtedly then, it is to the Dalits' and other marginalized multitudes' credit, that they

got educated under the British established schools open to all castes, and then led the spread of education with scientific temperament in India.

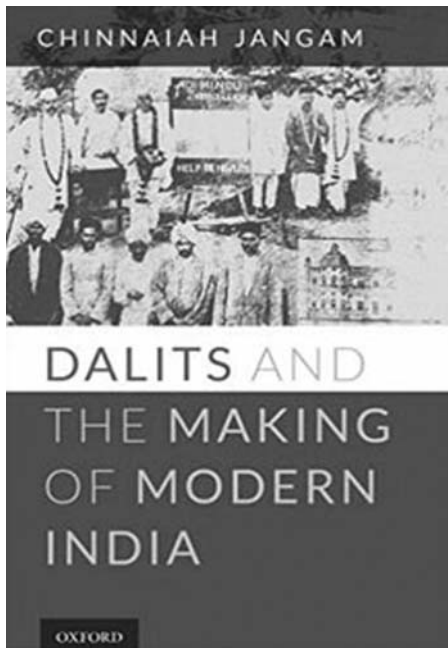
On this, Jangam painstakingly documents all the hurdles that the untouchables have to face while joining these schools along with the upper caste backlash that they have weathered to create their own niche and while at it, not only have they shaped modernity but underlined the contours of modern times. Through its rich archival study, Jangam documents and stresses the singular importance of education and Dalit enlightenment. Here, he underlines the importance of missionaries and the vital role that they have played all along, being the chief exponent of Dalit enlightenment in the course of providing education. This is a fact that also came up very strikingly in another recent work by Sujatha Gidla—a powerful account of untouchable lives. However, it must be said that the Dalits' struggle for the betterment of their lives was not always embedded in enlightenment values of western liberalism. This particular turn in their politics invoking the language of rights coincides more with Ambedkar's advent on the Indian political scene and obviously has roots in every counter tradition against Brahmanism along with the movement and awareness brought about by the thought and action of Jyotiba Phule and several other socio-religious reformers in the late nineteenth century. Jangam duly highlights the critical role played by the vernacular political actors in bringing forth the untouchables' culture as counter to the ongoing Brahmin dominance. Through the experience of several Dalit activists working in early twentieth century Telugu speaking Madras Presidency, Jangam underscores the ongoing ideological tension between Gandhians and the Ambedkarites on the question of untouchability. It is evident from the analysis that follows that it is through Ambedkar's intervention for safeguarding the political interests of untouchables that one can find the radical shift in their political assertion and their gradual metamorphosis into a political Dalit.

The story of Indian enlightenment, however, is incomplete without accounting for

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the continuous and consistent struggles against Brahmanism. In this context the postcolonial and the subaltern school exhibits an extremely parochial understanding of the European enlightenment and its subsequent impact on the Third World. Furthermore, their discourse lacks the very vocabulary of politics which could help in explaining the importance of the enlightenment for social movements of Dalits, that makes a claim on the necessity and the importance of modernity. The sociopolitical positioning of Dalits in the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial times cannot adequately be explained by the binary of postcolonial theory which obviously pins down all political actions with colonialism as the main referent. In this nuanced study, Jangam brings out the narrative of the modern day Dalit and the ex-untouchables who have always been on the margins of India's history, irrespective of their colonial history.

The idea that India as a whole has been exploited at the hands of British colonialism, does not account for the wretched lives of the untouchables who were and continued to be the victims of an 'internal colonialism' guided by the codes of *Manusmriti* at the hands of caste Hindus. This 'living past', as Ambedkar has coined denoting the impact of Manu's code on Indian society, continues to treat Dalits as degraded human beings and results in violent attacks on them even today. The not so discreet dominance of Brahmanism is so very pervasive in India that it has become a self-appointed gatekeeper of the 'East' and its cultural location and from where it obviously draws its socio-political dominance as well. Brahmanism, in fact, feel completely browbeaten by the western categories ala European enlightenment, as they failed miserably at every step by the intellectual common sense guided by reason and rationality. This failure is so complete today that even if they have to assert their cultural supremacy; they do it by invoking the language of sciences. For instance,



in India today the religious Right invokes the Vedas for claiming 'scientific discoveries' in the ancient past.

Another significant aspect of this work is the underlining and the analysis of the caste Hindus hypocrisy who while wanting to bring religious reforms kept their caste privileges intact and could not see the untouchables rising in their socioeconomic status. Jangam extricates such ongoing tussle among the caste Hindus and the subsequent debates between reformers and the caste Hindus through the then popular literary magazines, novels and newspapers. He explains that there was this element of moral guilt among the conservatives which along with the rising assertion of educated Dalits took the form of narratives in novels. Jangam calls it 'novelizing untouchability'—steps for including untouchables within the Brahmanical Hindu fold in order to forge a sense of community. Such initial churning was extremely central to understand the unfolding of the social and how it informs the making of a national identity and the larger ideology of nationalism. In his analysis, while Jangam maintains that 'Dalit nationalism' could be understood through 'dialogic imagination' wherein the idea they put forth is of an 'inclusive nationalist vision', the same cannot be seen as the conclusive case of Dalit nationalism.

The very phrase Dalit nationalism, seeing the entire trajectory of the untouchables' movement in India, for the lack of a milder word, stands diametrically opposed to the myopic confines of nationalism. The Dalit movement has come a long way in the ongoing evolution of the modern pedigree of politics today. Its ideological moorings goes back to their distant past with their own canon of

protest and change which of course got further boosted with the availability of the modern state in the context of the ever expanding enlightenment values. While it is true that the idea of India that coalesced post-Independence was broadly the idea of nationalism as the 'derivative of Europe', this derivative, however, has been cloned in the image of Brahmanism and still continues to absorb the other voices in its own imaginary of 'Mother India'. The only real challenge to such a strand of rabid upper caste nationalism came from Ambedkar and his philosophy of *Prabuddha Bharat* (enlightened India) brought on the street and into the national discourse through the working of the Dalit movement.

In summation, what Dalits have been struggling at the very basic level today is their political struggle to established modernity as opposed to deeply entrenched Brahmanism in India. This modernity is the kind of modernity that has been the foundation of the Constitution of India, promulgated immediately after its independence from British colonialism but somehow remains far from its own actualization. Hence, it can be stated that at a very fundamental level Dalits are fighting for their rights enshrined in the Constitution and also defending the same against the prevailing Brahmanical order. Jangam's book in this regard is a treasure-trove for the student of nationalism and India's troubled history. The book with its rich archival work is a shot in the arm for several scholars who maintain that India does not have a single narrative strand of nationalism or rather who continue to challenge the very notion of 'nationalism' which by its very inception has been a hegemonic conditionality of sociopolitical events in a given time and space.

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Book News

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Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit by Manoranjan Byapari, translated from the original Bengali by Sipra Mukherjee is the translation of the author's remarkable memoir *Itibritte Chandal Jivan*. It talks about his traumatic life as a child in the refugee camps of West Bengal and Dandakaranya, facing persistent want—an experience that would dominate his life. The book charts his futile flight from home to escape hunger, in search of work as a teenager around the country, only to face further exploitation.

Sage, 2018, pp. 356, ₹550.00

An Adda To Argue

Aratrika Das

WILL TO ARGUE: STUDIES IN LATE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL CONTROVERSIES

By Sumanyu Satpathy

Primus Books, 2017, pp. 232, ₹850.00

The Bengali word 'Adda' when translated as 'gossip' slips from a middle-class '*baithaak khaana*' and enters into a parlour, club or salon. In the '*baithaak khaana*', 'adda' comprises of passionate exchanges (the topics may include anything from political, cultural, linguistic to gastronomic), and is, first and foremost, a social speech-act that requires a performance of words-orally. 'Adda' relies on a communal appreciation of arguments as spoken words, often deploys sarcasm and laughter, and is solely dependent on the 'delivery' of an orator. This orator ought to be a '*parahita*' (concerned for the welfare of others), and hence his opinions ought to be heard and debated upon. Reading Sumanyu Satpathy's *Will to Argue: Studies in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Controversies* felt like entering into an mid-nineteenth century '*baithaak khaana*' wherein every chapter dwells upon a '*vaad-vivaad*' (controversy), and Satpathy, as a skilled orator, 'tells' the reader about the inconsistencies and unconnected stories at the heart of our national history.

One of the crucial insights this book hopes to develop is that argumentation is not always to seek adherence to a given thesis. The conflicted positions on a particular controversy are productive spaces of uncertainties. The five different controversies, developed in the course of five chapters, put forward constellations of various positions without rationalizing one single standpoint as the logical conclusion. Somewhere within the myriad juxtaposing viewpoints the book illustrates lies the truth. And the book does not seek to find that definite moment of truth. This is the strength of the book—the several controversies serve as a discursive framework that persuades the reader to look into the conditions upon which reasoning lies, rather than on the reasoning itself. This understanding of 'controversy' is best articulated in the introductory chapter of the book—Satpathy reads the Partition in a teleological sense such that the multiplicity of the political foci in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is reflected in the debates on Urdu/Hindi, which then translates into Muslim/Hindu and finally to Pakistan/India. Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Tagore within this discursive framework do not pro-