

Putting Studies on Dalit History to Work?

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Some years ago, in a review article published in the *Modern Asian Studies*, the historian, Chinnaiah Jangam, offered three passing observations about studies on Dalit history, not all of which have received sufficient attention. He argued that (i) Dalit scholarship, as it consolidates itself, must pay “special attention” to the fact that “Dalit identity is not a foolproof construct but one fraught with complexities and tensions”; (ii) nuancing the Dalit category and capturing the heterogeneity of their struggles and articulations requires a “more stringent analysis” of the “intersection of the categories of caste and gender”; and (iii) the historical narrative of Dalit articulations across India must include “the voices of Dalit leaders and organizers who were Gandhi’s followers” (Jangam 2016: 413–14). I want to return to the underlying thrust of these ideas as they set in place what is distinctive

Identity, Conflict, and Counter-narratives: Dalit Experiences in Culture, Politics, and Stigmatisation edited by Chinna Yagati Rao and Raj Sekhar Basu, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2025; pp xv + 342, ₹1,160.*

about the work that I am here reviewing for the readers of *EPW*, while also adding another dimension to our thinking about Dalit histories in the present.

Traversing the Ground

The context for the volume is, as its editors Yagati Chinna Rao and Raj Sekhar Basu, both historians, aver, a special panel on “Dalit History and Politics” under the auspices of the Indian History Congress (2016), where all the essays were originally presented. The editors are very clear that the “Dalitist or Dalit perspectives of Indian history can be distinguished from ‘subaltern history,’” even maintaining that the latter “had

very little to offer to socially oppressed, economically exploited, and politically marginalised landless agricultural labourers and Dalits” and that “the ‘subaltern’ as a category comprised the rural gentry and impoverished landlords, who were the direct oppressors and exploiters of the Dalit masses” (pp 21–22). A recognition of the complexities of the “Dalit life world” on its own terms—“from the perspective of Dalits themselves” (p 5)—is thus held to be a vital and necessary component for any socio-historical exploration of Dalit identity formation in India. Alongside this emphasis, the editors also sound a somewhat contradictory note about the “emphasis on the lived experiences of Dalits,” which (as they put it)

imparts an inflammable emotional tone to the issue of the oppression of Dalits rather than promoting a rational approach and upholding the idea that scholars of liberal and progressive persuasions can make significant changes to society’s perception of issues related to the social exclusion and discrimination faced by Dalits. (p 28)

On the face of it, these editorial exhortations may seem to be siding, rather uneasily though, with the observations anchoring Jangam as rendered above. It is the individual contributions as

featured in the volume, however, that lend more substance to my opening overture. In fact, the conceptual diction of the volume's main title—namely *Identity, Conflict, and Counter-narratives*—marks out the space and specificity of the individual essays and their argumentative ground more than the editorial introduction itself. In focus, across the range of the essays, is a “radical” empiricism about Dalit histories that Jangam (as I read him) was urging. I will get to the specifics of this construct and its implications for studies on Dalit history in due course; let me traverse quickly the ground mapped by the essays themselves. The book has 10 essays in all, each served up independently of the other, but cumulatively translating into a modality of putting studies of Dalit history to work.

Even as B Rama Chandra Reddy engages “Dalit martial traditions in the Telugu-speaking regions” across a long historical span (from the 12th to the 19th century), combining manuscript sources with local records, oral traditions, caste histories, and colonial reports (pp 40–80), P Sanal Mohan negotiates the prospects of “problematizing Dalit history” through the case of “slavery” as a form of “labour control regime” in colonial Kerala (pp 81–96). Both these contributions illustrate the twinning of histories that underlie the processes shaping Dalit identity in particular: that, primarily, the challenge is in forging histories of Dalit communities that are at once relational (connected with those of other social groupings) and singular (adverting to the specificity of the Dalit life-world). In fact, as a way of instrumentalising this dual thrust, Mohan insists on a fuller accounting of the “experiential aspects” of enslaved castes—specifically, in their modes of socioreligious comportment as expressed in the “conversion” to Christianity—as part of a historiographic and ethnographical orientation directed “not merely to lament past sufferings, but also as a strategy that allows for a critical revisiting of the past” (p 83).

For her part, Priyadarshini Vijaisri, in a somewhat paradoxical formulation (pp 97–130), traverses the “nature of caste violence,” with the dimension of

territoriality as manifested in the notion of the “nation as referent” seen to constitute a “new locus of reflexivity in engaging with caste during the later colonial period” (pp 97–98). This broadly yields an interesting juxtaposition of the critiques of caste as developed in the works of Savarkar, Gandhi, and Ambedkar—all served up as “cartographers of the nation”—and working off the understanding that largely in the heterogeneous spaces of pre-modern India, the “realisation of the totalitarian tendencies within caste,” which required a centring of religious and cultural power, could not have been effected, and that it is only in the later colonial period that

ritual systems [were] gradually delinked from sovereignty (of any recognised traditional authority), leading to the reorganisation of the caste system based on according pre-eminence to Brahminical authority and the shrinking of religious power/spaces. (p 103)

I remain quite perplexed though by the overall structure of this enunciation, ostensibly stringing together facets of India's social and intellectual history with a sharp understanding of the contemporary manifestations of caste violence directed at Dalits.

Rajesh Komath (incidentally, a performer himself of the cultural form that his contribution analyses) engages the *Theyyam* ritual dance form largely centred around northern Kerala (pp 131–50), noting the ways in which this lower caste “performative tradition” has been appropriated by various “modes of larger hegemonic social groups in society” (p 132). Even as the dynamics of the *Theyyam* ritual can be thematised as a “Dalit performance” directed at “narrativis[ing] injustices inflicted upon the lower castes by the upper castes,” Komath insists that this cultural form needs to be grasped in its entirety, addressing wholly aspects of “its ontology, spatiality, caste/class structures, community relations, institutionalisation, patronage, and diversified contexts” (pp 133–34).

This foray into “marginalisation” in the Kerala context is further sustained by Roshni Padmanabhan, who maps the dimensions of “education and exclusion” from the colonial times to the present

(pp 150–79). She diligently traces the processes underlying the Dalit demand for education in the princely state of Travancore in southern Kerala (around the late 19th and 20th centuries), drawing on a variety of sources including the work of Dalit organisations and their exemplary leaders like Ayyankali (1863–1941), legislative bodies and administrative reports to narrativise the “developmental spirations of different social groups” (p 152). Likewise, S Victor Babu turns on the movement of identity among the Andhra Dalits—from “Derogation to Dignity,” as he renders it—fixing notably on the affixing of sub-caste names to their personal ones in a public mode of self-identity and articulation (pp 180–91). The singularity of this articulation, though, finds a more complicated sociological nuancing in Thallapally Manohar, who engages with the diversity internal to the “leather-working communities” of South India, although he probes in some detail the “sophisticated social structure” of the leather-working Madiga community in the Telugu-speaking regions (pp 210–37). Importantly, even as patron-client relations have been probed between and across castes at various ends of the social pyramid, Manohar's narration augments a more internally ordered analysis directed at tracing the “nuances and dynamics of the patron-client relationship between the leather-working Madiga community and its dependent castes” (p 211) within their own fold. The nuancing of hierarchies as such within the broader Dalit fold is particularly noteworthy and complicates our given sociological orders of assessment.

Equally too are the complications rendered by the narrations underlying the respective contributions of Sudarshana

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Bhaumik (pp 192–209) and Raj Sekhar Basu (pp 238–83), who in their own ways traverse the question of social mobility among the lower castes. Where Bhaumik retraces aspects of the history of “popular culture” in Bengal, concentrating necessarily on the “multiple Hinduisms of the past” and maintaining that the

cultural products and the activities of the lower orders of nineteenth-century Bengal in general, and Calcutta in particular, developed in large measure from the traditional folk culture of the countryside. (p 193)

Basu engages the complexities of “non-Brahmin and Adi Dravida politics” in early 20th-century Tamil Nadu, reading into,

the non-Brahmin cultural sphere ... a hesitation in dismantling the foundations of Brahminism and foregrounding the shifting dimensions of the Adi-Dravida—non-Brahmin political rivalries and differences. (pp 240–41)

Arguably, in both these contributions, the broader dynamics of caste and subaltern consciousness is being broached within a dualistic framework of power and resistance, of coercion and consent, with caste and Dalithood orchestrating (as in the history probed by Basu) an identity separate from the homogenised representation of non-Brahminism and (as in the detailing offered by Bhaumik) an ambivalent cultural pluralism.

The final essay by Yagati Chinna Rao rehearses the ground of his expertise, namely, the “history and politics of Dalit sub-classification,” a phenomenon that adds another layer of complexity to the constitutional mandate of reservations for the Scheduled Caste (sc) and the sociohistorical reality of the different communities clustered under that label (pp 284–332). As his detailing makes clear, an “intensified internal conflict among Dalits” was always present under the colonial dispensation and have “persisted even in the postcolonial era” (pp 294–98); and, as such, even as the “development trajectories of different Dalit communities” have varied—with those “influenced by the Ambedkarite movement ... show[ing] substantial progress” (p 300)—the Dalit sub-classification issue has only served to drive a wedge into a collective form of identity and politics.

What are we to say, then, of this ground as traversed by the volume as a whole? Surely, one is witness to something more than a resolute negativity as the basis of Dalit histories, even as they give effect to the demands of any such history as underscored by Jangam in his 2016 intervention. I realise too that the fields of studies constituting Dalit histories have imagined other possibilities for the terrain than the one being envisaged here (see, for instance, Rawat et al 2025). And yet, across these terrains of debate and fraught conceptualisation, we could do with the reminder that “subalternity” of any kind—even as that rendered distinct and apart for, and by, the Dalit—is,

not merely structure, characterised solely by negativity; it is also history, shaped and developed through a changing process of interaction between the dominant and the subordinate. (Chatterjee 1994: 197)

Planes of ‘Radical’ Empiricism

Note, it is important for our purposes here that we cumulate the ground traversed by the various essays as condensed rather than attending to them discretely or solely on their own intrinsic terms. What is in perspective is a “radical” empiricism about Dalit histories that the volume is urging through its array of contributions. I realise that on these very pages of *EPW*, the renowned political theorist Gopal Guru (2002) had warned against “empiricism” as a warrant for Dalit intellectual practice, urging instead that Dalit intellectuals need to take more seriously the question of “theorising” their worlds and the manifold of their experiences. What follows is certainly not meant to contradict the latter, although, yes, I am more interested to think with “empiricism” rather than against it, and in an idiom that is more “performative” than representational (as was, arguably, not the case in Guru’s initial formulation).

Clearly, one is envisaging a form of “empiricism” that eschews all universals and the tendency to make wholes prior to the parts; alternatively, the logical (and ontological) stress comes to be on the part, the element, with the whole coming to be treated as an ensemble of

relations and the “universal” as an abstraction. Any historical and/or sociological description commences with the parts—making of the whole a being of the second order—and presents itself as a mosaic of plural facts, like that of the essays as re-presented along the course of our summation in the foregoing section. But surely there is more to the “empiricism” as being rendered—and therefore our qualifier “radical”—for the relations that constitute experiences must themselves be “experienced” relations (see Sarukkai [2007], in the overlay that he lends to Guru’s founding insight). This is strictly what I am also inferring from the volume and adjacency of its essays. The reader may well have to reposition themselves to draw on the implications of this “radical” empiricism for studies of Dalit history to resonate and be put to work. It is one thing to reconstitute developments in the linear form of history and quite another to range over their translations through an interplay of mediations and exchanges. A “radical” empiricism about any kind of history—but particularly so for all histories from below, as is the defining thrust (I take it) of a Dalit history—might yet require both these modalities to be impinging on each other: that is to say, the translational space of history as mediations and exchanges will always trouble the linear form of history, while also crystallising a desire for that very form.

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