

was ‘freely interspersed with vernacularised forms of Persian and Arabic words’ (p. 50). By drawing our attention to such layers of literary and linguistic complexity, the book helps in challenging many stereotypes about the alleged Hindu–Muslim and Sanskrit–Persian divide in the middle ages.

In its last chapter, the book takes a leap from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. Through her discussion of *Rās Mālā* of Alexander Forbes, the first colonial history of Gujarat, Kapadia reiterates the larger argument about the centrality of local chieftains in the politics of Gujarat over the centuries. She finds great value in a text like *Rās Mālā* for it helps to take the focus away from ‘imperial rulers like the Mughals and the Marathas’ (p. 131). While this might be an interesting observation on the part of the author, it is important to understand the politics of the colonial histories like *Rās Mālā* that portrayed the ‘Rajputs’ as perpetual power wielders. Tod’s magnum opus is another case in point. To be fair to the author, she does hint towards this but does not work out its historical implications for her own study.

The book is very loaded in terms of its arguments. In many ways, its novelty lies in the manner in which it deals with its ‘sources’ both as sources of information and as subjects of study in themselves. For this reason, readers might be excused for wishing that the book provided closer glimpses of the ‘sources’ in the form of more frequent and extended excerpts. For that would have provided the reader with a better view of the texture of the literary canvas in the fifteenth century.

Inconsistent spelling of certain non-English words and the more than occasional typographical errors are minor irritants in a book that should be a must read for those interested in historical studies of Gujarat, the literary cultures of the medieval period, cultural iconographies in a multilingual world and most certainly north India in the fifteenth century.

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RAMNARAYAN S. RAWAT and K. SATYANARAYANA, eds, *Dalit Studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 304 pp.

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Now that the scholarship on caste politics has moved away from the burden of adhering to the disciplinary injunctions put in place by the glories of India’s nationalist movement, a new set of questions has emerged among its more sophisticated practitioners. These are neither decidedly political questions nor are they reducible wholly to the social. Instead, they have increasingly become epistemic in nature. That is to say, these questions seek to conceptualise caste oppression, its apparatus of power, at the very moment that they strive to unpack its machine-like rigour and conceptual coherence. For caste’s violent *dispositif*, its

life-taking cruelty—which Ambedkar called its ‘system of graded sovereignties’—can exist in such a mutating, oblique, and adept form not because it functions in opposition to life but precisely because it is the sovereign concept in Indian conceptions of life as such. The challenge today, to put this paradox mildly, then, is to conceptually investigate caste’s ability to function as a concept itself, a concept not only *of* but *in* life, not only as an inorganic notion but an organic mechanism. Indeed, a freedom *without* caste—and not simply a freedom *from* caste in its negative, liberal sense—can only come from a freedom *outside* of this sovereignty of the conceptual division between the organic and inorganic, the living and nonliving, the touchable and untouchable: a division of which caste is the sovereign juridical articulation.

Here, especially, Indian political theory might be coming late to Ambedkar, who, in his prodigious 1916 essay ‘Castes in India: Its Genesis, Mechanism, and Development’, had already outlined the political manifestation of this sovereignty as a problem of obedience and office in Indian traditions. Not without reason do calls of reservation for Dalits and other backward castes in government office especially cause such anxiety even today in urban India (even as the clamour for reservations itself becomes universalised). Since we cannot retrace those genealogies and their moral psychological contours fully here, suffice it to note that the problem of ‘genesis’ in Ambedkar’s philosophy might be the key pivot of an anti-sovereign, planetary political thought, heterogenous to the liturgies of the nation-form that is still to come.

Roughly two generations of scholars that came before the current conjuncture had been compelled to understand caste as one of the several sites of disciplining, mobilisation, and resistance internal to the political narrative and liturgical rules of nationalist practice. Ranajit Guha’s *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1997) marked a crucial moment in this generational shift of Indian historiography and its twentieth century subaltern agenda, located as Guha’s later work was at the cusp of the extremely effective, if by then well-worn, paradigm of nationalist criticism on the one hand, and a galvanising new moment in the dialogue between Indian classicism and its explicitly punitive modern history, on the other. In contrast, a new wave of theoretical and political work places caste, in all its phenomenological density, its obdurate social ubiquity, and above all, its profound planetary salience, at the heart of democratic mentality itself.

Ramnarayan Rawat’s *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington, 2011) marked a crucial turning point in this emerging body of scholarship. First, because it reinscribed untouchability—and the fecund world of Chamar and Dalit self-fashioning—at the centre of twentieth-century politics in north India, where genealogies of community and communal strife had for some time been the dominant—albeit not the only—concern. Gyanendra Pandey’s *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, reprinted 2012)

had cleared the ground here, with its influential move away from the historiography of the nebulous agrarian populism and ‘unrest’ of interwar United Provinces—of which historians such as Eric Stokes and Majid Siddiqui too were part—to the emblematic figures of colonial codification, such as the Muslim weaver or *julaha*. Shahid Amin’s recent work *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* (Chicago, 2016) too continues his earlier interest in communitarian motifs as they shape national, popular story-telling in Uttar Pradesh. Rawat’s work at once speaks to this earlier tradition in which strife played a crucial role in genealogies of belonging and banishment, and brings out, on his terms, the steadier textures of the history of identity-making in the colonial north.

Second, like Bernard Cohn’s groundbreaking historical-anthropological essays on the Chamars, which appeared later in Cohn’s *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1998), Rawat’s work subtly shifts the gravity of the caste question away from the social scientific paradigm of electoral interest towards the layered genealogies and popular archives of late colonial identity. It was a struggle for emancipation in which modern political rights were affirmed and asserted publicly in direct conflict with colonialism and its forms of knowledge (and against nationalism’s subtly growing investment in the same regime too), yet, according to Rawat, in ways that remained simply irreducible to electoral vicissitudes of liberal democratic competition and opportunistic uses of the emerging social contract.

With *Dalit Studies*, Rawat and K. Satyanarayana deepen the scope of the dalit turn, bringing together a phenomenally rich collection of essays that at once probes and advances the concerns of the field on the whole. In fact, the editors do not stake their claim simply on behalf of one field among others. They propose a new way of seeing and touching the figure of the *dalit* itself. Such a project, clearly, must not simply be one of social justice or political assertion but of sensitively forcing an epistemological reckoning in Indian social science. Conceptually, the essays in this volume can be grouped into three overlapping sets, each following the thread of a specific modality of dalit question (although the editors themselves have arranged the contributions into two groups, one speaking to history, the other to the present). The first thread poses a question long associated with the work, among others, of Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Gopal Guru and, more recently, Soumyabrata Choudhury. Why is caste everywhere in India’s social and political life today, its presence both as social identity and analytical category especially ubiquitous among theorists of knowledge (who still broadly come from the Brahmin–Kayastha complex), even as the figure and person of the dalit—Ambedkar’s *bahishkrut*—in whose name they theorise remains a rarity in theoretical sciences, in fact barely seen in the practical arts of this very theory? Even if this monochromatism, which reproduces the invisibility of the dalit thinker in Indian thought and its institutions, is gradually changing its colour, the moral framework of caste, with its entrenched and oblique exclusions, still taints every political theory that emerges from South Asia.

This paradox animates Gopal Guru's intervention in the volume, which then sets the tone for the important essays that follow in the first part of the collection, titled 'Probing the Historical'. Essays by Hans, Jangam, Mohan, and Rawat—followed by Jodhka's contribution in the book's second half, titled 'Probing the Present'—highlight the fluidity of dalit identity by closely examining the long-term nuances of regional histories, including in the Punjab and Andhra. Theoretically close to these contributions is the second, overlapping set of essays by Satyanarayana, Gundimeda, Jodhka, and Shyam Babu, which together examine the contemporary openings and impasses of dalit remaking of democracy. This second set of interventions stands out for its robust refusal to unconditionally denounce the advances made by liberal democracy, a rhetorical temptation that has been for some time dominant on the global left (however heterogeneous), especially with the rise of majoritarian populisms out of the shambles of the neoliberal order in places as diverse as Turkey, the United States, Brazil, and India. Not surprisingly, class figures strongly in this set of essays (its legibility as a category now mediated more strongly by the question of reservations than, say, it was in the 1970s), and so does the problem of India's not very 'civil society' and its 'public sphere'.

Indeed, these last two categories—civil society and public sphere—appear in one essay or another, oddly complicating the success of the volume. After all, the abysmally low visibility, even presence, of Dalit and Muslim voices today in India is not just a significant problem that might be redressed by procedural means alone. It is a symptomatic blockage, constitutive of liberalism's civilisational prejudice that guards, like a 'barbed wire', the rules and logics of India's questionably urbane civility. Under these conditions, one would have wanted to press the contributors of *Dalit Studies* and ask what substantive value do these categories—and doubtlessly, they do—have for a radical dalit discourse? The third set of essays, in which we might place the contributions by Rawat, Satyanarayana, and Brueck, together pose the question that is today ineluctable. What would it take for the humanities and social sciences in India to move away from the *dalit* as a figure of 'caste politics', a term that itself reeks of liberal prejudice against it—and is used by liberals as such—and reinstitute in its place, as Satyanarayana brilliantly calls it (p. 166), a 'dalit politics of caste'?

For one, such reinstitution of *democratic politics as dalit politics* will require embracing the fact that such a project is fundamentally epistemic, and that, to rephrase Brueck's pithy formula, it demands a 'flipping' of the conventional analytical gaze that hierarchically structures caste and literary theory alike. Second, it will require *not* asking the caste question in its normative sense, of which dalits remain consigned to a non-part, at once asked to inhabit the realm of the question yet placed unequally and outside of it. Above all, it will require embracing the position that Ambedkar, in a moment of unbridled constitutional majesty in the Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1939, called the courage of being 'a part apart'.

Then alone can the exemplary move that Brueck's essay makes be generalised to encompass dalit political imagination on the whole, one in which it is not Premchand's searing representation of caste violence but rather the dalit reading—or, under certain conditions, dalit incineration of copies—of Premchand's works that becomes a site of literary justice, a scrupulous heroism even, exemplified by those cast away by—and *in*—Hindi literature.

Is an Indian institution of such fearless equality possible? An equality at once specific to the Indian regime of use of bodies and still planetary in its theoretical vision? By way of a preliminary acknowledgement that such a possibility is real, let me end with one more crucial shift that militant articulations of dalit politics have produced today: the surge of interest in Ambedkar among scholars who have spent a fair part of their academic life either aggressively denouncing his thought as a product of India's colonial hangover or simply refusing to read him. Both these gestures have for decades reproduced the same belief: Ambedkar must be too conservative for postcolonial taste. The reversal of this doxa today, however, brings to light a fine-toothed liberal anxiety of dalit epistemic assertion rather than their endorsement of it (which dalit politics does not need). This anxiety in itself, revealed in the sheer generalisation of Ambedkar in our time, intimates that the project of dalit studies is now more important than ever, and that the task has only begun.

For now, then, by way of highlighting the penetrating challenge that the essayists in *Dalit Studies* have collectively mounted, let us simply note this. Not since *Subaltern Studies* has an entire framework of study been announced on behalf of those left behind by history. *Dalit Studies*, however, also does much more, and it does so with greater methodological liberty and decidedly greater diversity of voices than *Subaltern Studies*. Its challenges are much greater, its questions more formidable, its conceptual demands of a different order and of a different time. Yet, the agenda of *Dalit Studies* is less formulaic, its conclusions more open and understated. And its time might have come.

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NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA, *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2018, 522 pp.

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The reader may well ask why a book so deeply situated in the material and cultural landscapes of Punjab does not refer to the region in its title. As will become clear, this is because its subject is the larger colonial project of economic growth that evolved in the second half of the nineteenth century. It involved deep institutional transformations based on what Neeladri Bhattacharya calls the 'agrarian imaginary'