



Anupama Rao. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xxi + 392 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25559-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25761-0.



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Historicizing Dalit Emancipation in Modern India

Given the remarkable power and appeal of the paradigm of Dalit emancipation in India today, a study of the subject as a cultural phenomenon in its own right is clearly in order, and historical analysis is arguably the best way to proceed. But what exactly would a history of Dalit emancipation be? In *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Anupama Rao provides one model. Rao takes as her subject a series of prominent figures, moments, and episodes in the modern political and cultural history of Dalit emancipation in western India (Maharashtra, in particular). Her dramatis personae include, among a plethora of non-Brahmin and Dalit publicists and activists, Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-90), who in the late nineteenth century forged a caste-radical thought centered around a critique of Brahminism, and had formulated the basis for politicized non-Brahmin communities identifying themselves as a distinctive people (the *shudra-atishudras*, who shared a common identity across caste specificities); Gopal Baba Valangkar (?-1900), an early Mahar Dalit activist who, while drawing on Phuleâs postulation of a military history for Dalit

castes, historicized Dalit social stigmatization in particular and urged a focus on the unique disabilities of being untouchable; Vithoba Raoji Moon Pande (1864-1924), who typified the new upwardly mobile Mahar communityâs growing refusal to countenance socio-ritual stigmatization and whose challenge to caste discrimination instituted an alternative source of religious authority in the form of a Mahar priesthood within the Hindu fold; and B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), who in nationalizing the Dalit question reconstituted Dalits as a distinctive political minority, initially with a right to separate enfranchisement but eventually translating into an institutionalization of Dalit identity within the Indian state and constitution.

The moments addressed as part of this trajectory encompassing the unfolding space of Dalit activism and the ensuing emergence of a Dalit public sphere, include the late nineteenth-century emergence of caste radicalism in the form of a deep-seated anti-Brahminism; the emergent forms of caste masculinity and community modernization involving the intermeshing forms of sexuality and gender; the coalescing and subsequent separation (in the

first decades of the twentieth century) between the non-Brahmin critique and a distinctively Dalit (largely Mahar) discourse of stigmatized existence; the playing out of both Dalit emancipation and new forms of subjection in the institutional spaces and amenities of colonial modernity (whether it be access to streets, schools, temples, and water points); the interwar years of Dalit activism around a liberal paradigm of civic rights and the attendant decisive moves in a context of shifting colonial governmentality; and the emergent cultures of Dalit protest from the 1950s in the shape both of constitutionally mandated civil rights policies and the "religious" response to the caste question through Buddhist conversion.

Rendered thus, it would seem that *The Caste Question* offers a "triumphalist emancipation story" (p. 26). But Rao is pressing for more, since the work also traces "the contemporary implications of identifying Dalits as minority subjects burdened by historic vulnerability" (p. 26). What this axis implicates, within the dualistic mode of narration peculiar to *The Caste Question*, is a focus on the ways in which postindependence politics perpetuates violence against Dalits and generates a corporeal politics of caste. Doubtless, the trajectory here alludes to a more complicated historical anthropology of caste, being given over not just to historicizing the symbolic forms of life defined by the term "untouchability," but alluding as well to democracy and political citizenship as cultural categories. Rao here wades through national (as reflected in Indian constitutional-legal measures to address caste inequality and untouchability), regional (the focus here being the dynamics of Maharashtrian Dalit life and cultural politics in the 1960s and 1970s), and local settings (addressing specific situations and exacerbations of anti-Dalit violence in the villages of Maharashtra). A recurring facet of the treatment offered is the management of anti-Dalit violence by legal-bureaucratic forms of protection as a means of exploring the performative nature of caste violence and the changing configurations of the Dalit subject. Indeed, for Rao, the proliferation of violent forms following Dalit recognition and state protection suggests, precisely, that "violence is a historical and cultural formation that has played a distinctive role in the formation of Dalit personhood" (p. 167).

From these (what is termed) "staggered and uneven temporalities of Dalit emancipation" (p. 287, n. 2), Rao separates out a single theme that, in her view, animates the complexity of Dalit political subject formation—the Dalit subaltern as both "stigmatized subject and revolutionary figure" and which, for her, "illuminates Dalit history as something other than the history of community"

(p. 10). This is the relation between two basic paradigms of Dalit emancipation, which I shall label symptomatically the "mimetic" and "anti-mimetic" models as viewed through the intertwining prisms of "the political culture of caste and the intellectual history of radical anticaste thought" (p. 11). To simplify, the mimetic model holds that the experience of stigmatized existence translated into a politics of self-fashioning and social activism, which ultimately transfigured into a politics of recognition as a political constituency. The model, to be sure, records the growing political salience of caste and discrimination and delivers into "a set of bureaucratic measures to define and protect exceptional subjects," but paradoxically reproduces "vulnerability as the condition of possibility for continued protection and legal recognition" (p. 26). Indeed this latter point serves as a point of departure for the contrasting anti-mimetic model of Dalit emancipation, which, while issuing off efforts to legally abolish the sources and conditions of Dalit vulnerability, makes manifest the constitutive relationship between caste violence and Dalit personhood. The anti-mimetic approach, accordingly, is framed to make sense of a more contemporary state of affairs, wherein the locus of violence has shifted "from violence that prevents Dalits from claiming political rights to violence that responds to their perceived political militancy" (p. 180). Consequently, for this model, caste violence is less a reflection of caste antagonism than a form of social reproduction, a reconstitution of caste sociality directed at reinstating in Dalit politics its ideological and historically specific intentionality and singularity.

Rao tracks her theme of Dalit emancipation in enormous factual and analytical detail. She explores equally the conceptual, theoretical, and normative aspects of her subject, while nicely avoiding the partisanship, including the excessive and obsessive Brahmin-bashing, which has marked a good deal of commentary on this subject. I also share Rao's skepticism about community as a misleading rubric under which to examine changing forms of power and political subjectivity, as indeed her identification of a limit underscoring subaltern historiography—as founded "on a clean opposition between an anthropological conception of community and a Marxist distrust of state power" (p. 11). Beyond these features, however, I have a few critical remarks to make, essentially about extant practices of historicization as they impinge on the prevailing grounds of postcolonial scholarship and historical narration.

Throughout the book, Rao regularly reminds the reader that she is making conceptual claims about essen-

tial features of Dalit emancipation, rather than merely constitutive claims about what seems usually to be the case. However, when attempting to parry a claim made about the growing political salience of caste and the analysis of caste assertion among sociologists and political scientists, Rao makes a striking concession, a concession seemingly running at odds with her explicitly avowed methodology. Broadly, the sociologists' and political scientists' mode of engaging the phenomenon entails two problems (or characteristic reductions): one, the persistent assumption that political identity and action follow from and can be read off demographic characteristics; and, two, the rendering of the political as the mere realization of social determinants or the instantiation of state institutions. Rao takes this scholarship to be making a claim about caste and democracy as antithetical (p. 17), and accordingly posits that '(t)he model describes perceived reality' but it does not constitute a theory of caste power (p. 291, n. 28). I take it that the claim here is that sociologists and political scientists are often inclined, by definition, toward enumerating pre- and nonpolitical causes that they then take to explain political actions or consequences; and that, when extended, this tendency eradicates the place of politics itself. Rendered thus, Rao's contention is a salutary reminder to those keen to pursue a purely descriptive agenda about caste power that their effort is deficient; that in fact theorizing caste power would require a different approach, one that views political claims-making as a profoundly political work of self-articulation in relationship with others. However, this could as yet constitute a retreat from Rao's project of asserting the constitutive relationship between Dalit emancipation and Indian democracy. Indeed, working against the grain of a tradition that takes caste and democracy as antithetical seems to have constrained Rao to theorize the dynamics of Dalit emancipation, but the theorizing on offer is not specific enough to outline the conditions under which Dalit subject formation would be the more encompassing form of caste power and democratic agency. Of course, one may rightly question whether the artificiality and unusualness of this single gesture is of any relevance; but my claim here is that this single methodological constraint seems to renege on the conceptual claims dotted throughout the book. It is as if the writing of a history of caste subalterns is no longer capable of keeping up with the conceptual claims of a study of the conditions of possible histories enabled by oppositional consciousness and subalternity.

This brings me to another major issue to be discussed.

It is a peculiarity of the discourses given to examining the constitutive aspects of Indian society and politics that they tend to deal with and translate into extreme positions, and Rao's work is no exception. An altogether familiar reference here has been the thematic of colonialism and nationalism, and although Rao breaks with this thematic by engaging a politics 'outside' (*sic*) the oppositional consciousness of anticolonial nationalism, the dialectical question being raised is more or less the same: what sort of response would give us a purchase on those phenomena that have left a mark in the present? Undoubtedly, this is a striking question, but, as the historian Chris Bayly has maintained, there is an air of paradox which attaches to formulations that strive to restore historical agency to Indian subjects while simultaneously positing the colonial presence as the principal causal explanation for most of the decisive turning points in modern Indian history and historiography. Be that as it may, Rao's narrative, in rendering spurious the claim to hegemony underwriting the colonial state as indeed its successor regime instituted by nationalism, is wont to mark at once the limits of colonialist/nationalist interventions and yield to a space of postcolonial specificity (in the figure of the Dalit). And yet, this does not—and cannot—come about as a simple laterality. One may quite legitimately ask whether the positing of all these forms of power and Dalit agency is not itself a derivative of a form given over to articulating, in the early spirit of Subaltern Studies, a space of subaltern agency. The conditions that obtain within—and make possible—a system of politics and sovereignty are also being retraced as the story of its effects.

Of course, the argument could be made that, even as Rao addresses the crucial role that Dalit history has played in the politics of caste and equality in postcolonial India, she is concerned to foreground the unresolved tensions of (an) Indian democracy. But to take this step is to breach the logic of its own immanent history. For having ventured into 'the enabling conditions and constitutive contradictions of India's political modernity' (p. 1), and having transposed that question onto a representational register 'weav(ing) together a history of community formation and the remaking of the caste self with an account of India's secular modernity' (p. 2), Rao simply re-translates that register into the terms of a difference that stands at the very limit of democratic liberalism. Within this register, the methodological ideal of 'difference' enters much more comprehensively, meaning that the validity of a development (specific states of affairs) and of statements about the effectivity of social practices,

the justification of moral norms, or the truth of theoretical facts can be determined finally in all realms (social-political, moral-practical, and cognitive-theoretical) only in accordance with what the difference really institutes. In other words, by making the ideas of democratic liberalism stand in for Dalit subject-formation in general—albeit in the revised form that *The Caste Question* implicates—Rao misses out on the real motors of radicalization that is the moment of Dalit emancipation today.

In sum, yet, *The Caste Question* is an admirable piece of work, presenting a thoroughly novel take on its

subject-matter, one that I approached with a great deal of anticipation. Here, finally, is a research willing to take Dalit emancipation seriously as a political formation in its own terms, without either functionalizing it into the modality of nationalism lacking all independent efficacy, reducing it to an epiphenomenon of the cultural anxieties of a modernized Hinduism, or folding it into a more amorphous general category of identity politics. Despite its occasional misconstruction of the claims it pits itself against, it is nonetheless worthy of close attention. Rao's book will be required reading for any student of Dalit emancipation in India for some time to come.

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