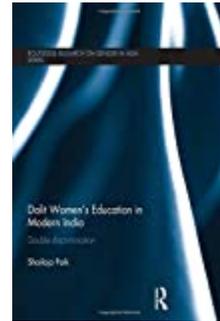




Shailaja Paik. *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination.* Routledge Research on Gender in Asia Series. New York: Routledge, 2014. xiv + 356 pp. \$160.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-49300-0.



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Dalit Women in India

Shailaja Paik has written an elegant and nuanced book about women's education and its centrality to Maharashtra's Ambedkar movement. A signal contribution to the field of critical Ambedkar studies and South Asian histories of gender, Paik's book focuses on Dalit women's continued struggles to claim educated selfhood while navigating complex inequities of caste, patriarchy, and inherited privilege. The work is enriched by a rare focus on working-class and middle-class women whose experience of caste and gender discrimination is modulated by two things, the political economy of class and the spatialization of caste.

Paik describes her method as follows: "Rather than going where women are, or recovering women through oral histories, ... the book illustrates how Dalit women were formed within the limits of historically specific practices, what [Michel] Foucault calls modes of subjectivation: the very processes that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent" (p. 8). Voice and experience have become the unfortunate focus of

much critical engagement with Dalit literature, which views such writing as inherently ethnographic, a window into the life and times of otherwise inaccessible subaltern subjects. Paik instead challenges the categories of experience and embodiment, which constitute the privileged ground of feminist and Dalit history, to argue that the question of Dalit women must be posed, at the outset, as a problem of representation. Here liberal feminism's inability to confront the exclusions of caste meets with Dalit history's focus on the community's emancipation at the cost of ignoring the specific needs of its women. Paik tempers her admiration for B. R. Ambedkar's enlightened and far-reaching response to the woman question with her own focus on Dalit women's ideas and practices, as they not only actuated but extended and critiqued Ambedkar's feminist praxis by challenging the politics of local leaders and men inside the household, however limited" (p. 13). The signal contribution of *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India* thus lies in tracking this double movement, modes of subjectivation and the refusal and resistance to them, as dialectical

processes with contingent and often-unanticipated outcomes.

The book is divided into two sections each containing four chapters. Paik situates the oral narratives that constitute her main archive for the second half of the book in a complex economy of forces—caste reform, colonial modernity, struggles over institutional access, and movement history. Thus the first section of the book explores the contradictions of mass intellectuality in a society governed by a founding cleavage between intellectual and manual labor, and Dalit and non-Brahmin struggles against this social divide.

Paik's thickly documented first chapter contrasts ideologies of class mobility and access to knowledge as these confronted the economic power and social resentment of Brahmins in the interwar, when the relationship between caste, colonial state, and Dalits underwent a major shift. Paik draws on personal recollections, newspaper accounts, and administrative reports to explore how Dalit demands for free and compulsory education were foiled, from the rise of novel practices of spatial segregation, to the psychological implications of the everyday repulsion that upper-caste students reflected back to Dalit and lower-caste students by refusing to share food and drink with them.

The 1813 Act tasked the East India Company government with the advancement of education. Decades later, in 1882, government-aided schools were opened to the public at large. Simultaneously, missionary societies dedicated themselves to Dalit schooling. However, both initiatives were subject to an implicit "slow" policy as they faced social resistance from upper castes who withdrew students from "integrated" schools. Private initiative fared no better. Paik offers numerous accounts of efforts by Gopal Krishna Gokhale's Servants of India Society to encourage Dalit education, albeit without allotting adequate funds for that purpose. Reformist commitment to mass education by reformers like N. G. Chandavarkar, M. G. Ranade, and R. G. Bhandarkar was coupled with apprehension about the social hygiene and mental fitness of Dalit students. Meanwhile conservative voices, such as B. G. Tilak, emphasized a tracked system of education, appropriate to the manual labor performed by the lower castes, that could curtail rebelliousness. Furthermore, resistance to mass schooling found an ingenious ally in quasi-participatory colonial institutions, such as the municipalities, which were controlled by Brahmins, and later, by economically well-off non-Brahmin communities, not to mention local school boards. Paik notes

that with the onset of dyarchic government in the 1920s, "the transfer of power to school boards was brutal for Dalits" (p. 65): commitments to equal access were foreclosed by the inequities of political and economic power, and the persistence of caste dominance in new forms and spaces.

Dalits were far from docile. Paik tracks the growth of Dalit protests at social exclusion in schools after 1920, especially challenges to the separate drinking water system. This chapter records the unfolding of a student strike against that system in Foras Road Municipal School in Bombay in 1929, which saw counter-response by upper castes who shut down the stock exchange and a protest against uppity Dalits by the upper-caste headmaster of the Agripada school. Such protests were a response to private initiatives, including by Ambedkar's Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Society for the Welfare of the Excluded), which followed upon numerous local initiatives by Dalits across the region, and by V. R. Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission to establish separate schools, though these were never as numerous as in Bengal, or the Tamil country. Ambedkar also argued for free and compulsory schooling, and struggled to mobilize public funds for that purpose. While the chapter focuses on the issue of Dalit schooling under conditions of severe inequity, it ends by noting efforts by Congress to shift focus away from the issue of free and compulsory education toward the cause of education for girls. Indeed by 1940, "upper-caste men appeared to reason that by replacing government high schools with girls' schools, they would set women against Dalits, creating a rivalry between the two marginalized groups" (p. 66).

The third and fourth chapters of this section on Dalit women's education precede a chapter that asks what education meant for Dalits and lower castes. Paik notes that Ambedkar's focus on integrated schooling was distinctive when compared to Jotirao Phule's arguments half a century earlier for developing intellectual confidence among Dalits and lower castes through separate schools, and when contrasted with Gandhi's argument for separate schooling as a stopgap measure while generating upper-caste consent to integrated schooling. Paik connects these projects of transformative education with such thinkers as Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, Paulo Freire, and John Dewey, whose investment in civic education and the autonomy of critical thought had a deep impact on Ambedkar.[1]

Dalit women's education was forged in this context of viewing education as the right to think.[2] Across two

rich chapters Paik addresses the unique relationship that was forged between Dalit reform, women's public participation in politics, and the quiet but profound transformations that ensued from becoming educated. She argues that concerns with sexual respectability and bourgeois morality compromised the project of female education from the start. "There was a major concern with women's 'difference' that resulted in much public debate about curricula, syllabi, textbooks, and even the best location for girls' education. Hence, a major issue in women's education was the emphasis on a 'feminised' curriculum" (p. 117). The idea of curricular distinction between men's and women's schooling was an idea supported by Hindu reformers, such as B. G. Tilak and V. S. Chiplunkar, while only a handful of men, such as G. G. Agarkar and the sexologist R. D. Karve, supported coeducation and a single curriculum. Meanwhile, ideas of 'protection' pervaded institutions like Pandita Ramabai's Seva Sadan (1889) and Karve's Hingne home (1896) for deserted widows and upper-caste women fleeing abusive circumstances. The fact that there were only two women from the Depressed Classes against a total of sixty-eight women in Karve's home testifies to the 'double discrimination' Dalit women faced.

Paik's analysis of the different emphasis of Dalit women's education, its focus on *svaabhimaan* (respect) and *svaavalamban* (self-reliance) is the crux of her argument. She reminds us that the Starte Committee noted in 1927 that of 1,983,415 girls from the Backward Class, 5,739 girls were receiving primary education, while another 159 girls were in middle school. Only one girl was in high school, and none was receiving university education (pp. 125-126). Dalit women were all too aware, and demanded educational equality, not merely differential access. "Caste identity, rather than gender, was the primary framework of political identity. While Dalit women battled to recover their individual and collective self-esteem, and to uplift their community, they also faced social discrimination at the hands of their upper-caste 'fortunate' sisters" (p. 132). Indeed the unmarked universality of liberal feminism confronted Dalit women's claims to equality through struggle and solidarity: when they elided caste to claim gender equality, upper-caste feminists found themselves confronting Dalit women's demands for a practical illustration of equality across the divide of caste, class, and gender.

Paik introduces us to the spate of organizational activism in which Dalit women were involved, from participation in the All-India Dalit Mahila Congress, to the establishment of an Untouchable Women's Society in

Amravati in 1921, and participation in the important temple-entry satyagrahas of the 1920s and early 1930s. The climax came in 1942, at the Women's Conference of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) in Nagpur when Sulochana Dongre and Shantabai Dani spoke before twenty-five thousand women. This was soon followed by a Women's Conference in Kanpur in 1944 attended by Dongre, while Dani was the chairperson of the Women's Council of the AISCF that organized that Kanpur meeting, and functioned as secretary of the Bombay branch of the Scheduled Caste Federation. Paik notes that while Dalit communities privileged sexual respectability and bourgeois morality, they were also adamant about the significance of female political participation and public visibility in the Ambedkarite project to create a 'confident, masculine Dalit womanhood' (p. 176). There was surely a deep and enduring contradiction between the focus on emancipation as a collective project by *streepurush* (women-men, the term coined by Phule in the later nineteenth century to signal gender equality) and efforts to regulate female sexuality in the cause of gender modernization. Paik accepts this struggle to conceive a viable subject of political feminism but she argues, nonetheless, for a Dalit feminism that grew out of experiences of social exclusion and Ambedkarite revolution that was markedly different in character from liberal feminism.

Paik's second section, 'Paradox of Education,' is a tour de force, which considers the ongoing effects of caste and class in shaping Dalit women's subjectivity. She focuses on women's experience of gendered precarity and spatial inequality as mutually entailed, structuring forces. Through a discussion of the geography of Pune's and Mumbai's slums, Paik argues that young Dalit women who are subject to repeated insult and humiliation in the classroom, correlate identity with the inhabitation of stigmatized space, as do upper castes who enact forms of 'urban indifference' and outright casteism. The book's focus on the social disciplining of the senses—smell, speech, dress, gait—is a profound exercise in social psychology; Paik shows us that this is coeval with these young women's fierce desire to better their lives, often via access to government incentives, to escape grinding poverty.

Escaping to the middle class is a key aspiration, and it marks an important milestone within the life of the community. Yet Paik reminds us, across three powerful chapters, that Dalit women's aspirational mobility requires a daily confrontation with caste stereotype in public, and fraught engagements in intimate life with husbands, in-

laws, and children. The middle-class Hindu ideal of marriage, the unacceptability of divorce and the agony of perpetual oppression by men thus affected many women (p. 309). New sites of struggle appear even as earlier paradigms are left behind.

Paik's book is a profound meditation on the enduring effects of caste, class, and gender as these affect individual lives contingently, but through the path dependency of Maharashtra social history. One wishes, at times, for a better sense of the complicated intellectual and political histories that shaped the terrain Paik describes, but then we would lose sight of the everyday, and the embodied experience of Dalit gender she provides. I would opt for the latter any day given the sheer paucity of such work, and the sophistication of Paik's analysis.

The publication of Paik's book coincides with a rise in Dalit activism. Many will recall the suicide of the doctoral student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad after a lifelong experience with caste discrimination and social

exclusion. That suicide has mobilized young Dalits to challenge social exclusion and intellectual invisibility. Set against this history of the present, Paik's book is a powerful and enduring reminder of why the project of mass intellectuality is among anti-casteism's most lasting legacies.

Notes

[1]. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy, *New Literary History* 40, no. 2 (2009): 345-370. Mukherjee's article offers an important textual analysis of Ambedkar's engagement with Dewey's writing.

[2]. The political philosopher Jacques Ranciere reminds us that the right to think also involves the right to think otherwise as he engages with what might be termed an intellectual history of subaltern thought. Jacques Ranciere, *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012).

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