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REVIEW ARTICLE

*A Dalit Paradigm: A new narrative in South Asian historiography**

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Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India. By Ramnarayan S. Rawat. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 298, US$28 (ISBN-13: 978-0253222626).

The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India. By Anupama Rao. Oakland: University of California Press, 2009, pp. 416, US$26.95 (ISBN-13: 978-0520257610).

Humiliation: Claims and Context. Gopal Guru (ed.). Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 238, US$ 27. 95 (ISBN-10: 0198074921).

This is the meaning of Negro History Week. It is not so much a Negro History Week as it is a History Week. We should emphasize not Negro History, but the Negro in history. What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race hate, and religious prejudice. There should be no indulgence in undue eulogy of the Negro. The case of the Negro is well taken care of when it is shown how he has influenced the development of civilization.[1]

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[1] C. G. Woodson, The Celebration of Negro History Week, *The Journal of Negro History*, 12.2 (April), 1927, p. 105.

Historiography in South Asia has been a product of complex experiences of colonial and post-colonial encounters which defined the contours of historical imagination. At one level, the colonial project of writing the history of the Indian subcontinent served the purpose of legitimizing the empire and its ideology of 'rescuing' collapsing social and political systems, and bringing them into the order of modernity and progress. Historians belonging to the Cambridge School, such as Anil Seal, furthered this agenda of history writing by arguing that the nation and nationalist consciousness in the Indian subcontinent was an offshoot of colonialism and its ideological institutions.[2] On the other hand, the colonized subjects used history as a project of resistance and the re-imagination of the self and the nation. Nationalist historians and their successors, bred in the soil of colonial imagination, ploughed the field of historical imagination using methods and ideas left behind by the colonial masters and their progeny. Despite having the agenda of rebuilding and regenerating a new nation, their method of writing history was not much different from the colonial and Cambridge legacies. While conceiving the writing of history as a project of emancipation, nationalist historians nostalgically wrote historical mythologies of a pre-colonial past and eulogized nationalist leaders as larger-than-life figures. Nationalist history remained a product of native elitism which replaced white mythologies with brown mythologies.

The first departure from this elitism came in the writings of Marxist historians whose focus was on the working class and peasant movements against British colonialism. They inscribed labour movements within the larger global communist struggles against capitalism and its extraneous avatar of imperialism. Even though their focus was on the non-elite struggles, intellectually and ideologically they subscribed to capitalist modernity and its institutional forms as essential ingredients for the achievement of socialism. Ironically, like the colonialists, they too discounted indigenous forms of struggles and ideas, and glossed over specificities of sociocultural forms of oppression and exploitation such as caste and untouchability. They perceived them as superficial forms and embedded them into the overarching framework of class oppression.

Disenchantment with existing historical writings and narratives paved the way for the emergence of *Subaltern Studies* as a radical

[2] Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

intervention in the writing of history in South Asia. Subaltern Studies scholars produced histories of tribal and peasant uprisings against British colonialism as a counter to the mainstream elite nationalist histories. The Subaltern scholars ingeniously wrote the histories of the marginalized (such as tribal and peasant communities) using the colonial archives. Focusing on pre-modern forms of articulations and struggles,[3] however, they considered colonial modernity and its institutional forms not radical enough to be considered as credible modes of struggle against imperialism. It is thus not any less ironic that Subaltern writings were written only in English and intended for elite English academics, and were therefore essentially inaccessible to the tribal and peasant protagonists. Moreover Subaltern scholars, despite claiming to write the histories of Subaltern masses, followed in the tracks of Marxist scholars and refused to consider the role of caste-based oppression and untouchability in writing history. In not using caste as a tool of analysis in social and historical transformations, the Subaltern scholars—all from elite caste-class backgrounds themselves—also failed to acknowledge the struggles of untouchables against both colonial and caste Hindu oppression and exploitation. With their stress on non-modern forms of articulations, Subaltern scholars overlooked the struggles of the untouchables because of the latter's use of modern institutions and ideas against caste oppression and inequality. It is particularly stunning that the Subaltern Studies project, aimed at rewriting social history in India, would overlook such a widespread and systematic structure of social oppression and violence in society. This omission resonates in a powerful assertion of philosopher Charles Mills about a similar silence of Western philosophy around the question of race and racial privilege. According to him:

> ... white supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today. You will not find this term in introductory, or even advanced, texts in political theory. A standard under-graduate philosophy course will start off with Plato and Aristotle, perhaps say something about Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli, move on to Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Marx, and then wind up with Rawls and Nozick. It will introduce you to notions of aristocracy, democracy, absolutism, liberalism, representative government, socialism, welfare capitalism, and libertarianism. But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political

[3] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years. And this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that standard textbooks and courses have for the most part been written and designed by whites, who take their racial privilege so much for granted that they do not even see it as political, as a form of domination.[4]

Similarly, Subaltern Studies scholars, while questioning the secular hierarchies of modernity such as race and knowledge production, did not engage with traditional hierarchies like caste and untouchability in India. Nevertheless, the growing political pressure in the Indian intellectual sphere eventually impelled the Subalterns to open their guarded space to Kancha Ilaiah,[5] a Sudra[6] intellectual, in the ninth volume of *Subaltern Studies*, published in 1996. However, though a welcome inclusion, Ilaiah's interventions are mostly based on his personal observations and do not engage either with historical sources or evidence of Dalit agency/articulations nor with theoretical insights in the context of anti-caste movements (for instance, the powerful works of Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar). Not surprisingly, his writings have not withstood the scrutiny of academic debates and have been criticized for their lack of theoretical or historical rigour. Even Subaltern scholars, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, have dismissed his work as 'polemical'.[7] Ilaiah's article in the *Subaltern Studies* volume brought in a much-needed perspective from the margins, but, in the long run, his interventions have proved inadequate and, in some ways, counter-productive to the agenda of Dalit historiography.

Thus, overall, the historical imagination in South Asia either consciously or unconsciously produced caste-blind narratives of anti-colonial struggles and the making of the modern Indian nation. Even when untouchables as individuals and communities played crucial

[4] Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 1.

[5] Kancha Ilaiah, 'Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative', in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 165–200.

[6] Sudras are located towards the bottom of the caste ladder but are not affected by the stigma of untouchability, that is, they are not considered untouchables (Dalits).

[7] Dipesh Chakrabarty, Public Life of History: An Argument out of India, *Public Culture*, 20.1, 2008, p. 158. Chakrabarty writes, 'Dalit historians have not always cared for "evidence" in the way that we might expect them to if they were our colleagues or students in universities. Ilaiah, for instance, writes with a clear and explicit intention to eschew the use of "source" and "evidence" and to base his "history" on "experience" alone' (p. 157).

roles in envisioning the idea of a nation and actively participated and mobilized in the nationalist anti-colonial campaigns (for example, under the leadership of caste Hindu nationalist leaders like M. K. Gandhi), sadly neither their voices nor their stories formed part of mainstream narratives of anti-colonial nationalism in India. In fact, many untouchable leaders even organized their own parallel movements that questioned their traditional exclusion from public and political spheres. For example, in 1922 an untouchable nationalist leader Kusuma Dharmanna wrote a pamphlet in Telugu entitled '*Makodhi Ee Nalla Dhorathanamu* (We Do not Want Black Landlordism)'[8] which exposed the inherent contradictions and hypocrisy of a nationalist leadership that fought for freedom but at the same time treated fellow Indians as untouchables and denied them basic rights. Thus the untouchables as intellectuals and political activists consciously wrote about and articulated their alternative perceptions of nation and nationalism in India.

While historical writings in South Asia did not pay heed to the untouchables and their struggles, for sociologists and anthropologists, they became and remained categories of theoretical illustrations. To Christian missionaries, the untouchables represented the dumb millions in need of protection and saving. Sociological and anthropological studies that followed the colonial tradition obsessively conducted village studies to understand the changing nature of caste dynamics and political power at the village level in post-independent India. From M. N. Srinivas[9] to Louis Dumont,[10] they presented changing dynamics of caste from the dominant Hindu Brahmanical perspective. At one level these studies reinforce the idea of untouchables as the lowest social being performing condemned occupations, without any part to play on the power structure of the village. In other words, the untouchable becomes a mute spectator who has neither the power nor the will to alter the traditional social structure and his/her own fate. On the other hand, the Christian missionaries in their proselytizing zeal view the untouchables with

[8] Kusuma Dharmanna, *Makodhi Ee Nalla Dhorathanamu (We Do not Want This Black Landlordism)*, Cocanada: Dharmasadhani Press, 1922.

[9] M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1962, and *Remembered Village*, Oakland: University of California Press, 1976, are considered seminal works on caste dynamics. He also formulated the concept of Sansritization to illustrate the dominant castes' emulation of Brahmanism.

[10] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste and its Implication*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

pity and compassion with an eye to increasing their flock. They are not seen as individuals with ambition to rise or to carve their own destinies through social or political emancipation. Along with the missionaries, sociological and anthropological studies kept the untouchables chained to caste Hinduism as voiceless victims of violence and injustice. Thus while historical narratives showed a complete apathy and did not acknowledge the role the untouchables played in the making of nation, for the sociologists and anthropologists they remained an exotic vestige of the pre-modern feudal caste system.

However, in more recent decades, the juggernaut of political democracy in post-colonial India has opened up new vistas for the marginal and oppressed sections that have a strategic numerical majority. Untouchables as a community have emerged as a crucial actor in tilting the balance of political power in elections. In addition, the rise of an educated, professional middle class among them has redefined the contours of public debates. As intellectuals and political activists they are transforming the political and intellectual landscape of India by demanding equal rights and a share in the nation and are also asking questions about their invisibility in the narratives of nation and its history.

Historically enslaved by caste, the untouchables are socially marginalized and economically impoverished but, in fact, were never passive subjects. Throughout history they actively engaged in physical and psychological struggles, strived to emancipate their community from deplorable conditions, and also aspired to a dignified social existence. But the intellectual milieu in India, dominated by a Hindu Brahmanical consciousness, perpetually treated them as untouchables and unseeable people, and refused to take note of their personal and social ambitions. They remained invisible and their voices were excluded from every sphere. Even when they appeared as active agents of change along with the caste Hindu nationalist leaders, their credentials as nationalists were unqualified and they did not fit into the neat narratives of anti-colonial nationalism. Instead a leader like Dr B. R. Ambedkar was condemned as an imperialist stooge because of his acceptance of modern institutions and ideas as forces of liberation. Thus, retrieving their hidden struggles and making their voices heard in the historical narratives would not only fill the gaps but also pave the way for social justice by embracing excluded communities as political actors. Most importantly, including the social experiences of untouchables into the nation's narratives would enhance the project of social democracy as well as make the untouchables visible to the

larger world. Such attempts also situate their quest for dignity and respect alongside the struggles and aspirations of other marginalized communities. Moreover, positively blending their role as agents in the making of modern India, along with multiple voices and struggles ignored by mainstream narratives, would enrich the texture of social and political history in general. As Carter G. Woodson's words (quoted in the epigraph to this article) emphasized, the significance of Black History Month is that it highlights not just black history but the historical role of black people in the making of civilization in general; similarly, the discipline of history in India should incorporate Dalit narratives into the general narrative of the nation thereby bringing to the fore the role of Dalits in the making of the modern Indian nation.

The recent surge in the numbers of untouchables on the Indian political landscape, acting as a crucial political force in changing the equations of power, have compelled scholars to investigate the roots of their politics. As we have pointed out above, there is a glaring anomaly between their forceful presence in the Indian political arena and their complete absence in historical narratives. Interestingly, even for political theorists, untouchable mobilizations are unsettling and they are unable to provide plausible theories to account for this.

Despite disregard from mainstream academia, untouchables as individuals and a community are involved in a relentless struggle to recoup their lost histories and regain social equality and political space in the unfolding terrain of democracy. In fact, they have creatively used the available opportunities to assert their political rights and resisted oppressive institutions by reconfiguring alternative routes of liberation. While struggling to overhaul social and economic structures to improve their material conditions and gain social equality, they have written the histories of their struggles and re-imagined the past and filled it with positive historical narratives to rebuild their wounded psyches and stolen self-esteem.

Significantly they have tried to obliterate the humiliating and ignoble social identities ascribed to them by caste Hindu society by inventing a new social identity endowed with dignity and self-respect. In this context, the reconstruction of new self-identities was a quintessential part of their political imagination. Therefore the identities of untouchables have moved away from stigmatized Brahmanical identities such as *Panchamas*, *Asprusya*, and been distanced from the patronizing *Harijan* identity bestowed by M. K. Gandhi. They have envisioned radical, self-assertive identities like Adi-Hindu, Adi-Andhra, and finally settled on the radical, rebellious identity of Dalits

in contemporary India. Dalit, meaning a broken people, defines their self-perception, defies the humiliating Brahmanical Hindu past, and articulates a self-assertive agency in the public sphere. Therefore, the public presence of the Dalits in the last decade, has, for many scholars, been an unnerving experience. Through their sustained struggles Dalits are emerging as formidable force that is impossible to ignore when trying to come to an understanding of the political and intellectual milieu of South Asia. As W. E. B. du Bois said in his fascinating book *The Souls of Black Folk*, 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line'.[11] Similarly the problem of twenty-first century South Asia (India) is the problem of caste difference. As a mental frame, caste not only imposes a psychological barrier in social interaction but also cripples the physical mobility of Dalits and leaves visible scars on their personalities.

The growing geopolitical importance of the South Asian region in the global economic paradigm and in politics led to a bourgeoning field of studies in contemporary politics which invariably dealt with Dalits. But most of those studies lack historical insights, and analyse politics after independence as though the pre-independence era has no bearing on post-independent politics.[12] Even though Dalit struggles and their active engagement in politics are as old as the beginning of nationalism in India, historical legacies of the past were not coalesced as a background to the contemporary upsurge. Therefore there has been a pressing need to connect the dots from across the regions to decipher the meanings of their struggles and narrate their stories as a collective that fought for democracy and equality as part of building a new nation. It is thus noteworthy that in recent times some serious historical research has used colonial archives, literary genres, newspaper reports, political pamphleteering, among other things, in an attempt to investigate Dalit lives from multiple perspectives. Some refreshing works using historical anthropology as well as political, legal, and human rights perspectives, have advanced the studies on Dalits. Moreover, these new studies have placed the Dalit perspective alongside larger global struggles for justice and equality such as the gender and race movements. These attempts have sought to bring

[11] W. E. B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover Publications, 1994, p. 9.

[12] Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, and Kanchan Chadra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

clarity and a distinctive understanding of Dalits to the forefront of social science scholarship. While such interventions add a much-needed perspective to the field, one needs to note how, despite such efforts, the majority of Dalits live and exist on the margins and struggle to be included in mainstream theoretical discussions.

Against this backdrop, the three books under review here, namely, Ramnarayan Rawat's *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India,* and *Humiliation: Claims and Context* edited by Gopal Guru, powerfully bring Dalits to the centre stage of South Asian historical narratives, not just as political actors but also as visionaries who rewrote and reshaped political ideas and movements in modern India. They frame and establish Dalits as central to the very definition of modern India in a variety of ways. By using colonial archives, historical anthropological approaches, legal and constitutional approaches, human rights perspectives, as well as insights from African American studies and European-American social science, they retrieve the Dalits from hidden archives and establish them as an invincible force in history.

While constructing the parallel course of the Dalits' historical struggles, which went against caste Hindu-dominated anti-colonial nationalist politics, Rawat's book lays the foundations for the autonomous Dalit movement in North India. By using colonial archival documents and Hindi tracts and pamphlets, it systematically pieces together social, economic, cultural, and political aspects to build a Dalit motif in terms of their alternative politics and visions. Rawat's most important contribution is the critical reading of local archives against the imperial archive in reconfiguring the identity of Chamars as significant peasants rather than stigmatized leather workers. In fact, in Rawat's reading, Chamar Dalits of North India emerge as independent peasants with substantial landholdings who paid land taxes to the colonial state equivalent to any other caste Hindu landholders. He powerfully shows that Dalits were not victims; rather, they were peasants with independent means who sold grains at the market. This refreshing depiction goes against the conventional writings on Dalits which portray them as landless labourers at the mercy of caste Hindu landholders. By digging deep into the Settlements reports and criminal investigation department reports from local archives, Rawat reads against the archival grain to argue that Chamars, as a community, were chained to the leather industry by colonial officials and their Brahmanical allies. This argument

goes a long way towards exposing the compliance of colonialism and Brahmanism in implicating Dalits as criminals who poisoned cows for their hides. Rawat's argument is also significant because there is a strand of Dalit intellectuals who uncritically celebrate colonialism because it provided educational and employment opportunities, and emancipated them.

Although Rawat does not dismiss the positive contribution of colonial institutions and ideas, he exposes the duplicity of colonialism in aligning with Brahmanical Hindus to re-entrench the caste stigma against Dalits. Defying the complaint made by many scholars working on Dalits regarding the dearth—and even unavailability—of sources in colonial records, through his meticulous research Rawat commendably locates Dalit stories from local settlement reports, annual police records, and veterinary records. This way of reading archives opens up new possibilities for writing the history of Dalits and bringing colonial documents into conversation with Dalit political struggles. Rawat further argues that the creation of a positive self-image and respectable identity was at the heart of Dalit politics during colonial and post-colonial times. As an example, Rawat informs us about the Chamars' historical endeavours to create a positive self-image and identity through reforms as well as through the writing of histories of the community, as Kshatriyas in the beginning and as *Achhut* under the leadership of Achhutanand. Metaphorically, the construction of *Achhut* as untouched, uncontaminated or pure, inverted and challenged the traditional stigmatized connotations of 'untouchable', thereby claiming higher social status for Dalits and highlighting their refusal to accept social indignities.

The central narrative of the book revolves around the history of Dalit struggles which has direct bearing on understanding contemporary Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh. In particular, his book weaves the historical background to the unprecedented rise of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh to the highest political offices not through lobbying but through organizing communities and compelling the caste Hindus to accept their leadership. The story of Kumari Mayawati, the first Dalit woman chief minister in India, thus lies not just in her own political prowess but can be traced back to the historical struggles and tactical manoeuvres of earlier generations of Dalits in the region.

Anupama Rao's *Caste Question*, a densely written text, ambitiously covers a vast historical period from the early colonial period to the 1990s, but succeeds in untangling several complex social and

cultural knots which shaped larger developments in western India. It traces the story of Dalit resistance to the evolution of colonial modernity and its liberal institutional forms which facilitated the rise of anti-caste and anti-Brahman consciousness. Mahar Dalits are put in the centre, as protagonists of the narrative, The book uses historical, anthropological, and human rights perspectives as well as European-American theoretical insights. It maps out the gradual politicization of Dalits along with the other colonized groups. By using liberal humanism as the intellectual source, Rao argues that Dalits advocated social equality and human dignity as pre-conditions for independence to India. For both Rawat and Rao, at one level, colonialism and institutional forms act as crucial platforms from which Dalits launched their political resistance against the caste Hindus and their hegemonic politics. On the other hand, Rao also points out the negative role played by colonialism in the lives of Dalits who subscribed to a Brahmanical world view. By firmly placing the text within mainstream nationalist developments, she skilfully teases out the alternative politics of Dalits that threatened the smooth flow of caste Hindu nationalist assimilative politics and altered the meaning of nation in India. Rightly, Rao establishes Dr B. R. Ambedkar as the central figure of the Dalit movement in western India. Moreover, the book re-enacts the story of Ambedkar as a Western-educated visionary politician and his role as a torchbearer for the emancipation struggles of Dalits across the Indian subcontinent.

Untouchability has been institutionalized as a form of social practice in India for centuries, enforced by Hindu Brahmanical ideology which sanctioned violence, exclusion, and humiliation as punishments for those who questioned it. Indeed, the struggles of Dalits to resist the tenets of Hinduism and their demand for access to public spaces were seen not only as a threat to the inherited privileges of caste Hindus but also a revolt against the Hindu religion. Therefore caste Hindus' response to Dalits' struggles was violent retribution which not only reinforced their domination but also aimed to show the untouchables their 'rightful' place in society. The precarious existence of untouchables as a community on the margins of Hindu social life is blighted by violence, and their collective efforts to escape from it makes them vulnerable to violence at multiple levels. Rao brings out this predicament by narrating Dalit experiences, including the irate mob Ambedkar faced at the Mahad water tank in Satyagraha, the molestation and naked parading of Dalit women at Sirasgaon in 1963 for fetching water from a public well, and the brutal killing of Dalit

Kotwal on the steps of the Hanuman temple in 1991 for trying to install a statue of Ambedkar at Pimpri village in Parbhani district. She further maintains that the survival of the Dalits is based on the endurance of historic violence at the hands of caste Hindus. Retrieving the Dalit self from the clutches of violent Hindu Brahmanical culture and ploughing new paths of liberation became the fundamental project of Ambedkar and his followers. That is why Ambedkar rediscovered Buddhism and reinterpreted it as, unlike Hinduism, a religion of peace that conforms to the principles of liberal humanism. However, endemic violence against Dalits in contemporary India signifies not just their vulnerability, but can also be read as a sign of their refusal to accept social indignities and their aspiration for self-respect and dignity.

Another significant aspect of the book is its critical analysis of the role of colonial and post-colonial state policy initiatives that are supposed to protect Dalits from caste violence and vulnerable conditions. Even though state policies did act as cushioning for Dalits against their everyday sufferings, ironically state policies also made their lives more precarious by reinforcing the stigma of caste not only in the eyes of caste Hindus but also in the perception of state. It further forced Dalits to internalize the feeling of victimhood. In this way Rao demonstrates the limits of dependence on the modern state for the emancipation of Dalits. Against this backdrop she foregrounds Dalits as the central figure in the conceptualization of ideas of modern politics in India and presents the Dalits' consistent resistance against caste-based oppression and inequality.

Even though Rawat's and Rao's works are region-centric in terms of their focus, both are located in the historical context of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalist struggles. Their historical context enables the reader to see the stories they narrate as part of one historical process rather than mutually exclusive processes that took place in their regional settings. As both the texts powerfully show, despite regional differences, caste Hinduism as a framework for the ideology of domination, imbued with multiple forms of violence, remains the modus operandi across India. Navigating through colonial and post-colonial landscapes, both works draw from factual incidents to enhance the argument. They also argue that from the early nineteenth century to post-independent India, untouchables as a community negotiated their identity—from passive victims as oppressed Hindus, depressed classes, and Scheduled Castes to Adi-Hindus, and as original inhabitants to rebellious Dalits. Through their meticulous field studies

both the authors amplify their argument that, despite linguistic and regional boundaries, the defining feature of Dalits in India was their untouchability as well as their enforced servitude. Both of these needed to be cast off in order for them to build a respectable self-identity as individuals and collectively as a community.

Humiliation: Claims and Context edited by Gopal Guru, an eminent political thinker who is also Dalit, is a ground-breaking intervention in modern South Asian studies. It is perhaps the first book that attempts to theorize Dalit experience and agency by formulating theoretical concepts. So far scholarship on Dalits has relied on empirical materials and perspectives to reconstruct their political and ideological struggles. This is arguably the first-ever book to focus on Dalit agency and experience, and marks the theoretical beginning of an exploration of the concepts of self-respect, dignity, recognition, equality, and humiliation which are fundamental to the very definition of the Dalit self and community identity. As critical studies on Dalit life narratives emerge as a field in itself, for example through recent works by Sarah Beth Hunt[13] and Laura Brueck,[14] Guru's work will not only help theorize the Dalit experience, it will also generate inter-disciplinary theoretical conversations beyond South Asia that engage with the issues of race, gender, and diasporic identities. In his insightful introduction and also in a separate chapter entitled 'Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self-respect', Guru traces the historic roots of humiliation to colonial rule based on the racial divisions and humiliating prejudices against indigenous elites and subalterns alike. He argues, 'in colonial societies, [the] traditional elite develop an insight into humiliation. However, they acquire this insight not because they have an innate moral capacity ... it necessarily disrupts their feudal complacency and awakens them to their own subordination.'[15] But in the local configuration of power, as Guru elaborates, indigenous elites did not act in a moral and ethical way to produce just order but reproduced 'caste humiliation' as an assertion of their power over subordinate groups. Thus subjugated sections of the population like the untouchables, once introduced to modern ideas and institutions, not only expose the hypocrisy of caste Hindus

[13] Sarah Beth Hunt, *Hindi Dalit Literature and the Politics of Representation*, Delhi: Routledge, 2014.

[14] Laura Brueck, *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

[15] Guru, *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, p. 3.

who were fighting for independence while treating fellow humans inhumanely but also reconstitute their selves away from the caste matrix and Hinduism. With humiliation being a crucial component of caste Hindu society for centuries, colonial reconfiguration indirectly awakened the untouchables and 'played an enabling role'. In framing the theoretical basis for interrogating humiliation, Guru engages with Western philosophical traditions of Hegel, Kant, Marx, and others to connect Dalit resistance to the wider world.

The other contributors are luminaries in South Asian studies. Their attempts to theorize Dalit experience and place it in the larger social science academic context not only add sophistication and seriousness to Dalit studies but also reinforce the crucial place of Dalits in India's political and ideological imaginations. As the contributors belong to multiple disciplines like political science, legal studies, history, sociology, psychoanalysis, and gender and Dalit studies, they all bring a unique dimension to the understanding of the Dalit experience. They interrogate the notion of humiliation not just as a subjective experience but also as a social, psychological, political, and historically based phenomenon, and multiple perspectives are brought to the conversation. All the articles in the volume place untouchables as centrally important in understanding the meaning of humiliation. While they do not come to a conclusive definition of humiliation, the essays persuasively argue that the essential constituent for the realization of humiliation is the political consciousness among the oppressed, that is the Dalits. Whether they approach humiliation from a socio-psychological perspective like Ashish Nandi or take political and philosophical approaches like Bhikhu Parekh and Sanjay Palshikar, they all place experience and the self-awareness to fight against humiliation as the essential markers which initiate the political project of emancipation. Bhikhu Parekh delineates the meaning of humiliation as a violation of self-respect linked to a person's moral and ethical existence because it 'diminishes him or her as [a] person' in their own eyes and those of others. By using historical and logical insights, he probes into institutionalized humiliation in the societies organized around hierarchical relations. He argues that in hierarchical societies (like caste-based society in India) humiliation is hard-wired into the structures in which dominant ideologies play a crucial role in justifying and internalizing it as a social norm. He points out that ideological contestation of dominance, along with agendas of social and economic emancipation will provide possibilities of escape from the 'inherent inferiority'. In this way Dalit politics demand not

just material improvement to their lives but equal treatment as human beings. Therefore psychological emancipation that both improves the self-esteem of Dalits and changes the perception of others becomes an important motto of their movements. Since the barrier of caste is not just a physical but also, equally, a debilitating mental experience, V. Geetha insightfully emphasizes the idea of the psychological wounds inherent in the experience of untouchability.

The three scholarly writings discussed above can indeed be considered seminal in the field due to their representation of the Dalit as an agent of history. Especially central to Rawat and Rao's ideas and arguments is the politically conscious Dalit who understands his/her subjugated position in history and attempts to transform it through ideological contestations and political struggles. Their works also point out that any history of modern South Asia, which aims to be true to its people's aspirations and ground realities, must include the narratives of caste-based discrimination and exploitation. It is noteworthy that these works are not exclusive stories of Dalits themselves; rather, they are testimonies to a larger conversation with the rest of society: the central thematic focus connects Dalit struggles with the larger dialogues about the nation, nationalism, democracy, and egalitarianism in India. Guru's volume, by probing into the subjective experience of Dalits, attempts to account for the anger in Dalit writings as an expression of the self. Therefore through their efforts, Rawat, Rao, and Guru make the story of Dalits the story of modern India in many ways. They bring to the fore the creative role of the Dalits in the making of modern India and pave the way for future conversations to integrate Dalit struggles and resistance into the narratives of South Asia. By combining historical, political, social, and subjective perspectives on the experiences of Dalits, these volumes articulate the essence of Dalit-ness as a socially entrenched political expression.

Finally, the article would like to make a few general observations which do not merely reflect the limitations of the books under review, but act as pointers for further studies on Dalit history in the larger context. Dalits, as a category of analysis, capture the historical experiences of untouchables and act as a new epistemic concept which contends Brahmanical oppression and domination. However, one also needs to be sensitive to the tensions within its application as a homogenous category. Sub-caste divisions and political competition among different Dalit communities across India have brought to the surface the often-uncomfortable reality of heterogeneity among

Dalits. This is similar to the nuances of heterogeneity in the categories of gender, race, and class, and demonstrates that Dalit identity is not a foolproof construct but one fraught with complexities and tensions. This is definitely a dimension that Dalit scholarship, as it evolves further, needs to pay special attention to. The second point is that the Dalit struggles and articulations are predominantly presented through exclusively male perspectives and are often blind to gender issues.[16] Thus the intersection of the categories of caste and gender needs more stringent analysis. Otherwise, the glossing over of the voices of women in the Dalit story would be no different from the similar omission of Dalits from the larger mainstream narratives of the nation. Finally, the historical narrative presented in Rawat and Rao's work does not include the voices of Dalit leaders and organizers who were Gandhi's followers. This lacuna leads to an exclusion of a major aspect of Dalit articulations across India. One needs to be reminded that even Ambedkar had to concede an electoral defeat to the cricketer Palwankar Baloo, a fellow Dalit but also a Congress (Gandhian) candidate in the 1937 elections after the Poona Pact![17]

[16] A recent, and welcome, addition to the field is: Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination*, Delhi: Routledge, 2014.

[17] Ramachandra Guha, 'The Moral that can be Safely Drawn from the Hindus' Magnificent Victory: Cricket, Caste and the Palwankar Brothers', in James H. Mills (ed.), *Subaltern Sports: Politics and Sport in South Asia*, London: Anthem Press, 2005.