
Daring to Imagine Caste's Antithesis

BALMURLI NATRAJAN

At a historical moment when the project of Hindu *rashtra* tears into the project of bourgeois liberal democracy in India, how can we think of equality? Anand Teltumbde's book *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* combines sober analysis with relentless critique to seek a way out of this moment. While the title is a reminder of how caste is central to what India means today, the subtitle dares to imagine caste's antithesis—an India shorn off its deep roots and long shadows of inequality. It represents what Gayatri Spivak (1996) calls a "storying" for the "clearing of a space from where to create a perspective." Verily, Teltumbde's storying is an interpretation of the world (of India) for the task of changing it fundamentally.

As a successful corporate management executive, even while resisting capitalism as a scholar-activist on the street, Teltumbde identifies the problem:

In this context of the Indian system, where caste and capitalism amalgamate, the biggest obstruction to the growth of a politics of change has been the growing divergence between the dalit and left movements. (p 20)

Such an identification is generative of the logic of the book clustered around three themes—rapprochement of left and Dalit movements (Chapters 1 to 5), analysis of neo-liberal Hindutva from the left-Dalit perspective (Chapters 6 to 10), and critique of alternative political formations (Chapters 11 to 13).

Teltumbde takes on the task of showing how the Dalit and left movements share interwoven ideals and goals, if not methods in Chapter 2. He rescues Marx from Marxism/Marxists and Ambedkar from Ambedkarism/Ambedkarites to show how caste and class inhere in each other, and that both Marx and Ambedkar grasped this fact in different but related ways. While Marx operated with a universalist view of history and abstract

BOOK REVIEWS

Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva by Anand Teltumbde, *Delhi: Navayana, 2018; pp 432, ₹600.*

categories (of class), Ambedkar operated with a particularist view of Indian reality and concrete categories (of caste). Yet, both of them frequently converged through Ambedkar's view of "caste as an enclosed class," and Marx's view of castes as internally fragmenting class formation.

Teltumbde severely indicts Indian communists for their particular reading of the base-superstructure metaphor in Marx, which rendered caste irredeemably as an ideological rather than a material reality. Chapter 3 follows with a historical journey to the "pragmatic" philosophical roots of Ambedkar's politics. Here Teltumbde shows how Ambedkar's political actions operated within a notion of a Deweyian Fabian socialism which shaped his view of Marxism and communism (shared ideals, divergent methods), the Indian state (possibility of "revolutionary change without bloodshed"), and education (need for enlightened beings, *prabuddha*). He critiques an Ambedkarism as hollowing out Ambedkar through opportunistic electoral politics shaped by a virulent anti-communism/anti-Marxism, combined with a "hero-worship" of Ambedkar. As he carefully documents, both these views were anathema to Ambedkar.

The author deepens his analysis with a critical look at reservations (Chapter 1). He critiques reservations without being against it by shoring up the case for "reservations within reservations" (first put forward by the *vidvat sabha*, council of intellectuals led by Prakash Ambedkar). This takes reservations out of the thrall of electoral politics while ensuring its benefits to the most needy among Dalits. The ultimate objective in this chapter is

to reveal the character of the Indian state for left-Dalit politics. To this end, Teltumbde offers a fresh reading of India's democratic spinal cord—the making of its Constitution. He argues, with historical backing, that the Constitution was not Ambedkar's signature achievement. Indeed, Ambedkar distanced himself from it on grounds that the Constitution (as it finally stood) did not carry the spirit of his intended reforms, which made the project of annihilation of caste a near impossibility. This is a call for Dalit movements to rethink the character of the Indian state, and to move beyond assumptions about the guarantees of the state.

Anti-Dalit State

It is deeply disturbing for readers who think about Indian polity as a form of democracy to read Chapters 4 and 5, which expose the Indian state's anti-Dalit, authoritarian, and class character. Teltumbde shows how the (changed) character of the Indian state (since the 1980s) makes it increasingly against Dalit interests (long and medium term). Consequently, state-guaranteed impunity to perpetrators sustains caste violence against Dalits. This disables Dalit state functionaries' capacity to react in a timely fashion to atrocities. Chapter 5 shows how the technology of "nationalism" and the crushing of all dissent to neo-liberal governance is realised through labelling dissenting citizens (Dalits and others) as Naxalites or Maoists, backed up by draconian laws of sedition. When combined with the tokenism of major political parties who project pliable Dalits as representatives, we get a sense of how a neoliberal Indian state is deeply anti-Dalit.

Not a Caste-free Market

Taken together, Chapters 1 to 5 outline a left-Dalit perspective that challenges orthodoxies of Marxists and Ambedkarites. Chapters 6 to 10 put such a perspective to work. In Chapter 6, Teltumbde recovers a social history of Dalit struggles around the land question, starting with Gujarat (the state with the highest rate of violence against Dalits) and in other parts of India. It also reminds us of how Ambedkar

engaged the land question. Sadly, as Teltumbde points out, the dominant Ambedkarite movement shied away from making land a central point of its struggles, and hence faces a challenge from the new and invigorated grammar of a Dalit movement today that has embraced what is typically thought of as a “left” agenda. Chapter 7 further explores the distinctions between a left–Dalit politics (that brings class and caste together) and an Ambedkarite politics (focused only on identitarian issues). Drawing from the history of Black struggles in the United States (us), Teltumbde exposes the hollowness of the claims of a section of Dalits who view the market and capitalism as “caste-free.” He argues that the notion of Dalit entrepreneurs is neither new nor signals the erasure of caste by capitalism. Indeed, caste-based entrepreneurial networks are the hallmark of India’s colonial and post-colonial economy into which “Dalit capitalists” enter without transforming the caste–class relations.

He launches a blistering attack on neo-liberal Hindutva by exposing its attempt to saffronise Ambedkar (Chapter 8). He shows how it relies on misreading Ambedkar, misrepresenting his actions, fabricating and transmitting “fake news.” Instead, Teltumbde documents how uncooptable Ambedkar is, given his consistent and openly articulated views against Brahminism, Hinduism, and communalism. In the same vein, he also shows how important Ambedkar is in a struggle against a looming fascism. Chapters 9 and 10 take on two of the most lucrative lies of neo-liberal Hindutva reforms—education and sanitation (both fundamentally shaped by caste). Privatisation guides both sets of interventions to the detriment of the bulk of the population—poor, marginalised, and vulnerable due to caste-based exclusions. In both domains, the attempts have either been haphazard or wanton publicity stunts. The result is that Indian society grows increasingly unequal without attending to the fundamental issues of education and healthcare.

In the last three chapters, Teltumbde packs a punch against an identitarian Dalit movement (exemplified by the Bahujan

Samaj Party—BSP), the middle-class movement around corruption (exemplified by Aam Aadmi Party—AAP), and the continuing opportunism of the Congress. He skilfully shows how the BSP works within a system-reproduction rather than system-transformation mode since its core concept of “Bahujan” neglects contradictions inherent in a caste–class society. Despite a modicum of benefits that accrued to sections of Uttar Pradesh’s Dalits, the inequities of caste remained under BSP’s rule. Similarly, he indicts AAP for its refusal to admit, let alone engage with, the structural reality of caste and capitalism in Indian society, succumbing to the personality cult of middle-class puritanical nationalism around corruption. The Congress is severely critiqued on its historical opportunism vis-à-vis Dalits and the caste question, but nonetheless Teltumbde leaves open some scope for a new leadership to emerge that would face the caste question squarely.

Republic of Caste is a public and scholarly engagement with India’s most complex and durable problem—inherent inequality between humans. Its arguments cannot be easily dismissed as being unrealistic, or uncharitable to opponents. Teltumbde historicises each argument, cedes ground to some opponents (such as BSP), and takes the left to task where needed. The following four themes aid the clearing of “space” in Teltumbde’s “storying” of a Dalit–left perspective.

Identity: The book rightly problematises an identitarian approach to caste and points to the need for a left–Dalit perspective. However, notions and sensibilities about identity go along with a quest for dignity and community belonging; they undergird political mobilisation. Given this, the question of the identity of the category “Dalit” needs reflection. For instance, the book (perhaps wishfully?) notes that its view of reforming reservations may aid the “consolidation of all subcastes of dalits into a class” (p 90). Yet, obviously, the notion of “class” here is not one related to positions occupied in the production process since Dalits are internally differentiated by class. Neither is it about shared “culture” since there is immense variation of shared

beliefs, world views, habits and “learned information” among Dalits. Consequently, the notion “Dalit” needs to be clarified as neither a caste, nor a class, nor a cultural identity.

Dalit is primarily an anti-caste identity—a liberating political identity born of historical and social necessity, not a primordial and provincialising (caste) identity. Such a view of “Dalit” also brings in the question of non-Dalits within a left–Dalit formation to be in “solidarity but in/as difference” (invoking Spivak again). Identity cannot be eschewed. It needs to be unpacked to enable what Mouffe (1991) called a “political community” held together only “by a common bond, a public concern,” a “common recognition of a set of ethico-political values.” This is the possibility to pursue upon the ruins of an identitarian caste politics.

Caste-patriarchy: Except for raising the deeply troubling facts of rapes and humiliation of Dalit women, the book does not explore the imbrication of gender with caste and class. This takes away from the value of its main thrust—crafting a left–Dalit perspective. For, Brahminism and neo-liberal capitalism operate on caste-gendered bodies—wherein Dalit men and women, and non-Dalit women appear as subjugated identities producing surplus. Caste-patriarchy is a primary form of violence, structural (systemic) and conjunctural (situational). It operates in brutal and banal ways. We “see” caste-patriarchy when violence erupts publicly as “honour killings” and “caste atrocities.” But caste-patriarchy is also banal, operating silently as a “normal” structuring force. Bringing into focus a caste-patriarchy enriches a left–Dalit perspective by showing how production relies on reproduction. This is because caste-patriarchy animates key institutions and practices that are part of our “traditions”—patrilineality, arranged marriage, “traditional” family roles, and purity/pollution rituals. We can never understand the brutality of caste-patriarchy without understanding the banality of its violence.

Transitional programme: The book offers a devastating argument about the fragility of bourgeois democracy in India.

It further reveals the problematic character of a “sarvajan” electoral politics (BSP), middle-class casteist anti-corruption (AAP), and a statist imbroglio (Ambedkarites). Yet, the fight against a rising tide of ultra-nationalist fascism in India demands articulation of a transitional programme and goals (aside from ultimate or maximalist ones) for a united front. Mobilisation around a Dalit-left perspective therefore needs goals accessible to a majority in the present and yet incompatible with the system in the long run. This requires showing how a growing movement for protecting the Constitution needs a critique of statism and populism, a growing demand for employment needs a critique of capitalist relations that make employment chimerical, and the ongoing struggle against atrocities needs a cultural transformation through annihilation of caste.

Caste violence and violence of caste:
This book is a powerful argument against

viewing caste as a benign institution or as having redeeming facets or as withering away with modernity. There is one clear thread throughout the book—that caste has nothing to recommend itself since caste is itself a form of violence. Keeping this in mind allows us to appreciate Ambedkar’s vociferous defence of the annihilation of caste (nor simply casteism or untouchability). The question that remains is: How to annihilate a violent institution? If Ambedkar viewed a bloodless constitutional path as promising a way out, how do Dalits defend themselves when the state itself fails to protect them (given the brazen dilution of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989)? How do Dalits defend themselves against caste atrocities when society is celebrating caste identities as a cultural right in an age of multiculturalism? The question then is: How to characterise this defence? As Paul Farmer notes, structural violence

against the poor of the world not only produces social suffering, but also a violent silencing of that suffering. Subalterns have long ceased to remain silent in India (were they ever?), and their speech and actions have begun to rattle the echo-chambers of a liberal discourse about non-violence. It is time to heed Teltumbde when he notes,

The wrath of the wretched scares the world.
The fair demand is that the world sit up and recognize their wretchedness. (p 180)

Balmurli Natrajan (natrajanb@wpunj.edu) is professor and chair, Department of Anthropology, William Paterson University of New Jersey.

REFERENCES

- Mouffe, C (1991): “Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community,” *Community at Loose Ends*, edited by Miami Theory Collective, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp 70–82.
- Spivak, Gayatri (1996): “Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga (1993–94),” *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, New York: Routledge.