Joshil. K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. *Dalit Literatures in India.* New Delhi, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2016

In their introduction, the editors, Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, quite rightly ask, “how is it possible that the major political and literary development that has deeply altered the Indian academic and non-academic world as well as Indian society at large in the last three decades, has not had a greater echo outside India?” (1) Almost all Indian literary language journals and publications since the 1990’s regularly publish Dalit literature; in fact, Dalit-identified writers have worked assiduously in making it possible to define the field as “Dalit” rather than “working class” or “Marxist” literature (as in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit writer K. Daniel whose novels published in the 1960’s and ‘70’s, set in Northern Sri Lankan Dalit communities were described as part of his Leftist activism). It is not an exaggeration to claim that the most exciting development in many regional languages in recent years has been Dalit writing, instantly identifiable by its powerfully articulated refusal of local pieties; it is a literature that is deeply aware of its need to bring something new into the world. Even the coining of the name “Dalit” -- which means “broken people” -- as a collective term referring to the various Dalit-identified communities living in the subcontinent and the diaspora, connotes a history of powerlessness.

The volume attempts to present Dalit issues to a non-Indian readership that it identifies as lacking rudimentary knowledge about the phenomenon of Dalit literature. The first essay, the one that is meant to set the tone of the collection, is by G. N. Devy, the Chair of the People’s Linguistic Survey of India. This is a survey done by thousands of volunteer activists in order to mitigate the official Census of India’s inability to count all reported languages. It is important to note that elsewhere, Devy has written persuasively on the politics of such classifications, since State language policies impact the very survival of the speakers of minority languages. But the essay, “Caste Differently,” chosen for publication here is a reprint from the literary magazine *Fountain Ink*, and is a summary of key Dalit criticisms of Indian scriptural discourses (drawn mostly from Ambedkar), followed by a highlighting of British colonial administrative actions that are the foundational epistemes of contemporary Indian caste society. For the reader who might expect to read about current controversies over *Bhashas* (the indigenous languages of the subcontinent) that is at the heart of Devy’s work, the general explanatory mode of the essay is a disappointment.

Even a seasoned academic like M.S.S. Pandian (the second essay in the volume) in “Caste and Democracy: Three Paradoxes,” writes a general essay on the topic, rather than the expected continuation of the epilogue from his polemical *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin* that quotes the Tamil Dalit philosopher and literary writer Raj Gowthaman. Given that Dalit scholarly writing is thriving in multiple Indian languages, the volume has chosen but a few striking examples on literature. Pramod K. Nayar has one of the best essays in the collection on the Indian graphic novel, *A Gardner in the Wastland*; K. Satyanarayana has a superb essay on the convergences of the Durban Discourse (the Human Rights rhetoric that came into being in the wake of the 2001 Durban conference on race) and the cosmopolitan Dalit identity presented in Narendhra Jadhav’s 2003 memoir, *Outcaste: A Memoir*, and Rajkumar Hans’ important essay on the ignored Dalit Intellectual Poets of Punjab from the late Seventeenth to early Twentieth century.

Since Dalit literatures are produced in various Indian languages, in a work of this kind, it is also necessary to explicitly identify regional languages and dialects in a clear fashion. We should take a page from say, Du Bois, Ilaiah, or Ambedkar (who by the way, appears but fleetingly in the book), studied for the ways the writers consciously locate themselves in the texts as partisan speakers of a minority group. For instance, in her introduction for the *Annihilation of Caste*, Arundhati Roy places the terms “parayar” and “Untouchable” in single quotes the first time they appear in her text. Thereafter, Roy openly names the men and their caste origins. It is salutary to remember that in the original Dalit literary texts, the autobiographies especially, the castes of the aggressors are unambiguously named: in Bama’s *Karruku,* it is the Naicker woman who humiliates her grandmother. Interestingly, Sara Sindhu Thomas in her essay referring to this incident, adds the descriptor “upper caste,” in parenthesis, after mentioning the caste name (241). We could also look towards critical writings in Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam and Hindi (to mention but four languages with a rich practice in writing on Dalit literature) for instruction. It is a pity that much of the Tamil critical writings of A. Marx, Ravikumar, S. Ponnuthurai and Raj Gowthaman have not been translated into English *(The* *Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* not withstanding). One also wishes for at least a mention of *Toward a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, which has translations of Iyothee Thass and Periyar.

Santhosh Sadanandan on the artist Savi Sawarkar who has been ignored by the canon in unforgiveable ways is one of the few essays that consciously recognizes that Dalit writings come out of a profound criticism of the establishment and are self-reflexive in the best fashion – see the endnote on the Malayalam writer K.K. Baburaj, whom Sadanandan generously credits with expanding his thinking on current cultural politics. Nida Sajid has an excellent essay on the Dalit-Muslim question in literature that brings in a rich variety of quotes from Naimishraya’s Hindi poetry on the Gujarat communal riots that pitted Dalit Hindus against Muslims – her plaintive “…why the most disenfranchised *among us* have to suffer the most during the rioting in India” (119; emphasis added) is a welcome departure from the ethnography-driven descriptions of some of the other essays.

Works Cited

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