

Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. *Dalit Literatures in India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 366. US\$160.

In their introduction, the editors of *Dalit Literatures in India*, Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, quite rightly ask, “[H]ow 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 presses since the 1990s have regularly published Dalit literature; in fact, Dalit-identified writers have worked assiduously 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 1960s and 1970s, 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 is a result of Dalit writing, instantly identifiable by its powerfully articulated refusal of local pieties. Dalit literature 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 on the subcontinent and in the diaspora connotes a history of powerlessness.

*Dalit Literatures in India* presents Dalit issues to non-Indian readers who lack rudimentary knowledge about the phenomenon of Dalit literature. The first essay, which sets the tone for the collection, is by G. N. Devy, the Chair of the People’s Linguistic Survey of India. This is a survey administered by thousands of volunteer activists in order to mitigate the official Census of India’s inability to count all reported languages. 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 in the collection here, “Caste Differently,” is reprinted from the literary magazine *Fountain Ink* and summarizes key Dalit criticisms of Indian scriptural discourses (drawn mostly from B. R. Ambedkar) then highlights the British colonial administrative actions that are the foundational epistemes of contemporary Indian caste society. For the reader who expects to read about the current controversies over *Bhashas* (the indigenous languages of the subcontinent), which are at the heart of Devy’s work, the explanatory mode of the essay, which avoids the vibrant polemic that characterizes his work elsewhere, is a disappointment.

Even a seasoned academic like M. S. S. Pandian, 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*, which quotes the Tamil Dalit philosopher and literary writer Raj Gowthaman. Given that Dalit scholarly writing is thriving in multiple Indian languages, the volume has few striking essays 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’ essay on the ignored Dalit intellectual poets of Punjab from the late seventeenth to early twentieth century is important.

Since Dalit literatures are produced in various Indian languages, a book of this kind must clearly and explicitly identify regional languages and dialects. For instance, I had to email the translator, K. Satchidanandan, to find out the language of the excerpted poem by S. Joseph that opens the editors’ introduction (it is Malayalam). We should take a page from W. E. B. Du Bois, Kancha Ilaiah, or B. R. Ambedkar, who consciously locate themselves in their texts as partisan speakers of a minority group. For instance, in her introduction to the *Annihilation of Caste*, Arundhati Roy places the terms “parayar” and “Untouchable” in single quotation marks 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 negative ways: 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 parentheses, after mentioning the caste name, undoing Bama’s powerful act of naming the oppressor (241). We could also look toward 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, K. S. Ravikumar, S. Ponnuthurai, and Raj Gowthaman have not been translated into English (*The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* notwithstanding). One also wishes for the collection to at least mention *Toward a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, which has translations of Iyothee Thass and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy.

Santhosh Sadanandan’s essay on the artist Savi Sawarkar, who has been ignored by the canon in unforgiveable ways, is one of the few in the collection that consciously recognizes that Dalit writing comes out of a profound

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criticism of the establishment and is 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’s excellent essay on the Dalit-Muslim question in literature brings in a rich variety of quotations from Mohandas Naimishraya’s Hindi poetry on the Gujarat communal riots that pitted Dalit Hindus against Muslims. Sajid’s plaintive question, “[W]hy [do] 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.

Anushiya Ramaswamy

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