

Book Review

***Dalit Intellectuals: Ideas, Struggles and the Vision*, eds. Yagati Chinna Rao and Raj Sekhar Basu, Delhi: Primus Books, 2022, i-x and 405 pages, ISBN: 978-93-5572-581-3 (hardback), Rs. 1995/-**

Intellectual history as a discipline caught scholarly attention across the globe from the 1980s and subsequently challenged many of our understandings revolving around this theme. This has compelled us to rethink issues related to the nation and nation-building, and those of social actors that represent the voice of the governing class (es) at large. One may argue that intellectual history is not a single idea but a conglomeration of many ideas that have actually originated and evolved in specific historical contexts (p. 24). Intellectual history further reinstates the fact that micro-histories could actually be formed out of broader societies and cultural norms, as well as traits. One may also argue that the convergence of micro and macro consequently forms the basis of the intellectual orientations, and that could help us in shaping and reshaping the past. This is indeed a global phenomenon, while India follows the path in its own way. Issues like ‘Marginal groups’ or ‘Lower-caste’ and their association with the society at large proved to be detrimental in many respects across India since the early modern days. Now, the thinkers of this group are crucial in the conceptualization of caste in modern India. This approach was largely absent or marginal during the pre-modern days, while talking about the Lower-caste or the Dalits and their social and cultural articulations. *Dalit Intellectuals: Ideas, Struggles and the Vision*, edited by Yagati Chinna Rao and Raj Sekhar Basu, is a significant scholarly contribution that delves into the intellectual traditions and political engagements of Dalit thinkers in modern India. The gestation of this volume started with the essays presented by various scholars and historians in the special panel on Dalit History and Politics held in the special session of the Indian History Congress in Bhopal in February 2019 (p. 20).

This edited anthology is based on thirteen diverse thought-provoking essays that simply reshaped our understanding towards intellectual history at large and its meaning and methodological orientations, as well as how Dalits formed the intellectual foundations of their own during the modern times in India. The editors of this significant book opined that these essays are based on broader perspectives of Dalit intellectual discourse, starting from B. R. Ambedkar and his reconstruction of modern India to the Adi-Dravida movement in colonial Tamil Nadu (erstwhile Madras Presidency) and also Kanshi Ram as a Dalit intellectual from obscurity to prominence. Also, the select autobiographies of Dalits and by the Dalits and the late emergence of Dalit intellectual traditions in Bengal foreground the essence of this edited volume (p. 20).

This volume has started with Yagati Chinna Rao’s essay on Ambedkar and the reconstruction of Modern India (pp.32-62). Based on vast archival materials, Rao has

argued that Ambedkar could be categorized as a harbinger of modernity to the Dalits in particular and for the people of India in general. He was ahead of his time and provided the basic guidance for policy formations, constitution framing and issues of social justice and the role of the citizens at large. Prashant Bansode, in his *Mahar Watan Land Reform in Maharashtra* (pp. 63-77), highlighted the fact that how certain land reforms in a regional perspective had been influenced by the ideals of Ambedkar and the act of deception towards one of the marginal communities in Maharashtra in colonial times. How the question of gender from the category of the 'social' to the 'political' was inspired by the idea of Ambedkar's Hindu Code Bill. The issue of gender justice has also been foregrounded by Neha Singh (pp. 78-100) in her essay.

The dynamic emergence of Dalit intellectual history in the context of Bengal has been critically examined by Sudarshana Bhaumik (pp.101-125) by pointing out the creative articulations of 'lower caste' Bengali intellectuals and their chronic search for individual and collective identity, especially through their own lived experiences and writings. Those aspects slowly made them aware that they too could represent/share themselves along with the other marginal groups in India. Priyadarshini Vijaisri focuses on important personalities like *Quida-e Pasta Quam* of the Muslim minority community of Hyderabad's Deccan. It has been highlighted that he had been both hated and admired for his remarkable free spirit, sagacity, shrewdness, tact and craft of statesmanship (pp. 126-188). By focusing on the leadership of Arigay Ramaswamy of Hyderabad state under the Nizams, Chandraiah Gopani shed light on the Dalit emancipation from 1906 to 1953. He had employed alternative tricks contrary to Bagya Reddy Varma, B. Shyam Sunder, B.S. Venkat Rao, and P. R. Venkatswamy in terms of vision and strategy around this time (pp. 189-211).

The essay by K. Deepanjan on the intellectual biography of Mylai Chinnathambi Rajah (popularly known as M.C. Rajah) and his pioneering role for the Adi-Dravida movement in colonial Tamil Nadu represented the multidimensional aspect of it. This was initiated as a socio-religious movement and later turned political in nature during the 1920s. K. Deepanjan also discussed the political life of Rajah, his intellectual activism and how his ideas contributed to the growth of the Adi-Dravida movement (pp. 212-238). On the other hand, Raj Sekhar Basu has critically analyzed the concept of Adi-Dravida identity and the Panchama intellectual space in early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. By exploring the strategies devised by lower-caste individuals to redefine their past, Basu argued that this notion also subsequently challenged the superior claim of Brahmanical Hinduism and the binary relation between the community and the nation. He also argued that by the 1920s, the Adi-Dravida intellectuals had utilized their own knowledge system to critically oppose the upper-caste elites of the Justice Party, especially when it came to the usage of the term 'Dravida' for representing all Dravidian races of southern India (pp. 239-256).

The next essay by G. Suresh deals with the issue of a neglected Bahujan thinker, B. Shyam Sunder and his ardent attempt to delve into the political discourse developed by Shyam Sunder with an emphasis on Dalit-minority unity through his writings and speeches. This

essay also claimed that Sunder was considered one of the early proponents of the oppressed community's unity and political emancipation (pp. 257-281). Prominent figures like Bhagwan Das's contribution to the compilation, editing and production of the works of Ambedkar have been mentioned by Shura Darapuri. This is argued that Das's efforts were the first professional effort in colonial India to publish and document Ambedkar's writings in one place and promote the ideas of Babasaheb, which united and uplifted the downtrodden not only in India but across the globe (pp. 282-311). While most of the authors are busy representing the social and political lives of the Dalits, Sangita Yadav attempts to understand the role and contribution of Dakshayani Velayudhan, who was a part of the Constituent Assembly of India. She was the only female Dalit in the Assembly and one of the youngest women who took part in shaping the Indian Constitution under the crucial leadership of B.R. Ambedkar. Her contribution to the framing of the Indian Constitution on equal terms has been critically evaluated by the author (pp. 312-329).

Narendra Kumar's essay tries to foreground the extraordinary intellect of Kanshi Ram as a public voice among the masses of India. While his forays into politics have been discussed at length by researchers but his little-known early life to become one of the proponents of the emancipation of the Bahujan in Uttar Pradesh has not received scholarly attention. Kumar's essay tries to mitigate that gap and brings forward his charismatic public life on an everyday basis so that one could get a comprehensive impression that he rose to prominence from nowhere. Further, this essay tries to map the processes through which lived experience and academic wisdom came to inform the Dalit experience in contemporary Uttar Pradesh. He was also able to demonstrate the new grammar of protest for the Dalit-Bahujan by applying language and vocabulary, which was collectively used by the public intellectuals for their cultural expression (pp. 330-356).

The final essay in this volume by Hitendra K. Patel delves into the issue of how Dalit autobiographies proved to be crucial while interpreting the emerging Dalit intellectual world. Later, he analysed the need to see how Dalit writers have recollected the details of their own lives to discuss the social and intellectual struggles of the community. By exploring Tulsi Ram's two-volume autobiography *Murdahiya*, Patel discusses the early life of Tulsi Ram and his community where he grew up. Patel also urges that one should read the volumes of *Murdahiya* in order to understand the fact that intersectionalities of caste and class define the logic of marginalization in India. The essay also sheds light on the fact that the convergence between caste and class established the claim of some superior castes over resources and a denial, if not complete, of such entitlements for the marginal or 'Lower-caste' people. In the concluding remarks, Hiten K. Patel opined that the Dalits should tell their own stories for a better understanding and accurate information, and this would lead to a path that could offer the history of intellectual worlds of Dalits and their past in a different manner (pp. 357-382).

Dalit Intellectuals: Ideas, Struggles and the Vision is an essential read for those interested in understanding the complexities of Dalit intellectual traditions and their impact on

modern Indian thought. Also, a commendable effort has been made to foreground the intellectual contributions of Dalit thinkers, challenging dominant narratives and offering new perspectives on Indian history. Its interdisciplinary approach makes it a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in caste studies, intellectual history, and social justice. One should argue that it challenges existing historiographical frameworks and offers fresh insights into how caste and marginality have been studied and represented while talking on India. Finally, the editors of this significant volume urge that the whole discussion on Dalit intellectualism cannot be continued if we do not consider the changes that have taken place within the discipline of History in the last two centuries (p. 24). Even the question of dominance and superiority has to be taken into consideration while talking about the Dalit intellectuals in modern India. This binary notion will help us understand how power has been instrumental in shaping and reshaping the intellectual orientations of the Dalits as opposed to or parallel to Brahmanical Hinduism.

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