

**Review of Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Global South Asia series), Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016, xv + 336 pp., ISBN 9780295995649**

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Charu Gupta has made her contribution in the field of historical research at the intersection of gender and caste in India widely acclaimed. She continues where she had left off her previous work on the Hindi popular print media and in this latest work focuses on the intersection of caste and gender in colonial North India through visual print culture and archival material. The success of this work lies in the tedious archival research which brings forth Dalit popular print culture as part of the print discourse in colonial North India. The sources of these print materials were colonizers, reformers and nationalists, but most importantly, Dalits themselves (p. 27). She establishes the Dalit figure not as a subject but as a vibrant participator in the contemporary print culture, despite casteist restrictions to access to education and the resultant low literacy rates among Dalits. Dalits were not only being written about, but were also writing. Her sources range from didactic manuals, reformist magazines and women's periodicals to missionary propaganda, police reports, cartoons, and popular Dalit pamphlets.

In doing so, she shows three popular representations of Dalit women: that of vamps or the lascivious, sexualised other of the chaste upper caste woman, that of victims and mute sufferers of the cruel casteist segregations and that of the *Viranganas* – the brave women who took part in the revolt of 1857. These three images of Dalit women make up the first three chapters of the book. With the use of didactic literature and debates around social reform, Gupta is able to substantiate how casteist discourse influenced the depiction of Dalit women through 'the substitution of pollution by suffering, of paranoia by romanticization, of vamp by victim, of difference by sameness, of stigma by sympathy, of condemnation by subservience' (p. 85). Thus emerged the need of the third positive image of the Dalit women as fighters or *Viranganas* in present day Hindi popular literature – the militant woman in the revolt of 1857. Gupta traces the emergence of the image of the brave Dalit women who fought against the British in 1857 in her third chapter. A genre of popular literature emerged around

the 150th anniversary of the 1857 revolt, and she interprets it as an attempt to redefine the self-image of Dalits in tandem with the needs of contemporary politics.

The book then moves on to a crucial contribution in Indian masculinity studies with her chapter on the portrayal of Dalit masculinity in the Hindi print media of the nineteenth century. This chapter takes up the dominant images of Dalit men portrayed by the colonisers and the upper caste Hindus as 'meek and docile, strong but stupid, ready to serve their masters on the one hand, and on the other as criminal, violent, and threatening' (p. 113). But Gupta shows Dalit resistances to such portrayals and their attempts to reclaim their images through their social roles and responsibilities.

The anxiety that these images created in contemporary Hindu society is reflected in the concern around conversions of Dalits into Islam and Christianity, and how these can be stalled. The fifth chapter, thus, very aptly, brings the discussion to the Shuddhi movement – the reformist movement to bring converts back to the Hindu religious community – and its print discourse as a response to growing critiques of Brahminical Hinduism. Conversion was only one of the many ways such a critique took shape – Gupta shows how increasing number of Dalits were asserting their religious choice by 'claiming to be Raidasis, Shivnarayanis, Kabirpanthis, and Adi Hindus'. The use of religious choice as a voice of resistance against Brahminical Hinduism and also as an expression of Dalit women's desire has been documented in this chapter.

The incorporation of alternative Dalit mythologies of Lonal Chamarin and Sitala in the form of Kajli songs brings an element of surprise in the sixth chapter. From print material, this chapter suddenly moves to oral traditions and mythology. Gupta shows how in the face of efforts by colonizers, reformers and nationalists to popularize elite ideas of tradition as universal, 'Dalits, lower castes, and women rearticulated their popular idioms from distinct perspectives' (p. 209). The interaction of the medical discourse on small pox (with its secularity) and the worship of goddess of smallpox – Sitala – is discussed in this Chapter. The author provides us with a case where gender, caste and the secularity of western medicine created a site of resistance.

Her decision to include the representation of the indentured women as the seventh chapter is a timely intervention in the gap of scholarly work on the gendered history of indenture in colonial North India. While historical research on global indentured labour has seen some brilliant gendered perspective in recent times – as for example Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2013) – the north Indian gender history of indentured labour remains under researched. Gupta's chapter is thus a welcome addition in this aspect.

The methodological tools used by Gupta in the research leading to this book merits some discussion for the readers interested in the field of religion and gender studies. Echoing previous established feminist historiographical works in India, her methodology focuses on the everyday practices through the politics of intimacy – of how bodies are regulated, touches are restricted, and rituals are carried out – to critically bring out the disciplining of bodies based on caste and gender. This also brings out the stigma and the violence that Dalit male and Dalit female bodies went through in the hierarchized caste Hindu society. Her choice of 'representation-reception histories as a method' (p. 13) serves well to this end and challenges the limited notion of archives on mainstream historiography.

This book serves as a timely reminder for gender scholars working on colonial India that gendering is experienced by all bodies, and hence the time has come to question the central subjectivity of women in most works. It raises questions as to similar gendered Dalit resistance forms in other geographical areas, and points to the vernacular as a powerful source of archive for such works in the days to come. Gupta's book definitely calls for a more extensive investigation of the influence of casteist Hindu religious practices on the gendering of bodies in north India.