

Important Similarities, Strange Differences: Caste, Race and Durban

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This volume, according to the editors Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough, is an attempt to disrupt globalisation's tidy parlour, through a look at caste and race. While globalisation is about domination, it is also about the globalisation of emancipatory struggles: It "simultaneously supplies both, the *need* for emancipation due to globalisation's widely perceived and experienced negative impacts, and the *context* for emancipatory struggles that seek new possibilities within globalising processes. From this perspective, globalisation must also include within itself the globalisation of emancipatory struggles – their forms, content and sites" (p 3). The editors argue that there is a "Durban-turn" post-2001, which has introduced three new elements – the language of social construction, the framework of comparative analysis and a body of "critical caste theory" – into caste scholarship (p 10). Rupturing the smug silence around the creation of unique and separate spaces of scholarship on caste and on race, Durban breached borders between disciplines and theoretical paradigms – focusing attention thereby on scholarship that emanated from anti-racist and anti-casteist standpoints (pp 11-16). It is this texture of the Durban process that this volume sets out to present.

Against Stigma: Studies in Caste, Race and Justice since Durban edited by Balmurli Natrajan and Paul Greenough (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2009; pp 490, Rs 795).

Anthropologist Gerald D Berreman reviewing literature on caste and race and their interconnections begins by observing how he has been "...consistently struck by the structural, behavioural and ideological similarity of the Indian and the North American systems of birth-ascribed inequality in the two societies despite their obvious cultural differences" (p 47). Attempting to situate Andre Beteille's assertions in the context of Durban, he finds that since during most of Beteille's early research on Tanjore, he was "housed and surrounded by Brahmins" (p 59), this elite bias pervades all of his writing, similar being the case of Louis Dumont's writing (p 63), and Dipankar Gupta's as well (pp 64-67). The common sense of caste, and a pervasive sense of Hinduness, which shaped the sociological imagination in India, observes Kamala Visweswaran, also provided the sociological description for Hindutva (p 346).

The way forward for Berreman is to tap and nourish social and ethnic diversity in ways that social difference is not burdened with the weight of inequality – and by implication to nurture scholarship that

enables this shift (p 77). Examining analyses of caste in the context of the Bhopal Declaration, Balmurli Natrajan looks at the import of "diversity" from north American scholarship into the articulation of caste discrimination and resistance to it. He suggests that caste be viewed "as the effect of a *relational or relation-producing process*" with a focus on discrimination as well as the cultural construction of essentialised and naturalised identities (p 323).

Arguing that analogies between caste and race that are based on comparisons between their relatively unique characteristics, while sociologically fascinating, are socially pointless, Gary M Tartakov develops the analogy within the framework of "stigmatised classes" – a track that allows consideration of shared experiences of segregation, criminalisation, and being subject to violence and sexual exploitation, denial of education, health-care and political participation (p 98). This framework for him contains the possibility of resisting stigmatising, stereotyping and exploitation, as "[n]o democracy is possible as long as stigmatised classes exist" (p 137).

"If people do not choose to see 'racism' in a society...that does not discursively structure itself in terms of race, at what level can we identify the benefits of such a move?" (p 94). Virginia R Dominguez poses this question in the context of "racism-talk" in Israel, a country in which talk of racism has focused historically on Nazi attitudes in its genocidal form, observing through a careful analysis of specific cases in Israel that invoking racism may not always be a sign of visionary, oppositional

politics in every world of inequality (p 83). Deepa S Reddy explores the possibility of looking at caste in terms of ethnicity, a term that might help to think about “what happens to ‘caste’ as it traverses the global landscapes of modernity: as a means of understanding its paradoxes, and of viewing caste as inherently fluid and performative, a discursive formation as much as social reality” (p 258).

Katya G Mevorach, through an account of discussions on race in a classroom in North America, asserts, echoing Tartakov, “I think intellectual integrity and political clarity are professional responsibilities that come with the academic vocation. *Discrimination should be condemned. Period*” (p 249, emphasis in the original).

Durban 2001

Tracing the history of UN responses to caste discrimination, Sukhadeo Thorat finds that it is only in 1996 that the Committee on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) made its first reference to caste discrimination, untouchability and scs as descent based discrimination. (p 146). Rebutting the arguments against inclusion of caste within this framework, he argues (similarly with Tartakov) that the focus must be on discrimination and *racism* (as distinct from race), and that locating this discussion within the UN framework places obligations on the Indian state to fulfil its own constitutional and legislative obligations better (p 156).

The usefulness of taking the issue of caste discrimination to Durban is reiterated by Gopal Guru, with a caveat that we might need to revisit the key categories or concepts through which discrimination is experienced and understood – colour in the case of race, but *touch* in the case of caste. On another track however, he observes, the groups participating in the Durban process did not fully utilise the opportunity before them to embark on and sustain a thoroughgoing critique of caste discrimination – an effort that would involve a critical assessment of the absorption of ideologies of caste by the Christian churches in India (p 180).

The Durban Conference was, it can scarcely be forgotten, “political dramaturgy at its best: a stage for re-enactments of

cruelty and torture as well as a site for bearing witness against them” (V Geetha: 206). But, Geetha asks, what are the local contexts of this global moment, and what implications do the Durban articulations bear for the everyday struggles for dignity and life for the dalits and oppressed castes in India? The contradictions this question alludes to, however, are intrinsic to the growing politics of globalism, where a moment while redemptive in that it creates “an ethical outrage amongst an imagined global community” (p 206), is fraught

and complicated in its translation into the local, where globalisation, for instance, has seen the state withdrawing from the economy with disastrous consequences for dalit communities, especially.

The mutual fascination between dalits and African Americans, goes back to Jotirao Phule (*Gulamgiri*, 1873) and W E B Du Bois (*Dark Princess*, 1928). Gai Omvedt believes that the conversation on race and caste will be strengthened through a comparative study of Ambedkar and Du Bois and the movements they represented –

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a cursory reading points to “(s)trange similarities and important differences, and almost no contact” (p 377). Kancha Ilaiah argues that the focus on colonialism-nationalism masks the far-reaching effects of brahminism/Hinduism vs nationalism debate. It is necessary at this point to weave frameworks that allow “the expansion of spiritual democratic religions that have no roots in casteism and allow

the racial notions to get killed in the process of historical change” (p 431).

Much of the area covered by this volume has already been written about and theorised extensively in India, not just in English but in regional languages as well. A significant part of this writing has focused on questions of labour and gender in the context of the Durban debates – a focus that is conspicuous in its absence in this collection.

It is useful, however, to have a volume that brings a sizeable section of the English writing together, as also a useful bibliography, for use by scholars with an interest in questions of caste, race and discrimination located outside India.

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Books Received

- Agarwal, P K (2010): *Land Reforms in States and Union Territories in India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing); pp x + 254, Rs 600.
- Ahmed, Sadiq, Saman Kelegama and Ejaz Ghani, ed. (2010): *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia: Beyond SAFTA* (New Delhi: Sage Publications); pp xxvi + 435, Rs 850.
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- Dickson, Janet R, Barry B Hughes and Mohammad T Irfan (2010): *Advancing Global Education: Patterns of Potential Human Progress – Vol 2* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press and Paradigm Publishers); pp xvi + 333, Rs 995.
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