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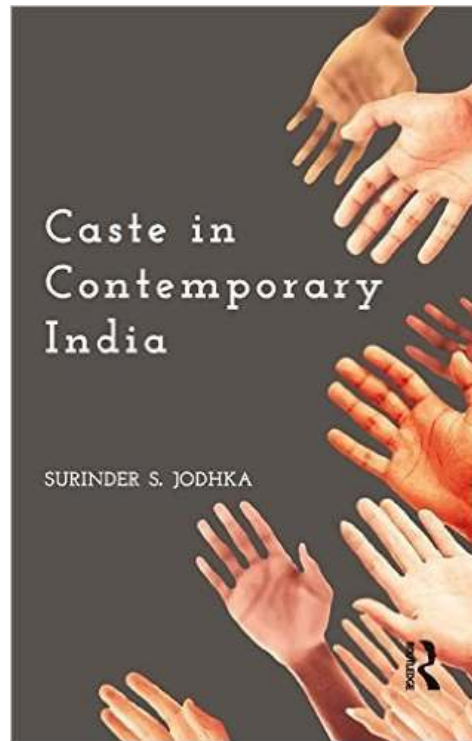
Alexandra de Heering

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Jodhka, Surinder S. (2015) *Caste in Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Routledge, 252 pages.

1 Do we need yet another book on castes? Although to all appearances provocative, this is the question that might come to mind when browsing through Surinder Jodhka's latest publication, *Caste in Contemporary India*. Hugo Gorringe (2014), in his review of the same book, also foresees people will wonder what is the point of publishing another book on caste. Which fresh perspectives does Surinder Jodhka, a professor of sociology and chair of the Centre for the Study of Social Systems at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi), bring to the topic?

2 The reason for being of this monograph—the result of the research Jodhka conducted on caste over the last 15 years in the context of different projects carried out in various regions, although mostly in North India—lies in its treatment of the issue of castes: challenging many flawed



conceptions of the reality of caste (caste as a contemporary incongruity, an anachronism), it attempts to rectify the sociology of democratic politics. In the author's opinion, the popular fallacies largely prevailing among the middle class in India (Jodhka 2015: xiiv and 218), or within the scholarship on the topic, have gone on long enough. It is time to cripple them. No, unlike many evolutionary theorists have predicted, caste did not inevitably disappear with the dawn of modernity and development. No, caste in modern India is not dead. Neither is caste merely surviving because it has been artificially kept alive by the media and government policies, as some have been trying to advocate. Jodhka challenges these commonsensical formulations. Far from dying off or even just surviving, caste has shown a tremendous resilience and a strong ability to adapt to the fast-changing society of India. Its organization is evolving, its hierarchical logic is declining but it indisputably continues to exist as a constantly renewed form of relational discrimination and domination, always more visible, always more complex.

3 Surinder Jodhka insists on the importance of the way the 'caste question' is framed since it heavily influences the kind of data collected and therefore also the results obtained. As stated in an introduction on caste he published a couple of years earlier, 'the meaning and experience of caste changes, depending upon whose experience of caste is given priority' (Jodhka 2012: 170). Precisely because viewing caste as a tradition, or as a form of power—as was usually the case until the 1990's—silences the many discriminations emanating from this social structure, Jodhka emphasizes the relevancy, not to say the necessity, of generalizing the conceptualization of caste within the framework of prejudice and discrimination, *i.e.* to look at caste 'as a system that institutionalizes humiliation as a social and cultural practice' (2015: 12). This socially-engaged stance, which differs radically from other rather theoretical approaches that have long dominated the scholarship on caste, can however not be labelled as new. It follows in the footsteps of research in the field of Dalit studies conducted with the 'perspective from

below' for over 20 years and approaching power critically (Zelliot 1992, Omvedt 1995, Kandyil 2009, Teltumbde 2010).

- 4 *Caste in Contemporary India* is a compilation of seven articles previously published and is divided into three parts. The first part, entitled 'Hierarchies and the Politics of Citizenship', basically undertakes to draw a panorama of the Dalits' situation in today's (North) India. After underlining 'the vestiges of untouchability in rural Punjab' (chapter 1), Jodhka investigates the upsurge of atrocities against Dalits in Punjab and Haryana (chapter 2) as well as the politicization of caste and the emergence of a Dalit movement (chapter 3). The second part, dealing with the question of 'Caste in the Neo-Liberal Economy', focuses on the persisting weight of caste in the expanding private sector. This second part is, in my opinion, the most persuasive. After the liberalization of the country in the 1990s, the State's withdrawal from its direct involvement in the economy, combined with increasing privatization all over the country, had an important impact on the existence of historically marginalized groups who, for a few decades already, had been moving away from the traditional agrarian economy. As per capitalist theory, individuals should be judged in the light of their skills and their merit; but does this ideal rule—according to which the social identities (caste) of agents do not matter in the market—apply to the Indian context? This section addresses this question in the business sector (chapter 4 on Dalit entrepreneurs) as well as in the corporate world (chapter 5 on the recruitment process). In both cases, the answers provided, not only by Dalits entrepreneurs themselves but also by upper-caste Human Resource employees, confirm that the ideal scenario of inclusion is far from actual experience. Many obstacles lie on the path towards Dalit mobility. Dalit entrepreneurs, whose socio-demographic data are meticulously described here, look back on the multiple hardships they had, and still have, to go through because of their lack of resources and prevalent caste prejudice. As in the corporate sector, despite a strong politics of stonewalling with regard to caste (caste is a taboo in many spheres of Indian society) where merit is systematically presented as being the only guiding rule, Jodhka's questions (for instance: 'what [do you] look for in addition to merit?' (Jodhka 2015: 127) enabled him to uncover the actual recruitment rationale. He demonstrates that 'though the hiring managers underlined merit as the sole criteria in the selection process, the standards for judging the soft skills of the candidates invariably drew from their cultural prejudices about the communities and regions the candidates came from' (p. 131). Caste-blindness is—essentially—a rhetoric; reality, as revealed in this study, is far from being ideal.¹ The third, and last part is entitled 'Mobility and Mobilizations' and looks—to put it briefly—at the history and the logics of mobilization in two different locations and at different periods of time: Punjab and Delhi. Chapter 6, on Punjab, provides an outline of the 'global contours of Ravidasi identity' while chapter 7 investigates the background and the motivations of Dalit activists in Delhi.
- 5 While acknowledging the reproduction of the institution of caste in contemporary India, this volume emphasizes the many radical changes it has undergone in the last few decades. Three types of changes are distinguished: those coming 'from below', that is from low-caste social movements, those 'from above', *i.e.* constitutional provisions or state policies in favour of the victims of discrimination, and changes 'from the side', *i.e.* changes that were not directly targeted at the emancipation of low-caste people but that had an impact on them eventually (p. 216). The attention paid to diachrony, historical changes and social transformations, as well as their careful analysis, is of great value.

Transformations on one side, and increasing resistance to change on the other, are part of a multifaceted interweaving of humiliation, eagerness for self-respect, privileges, domination, which Jodhka attempts to bring forward. For that matter, the author grounds his work in intensive fieldwork and in strong empirical (quantitative and qualitative) evidence that fruitfully keeps his intellectual engagement from becoming purely theoretical. He is searching for the 'reality of caste, as it has been lived and experienced on ground' (p. xiv). The diversity of the field sites explored (Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi) offers a fertile ground for comparison. Very few studies have been carried out on Punjabi Dalits. As other scholars have done with other religious minorities (such as Mines 1978 and Mosse 2012, for instance), Jodhka contributes to fill the void concerning the practices of caste within the Sikh community.

- 6 Yet, despite its many abovementioned strengths, its erudition (while remaining highly readable) and the author's laudable effort to bring out a common thread through a solid introduction and conclusion, this compilation leaves an uncomfortable impression of unevenness and heterogeneity. The apparent consistency found in the well-structured table of content is not maintained throughout the book. It, therefore, does not fully succeed at convincing the reader about the relevancy of the compilation of the articles. Some chapters are individually enlightening but as an entity, this volume is a bit disappointing.
- 7 As often in compilations, the common thread does not appear clearly. Despite Jodhka's efforts to formulate it, a solid binder is missing. Overarching section titles do not suffice to bring coherence. This impression certainly results from the fact that the articles were written in the context of successive research projects that seemingly did not follow much linearity, nor a common aim (an 'order' for an NGO, a World Bank-funded project, personal projects, etc.). The title of the book itself 'Caste in Contemporary India' is misleading, and leads to disappointment: is a book on castes in India even possible? As mentioned by the author himself, 'each and every corner of the country, each and every region has its own specificities' (Jodhka 2015: 25). The choice of the title probably results from editorial and marketing constraints, but why fall into the trap of speaking about 'India' as an entity experiencing the reality of caste homogeneously? Wouldn't it have been wiser to be more specific and speak, at least, of North India?
- 8 Lastly, although all seven chapters deal explicitly with, and show a genuine concern for, Dalit issues, this book is simply presented as a book on caste. Of course, the caste system is the overarching framework at the root of the immense disparities between social groups but why not clearly present it as a book on Dalits? Dalits struggle nowadays to be called by the right name—that is using a name that specifies their social and mental oppression (Paik 2011)—, to be granted attention, and to have their condition of deprivation known and recognized. They also fight for the recognition of the changes that have taken place in the last decades. This publication, underlining line after line the importance of looking at the issue of caste from below, *i.e.* from the perspective of discriminations, surprisingly fails to deal with the basics. Dalits, being the main subject of this book, would have deserved to be given their proper name, that is to be put at the forefront, up into the title line. However secondary this remark may seem, symbols matter; all the more so when it comes to dealing with a long discriminated against and silenced section of the population. To quote Albert Camus' (2008: 908) famous formula: 'to call things by incorrect names is to add to the world's misery'² and, by extension, to deny our humanity.

- 9 To answer the question this review started with: yes this additional book on 'caste' and on Dalits can be useful. It opens up new areas of reflection by adopting an interesting approach. Preconceived ideas on caste must be crushed. It meticulously draws its material from impressive fieldwork and always remains extremely readable. Overall therefore, and when analysing each chapter individually, this compilation—which could also be called a retrospective on Jodhka's work—contributes greatly to Dalit studies and explores important issues. However, as stated above, a more coherent approach with clearer links between the chapters would have been appreciated, as well as a more specific way of naming people.
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NOTES

1. The question of Dalit entrepreneurship in India has been addressed recently by Aseem Prakash (2015) for instance.
2. In French: '*Mal nommer les choses, c'est ajouter au malheur du monde*'. Actually, the paternity of this formula is debated and some attribute it to his dear friend André Derain.

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