



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Review of Dalit Women's Education in Modern India by Shailaja Paik

**Citation for published version:**

Gorringe, H 2015, 'Review of Dalit Women's Education in Modern India by Shailaja Paik', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 101-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2014.1001115>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/09584935.2014.1001115](https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2014.1001115)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Contemporary South Asia

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Contemporary South Asia on 16/04/2015, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09584935.2014.1001115>

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination**, by Shailaja Paik, London, Routledge, 2014, xiv + 356 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-49300-0

In *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India*, Shailaja Paik offers a richly textured and historicised insight into the interplay between caste, gender and education in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Maharashtra. Drawing on archival sources, life history interviews, classic Dalit writing and a range of secondary and theoretical sources, she captures the complex and contested processes of social change in this field. Through recourse to this array of sources, the book seeks to recover and recount a story that is absent from official histories.

Paik focuses on three cities with active reform movements – Pune, Mumbai and Nagpur. At first I wondered how representative a study based on such a sample could be, but the choice serves its purpose. Despite the background of social activism, the volume still captures the struggles by Dalit students and staff for equality, the right to use the same water sources, to respectful treatment and equal access. These concerns are depressingly familiar to scholars of caste society and still blight the lives of school age children in parts of India today. The fact that the three cities have reformist movements, however, allows Paik to chart another story in parallel to this as well: the story of social change, Dalit agency and the emergence of radical anti-caste critiques and forms of practice.

The research on which the book is based involved interviews with three different generations of educated Dalit women. This offers the volume a longitudinal dimension that is often missing from such accounts. The use of rich life histories, furthermore, foregrounds the diversity of the Dalit category and captures their range of experiences and narratives. This refusal to stereotype and pigeonhole is welcome and instructive. The book, thus, makes the crucial point that education has complex outcomes and is not necessarily unproblematic or beneficial for its recipients. Paik notes how education has sometimes served to entrench inferiority or result in a double burden of paid work and housework. She notes how some of the emergent middle class Dalits seek to 'be upper caste' and shroud their origins, and highlights their inability to completely escape Dalithood. Finally, the book catalogues the hardships that Dalit women may endure in terms of sexual harassment or demeaning treatment in school or simply by being subject to educational processes that are designed to institutionalise caste disadvantage. Capturing these complexities is a virtue, but the occasional result is that the book offers more breadth than depth in places.

The chapter on Dalit women's employment, for instance, offers vivid and fascinating snapshots of various occupations. We encounter book-binders, police officers, teachers, accountants and *tamaasha* dancers. This last reflection on cultural performers is almost a chapter within a chapter. The piece is replete with vignettes and analytical insights, but some coherence and detail is lost in the process. Likewise, the juxtaposition of quotes relating to 1950 and data on government employment from 2001 simultaneously highlights processes of continuity and change *and* comes across as slightly disjointed.

Despite, and sometimes because of these quirks, the book as a whole offers a powerful account of successive generations of Dalit women and their struggles for education, respect and agency. There are important insights into the difficulties that Dalit women encounter at every stage of the process: to begin with, they may lack family support even to embark on school education. Having overcome this hurdle, they could face poor or biased teaching that looks down upon and discourages them because of their caste. The book offers some heart-warming examples of exceptional teachers and the difference they can make, even where the participants are successful in education, however, they encounter numerous difficulties in gaining employment or securing promotion. These hurdles, significantly, may again come from within the home or from a spouse as much as the wider society.

Paik captures the constant confrontations with patriarchal norms and attitudes within the family, the wider society and the Ambedkarite movement itself. The educated and worldly wise interviewees in this book point to obstructions placed in their way by committed social reformers whose egalitarian visions clearly do not extend to women. As a whole, the book offers a compelling portrait of the passion that Dalit women have for education and betterment and the hindrances that are placed in their way. Reading through the accounts helps explain perennial issues of school drop-out rates and the disparity between Scheduled Caste literacy rates and those of others. Equally, however, one gets a sense of why those gaps are continually narrowing. The determination of the women not only to succeed themselves, but to help others to do so too shines forth in the book. These accounts are, as the book notes, often neglected, and Paik has performed a valuable service in retrieving them for a wider audience.

*Hugo Gorringe,  
University of Edinburgh, UK  
Email: Hugo.Gorringe@ed.ac.uk*