

ISSN: 2456-9550
JMC
November 2019

Book Review

REPUBLIC OF CASTE: THINKING EQUALITY IN THE TIME OF NEOLIBERAL HINDUTVA

by Anand Teltumbde, New Delhi: Navyana, 2018, pp. 432,
₹695 (hardback). ISBN 9788189059842.

Reviewed by:

SURAJ BERI

EMAIL: criticalsun@gmail.com

Assistant Professor

Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi

Volume 3, 2019

THE JMC REVIEW

*An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism,
Practice and Theory*

**JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
NEW DELHI-110021**

Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva by Anand Teltumbde, New Delhi: Navyana, 2018, pp. 432, ₹695 (hardback). ISBN 9788189059842.

Reviewed by: Suraj Beri, Assistant Professor (Guest), Department of Sociology, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, Delhi.

This book is a fuming explosion of social critique of the material reality of caste in contemporary India, and presents a provocative analysis of academic debates on caste, class, religion and politics. It questions the logics of the political praxis of both Leftists and Ambedkarites. Anand Teltumbde reinstates the politics of change in the neoliberal context, where saffronisation provides legitimacy for both caste and religion. His work dissects the popular imagination on caste across the political spectrum, and aims to rebuild the discourse on caste through the idea of equality.

Divided into 13 chapters besides an introduction, this book approaches a wide range of issues such as the tussle between Ambedkarites and Leftists, recent cases of violence against Dalits, Maoist insurgency, policy of reservation, neoliberal reforms in education, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) politics, and so on. Teltumbde challenges us to reinstate the critical imagination on foundations of inequalities in Indian society at large. Based on the papers that he wrote for a column in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Teltumbde assembles an updated volume on structures of power and injustice. The agenda of this work is explained in these simple yet powerful words: that this study ‘looks at how inequality in India is deeply entwined with caste and religion, and how in our times, both caste and religious fundamentalism have colluded with the market to speak the language of majoritarianism’ (p. 20).

The tone and tenor of the work makes it clear that Teltumbde is not providing any historical account of the Dalit movement in any specific context, nor is he interested in presenting an evaluative commitment for Marxist politics. Instead, his aim is to lay bare the state of affairs of those who claim to represent politics of different social groups (caste or class) in contemporary times. For example, in the first chapter on ‘Reservations’, Teltumbde critically traces the entry of reservation into Indian politics from the colonial period onwards, and how in present times it has not fulfilled the purpose. Rather, says Teltumbde, reservations have become a tool for the ruling classes to maintain the caste system instead of annihilating it. According to Teltumbde, reservation is based on caste grounds and hence reinforces caste identities in different ways while simultaneously, keeps the marginalised groups’ faith intact in constitutional norms. In other words, reservations, in his view, have contributed to the strengthening of social divisions in our society and have only diverted people’s attention from major livelihood issues. He reminds

readers how the architect of the constitution himself became disillusioned with it within years of its inception.

His critique of identity politics and the failure of the Left to address the questions of caste theoretically is remarkable. Turning his critical eye on the dialectic of caste and class, the author raises popular contestations around them in the second chapter. Engaging with Marxist literature on class and combining it with Ambedkar's analysis of caste, Teltumbde presents the dialectical and pragmatic perspectives on this binary. He criticises both Marxists and Ambedkarites for ignoring caste and class, respectively, and rather suggests building an alliance where they could converge both in theory and in praxis. Their mutual hostility had huge costs to the efforts of building an egalitarian order. With detailed analytical discussion, he makes a plea to combine Marx's scientific analysis with Ambedkar's pragmatic actions to eradicate caste.

The author provides a very critical examination of a section of Dalits who claim to represent Dalit politics in contemporary times. He argues that some of these Dalit politicians are undermining Ambedkar's objective of creating a caste-less society. According to Teltumbde, they are instead interested in mere caste assertion and not caste annihilation, which was the main agenda of Ambedkar's politics. With BSP politics in the backdrop, he dissents with the populist struggle for symbolic gains through building statues or celebrating *jayantis*, while losing out on issues such as land, education and employment for the social revolution. In other words, his critique brings forth the absence of class politics in the Dalit movement, and a deliberate denial of the heterogeneities among Dalits. Hence, Teltumbde is emphatic in arguing that caste, which divides society into unequal compartments, can never be the force for solidarity, and thus Dalit politics should focus on material issues to forge class unity as well. Similarly, he questions the logic of some proponents of capitalism from the Dalit community, who argue that capitalism will provide more avenues for social mobility instead of economic exploitation of lower classes.

He reserves his most scathing critique for the RSS. With their very conservative and casteist framework of a nation, the author challenges the politics which the RSS represents and wants to impose across the country. In its recent dispensation, the RSS wants to saffronise Ambedkar and present him as another figure who hates Muslims by selectively quoting from his texts on partition, and wants to block any attempts by Dalits specifically to question the Indian state. In such instances, the RSS labels anyone who presents Ambedkar—who both theoretically and politically attacked Brahminism and Hindu philosophy—as deeply hierarchical and discriminatory is called a 'pseudo-Ambedkarite'; the controversy around APSC¹, Chennai, being

¹ Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle, a student group at IIT Chennai raised protest against the institution's new policy, brought in December 2018, of separate entrances, separate dishes and wash basins for vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Earlier in 2015, the administration of IIT Madras has banned this student group for writing 'political' pamphlets on issues of communalism, criticizing government.

an example. This is a challenge that needs to be addressed by Dalits systematically to consolidate the politics of emancipation.

In addition to these burning issues of caste violence, ideological attack by the RSS and continuous attempts to undermine the legacy of Ambedkar, this work also addresses the neoliberal context of contemporary economic disparities. Unlike many popular works which obliterate the economic context of neoliberal capitalism, Teltumbde attacks the ideological framework of neoliberalism which provides added legitimation to caste inequalities and communal wars. With the growing privatisation of health and education, lower classes are further pushed to live a life of misery and deprivation. Neoliberal capitalism with a deregulated state contributed to the commercialisation of education and health systems as well, and they have been gradually turned into a new market to earn profits. In this process, neoliberal policies are guided by Brahminism of ruling classes who shut the system to the vast majority of Indians. Under this dispensation, public goods are provided through market mechanisms, and hence it systematically erodes the gains of citizenship in the last hundred years or so.

Lastly, the book also makes passing references to the issue of corruption and the role of civil society in raising superficial concerns about it. The author discusses AAP politics in the wake of anti-corruption agitations which erupted in Delhi. It was broadly a middle-class dominant caste agitation which has no interest in systemic changes to the institution of caste, or in leading an anti-capitalist movement. Rather, they are interested in cleaning the rotten system cursorily. Ideologically, too, AAP could not provide any alternative force because of its preference for and affiliation with already existing traditional markers. Teltumbde also notes that it is significant to examine who is labelled as corrupt by civil society, and he cites instances of popular controversies around Mayawati and Bangaru Laxman, while corrupt politicians and bureaucrats from an upper caste background are routinely portrayed as part of common systematic systems.

With his detailed span of the fields of politics, economy and education, Teltumbde establishes the notion that Dalits have been systematically marginalised, disempowered, and thus exclusion and stigmatisation is in the very DNA of this republic. He takes head on the consciousness of caste that permeates every realm and hammers it with the consciousness of modern citizenship to re-establish the discourse of equality which Ambedkar always foregrounded. One can sense the moral call in this work when Teltumbde endorses the idea that Indian society is primarily based on plurality and diversity of social and cultural life, and only on this foundation can the future stand.