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Book Review: Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India, edited by Aloka Parasher-Sen

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of direct transfer of technology from Europe to India. In this, they miss the analytical point of the literature on Indian popular art as well as of recent histories of Indian modernity.

The text travels between the spotty regions of published research on popular Indian art, providing summaries of much of the existing work transposed into the authors’ less analytical framework. The chapter on Ravi Varma—with quotations from the diary of C. Raja Raja Varma, the artist’s brother, and reproductions of source and process material for the prints—presents new research, however. A publication of the Varma diary would be a useful contribution to the field.

Neumayer and Schelberger seem charmed by the persistent importance of German printing technology and printers in India, noting several times the worldwide circulation of German popular prints in the late nineteenth century. They cite, however, as a “travesty of history” that the Ravi Varma Press was taken over by Fritz Schleicher and that the “Indianization of popular modern Indian imagery received its greatest fillip from the commercialization of sacral Indian icons by a German Protestant printer” (p. 54).

The reproductions, which are of high quality, are grouped by subject. This practice highlights the diversity of contemporary representations of single icons, whether in degree of naturalism, quality of printing, or approach to figuration. Unfortunately, these formal divergences—many, though not all, within the production of the Ravi Varma Press itself—are not commented upon in the text, which instead focuses on the stability in the iconographic content of images of gods and goddesses. One must read against the grain here to observe this difference and to propose interpretations: Are the differences a result of chronological changes in aesthetic approach, a movement away from reproducing actual works by Ravi Varma after the artist’s death, or degradation in the prints’ aesthetic quality? Also disappointing is the familiarity of the images, many of which have appeared in other volumes on popular Indian art. The series of representations of M. K. Gandhi is extensive, however, and includes many suggestive images, including one of Gandhi as pieta.

This book will hold the interest of newcomers to the study of popular Indian art. It does not, however, fill the need for a comprehensive analytical study of popular visual culture, either in terms of its very popularity or of its visual forms.

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Marginality and subordination have been important themes in India’s human and social sciences for almost a hundred years. Aloka Parasher-Sen’s edited volume is a useful intervention in the literature on caste in the “intermediate and immediate past” (p. 3). This is the long stretch of South Asian premodernity frequently ignored by historians, thanks to presentist commitments that tend to overwhelm their scholarship ideologically or lop-sided archival and linguistic skills that tend to constrain it intellectually. The politics of the discipline of history being what it is today, the
ancient, colonial, and contemporary periods all receive disproportionate amounts of scholarly attention, at the cost of what Parasher-Sen is calling "early India." This is the bulk of our past that can be richly historicized with the help of extensive corpora of texts in vernacular and classical languages, archeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence, also surviving in art and architecture, and the persistence of various kinds of practice. *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India* is, therefore, a timely contribution to the field of caste studies and, read correctly, is a welcome addition to the growing body of knowledge about the deep history of inequality on the subcontinent.

Hierarchy and difference are very old social phenomena in our region. This does not make them peculiar to southern Asian cultures. However, it is somewhat unusual, compared to many other parts of the world, that from practically the very beginning of our recorded history we find highly developed folk theories of the hierarchical and differentiated nature of society. What makes it so challenging to reconstruct the role of caste in the historical—and historicizable—past of India is precisely the difficulty of figuring out, when faced with premodern texts, the extent to which normative discourse overlays descriptive accounts. The task is further complicated when theoretical terms of considerable vintage persist into the present, their form being preserved verbatim but their meaning fluctuating between registers that are as likely to be millennia old as they are to be quite recent. One way to deal with this problem, which has enjoyed some popularity among historians of India in the last decade, has been to radically fix the historicity of important folk categories in the moment of encounter between colonizing and native cultures. According to this school of history, which has achieved notable influence if not dominance among South Asianists of late, the present need only goes back as far as the arrival of the British in order to diagnose its own pathologies. Nicholas Dirks’s masterful *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), genealogized to the pioneering work of his teacher, the late Bernard Cohn, is the apotheosis of this trend in historical scholarship, especially with reference to caste. There has been no answer to Dirks thus far in the form of a single, comprehensive counterargument illustrated by the thorough treatment of a given archive.

However, historical essays such as those collected by Parasher-Sen do begin to return us to the precolonial past. Romila Thapar, Richard Fick, Vivekanand Jha, B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Uma Chakravarti, and D. R. Chanana all remind us of the centuries before the company and the raj when Indic cultures nonetheless produced and debated what we have to regard as theories of power and of identity—theories whose traces often continue to permeate contemporary social consciousness despite modernity. All the major ideas about hierarchy and difference, self and other, to emerge from "early India" are touched on by these and other authors. Thus, the following ideas of Sanskritic ritual status come in for systematic analysis: dharma, varna, and their subcategories; family, community, and political structure—jana, jāti, and related terms; race, color, and ethnicity—ārya and dāsa; indigenous and foreign—mleccha and barbara; purity, pollution, and miscegenation—dvija, śūdra, antyaja, asprīya. Notions of and data about slavery, gender domination, birth, heredity, flux, mobility, professional and occupational diversity, commensality, endogamy, religious divisions, and sectarian grouping are also engaged within the book. We are reminded of the scholarship of the stalwarts of Indian anthropology and history, such as B. R. Ambedkar, G. S. Ghurye, M. N. Srinivas, D. D. Kosambi, R. S. Sharma, and Sharad Patil.
The discussion of race on the subcontinent unfolds within the context of Aryan race theory, which originated in Romantic Europe and played a significant part in Orientalist discourse throughout the colonial period. But, it is given a fine point in the identity politics of Tamil country, where the conflict between Aryan and Dravidian was/is used most effectively to counter the ethnic domination of both white Europeans and fair-skinned north Indians and the equally supremacist aspirations of the representatives of western European, Sanskritic, and Persianate high cultures. Dagmar Hellman Rajanayagam’s piece points to a very long history of articulating difference in this region vis-à-vis other parts of South Asia and the Indo-European world (pp. 314–48). K. R. Hanumanthan, on the other hand, presents the evidence for and against untouchability in premodern Tamil culture through an examination of textual sources (pp. 125–56).

Much of the critical thematization in the Indic civilization of the extreme practice of untouchability, but also of other forms of contempt against socially and economically disenfranchised groups, begins in Buddhist texts. Accordingly, there are pieces on Buddhism—about slavery, untouchability, gender, and despised professions—by four contributors out of ten. Given the scope of the volume, this is with reference to premodernity, the original Buddhism, as it were, not Ambedkarite neo-Buddhism, which once again in the twentieth century brings untouchability to the forefront in ideological debates.

Modern Indian social science distinguishes between caste and religion as encompassing distinct sectors of life in South Asian cultures. This compartmentalization is driven partly by the demands of academic disciplines and institutions. Historically much of the protest against the social inequality that we attribute to caste comes out of radical literatures that are devotional and theological in character. Saint-poet figures all across medieval India undermined, questioned, or rejected caste hierarchy and became the founders and leaders of important religious movements. Parasher-Sen’s anthology goes some way toward reflecting the centrality of bhakti to multiple traditions of dissent against hegemonic Sanskritic conceptions of caste via Eleanor Zelliot’s essay on the poets Chokhamela and Eknath (pp. 243–71).

Despite the artificial disciplinary separation of caste and religion that plagues Indic studies, the phenomena of casteism and communalism cannot be separated in contemporary India. But, the othering of the Muslim, which is at the heart of communal ideology, began centuries ago in South Asia. We could say that the texts of subcontinental Buddhism and Islam have constituted both the defining interlocutors and the deadliest challenges to the classical dharmaśāstra theory of caste spelled out in Sanskrit texts as well as to its practical entailments in society across vernacular cultures. If in ancient India the prototypical other was the Buddhist, in medieval India the Muslim takes this discursive position. How is this longue durée chronology of what we can retrospectively call “communal” othering layered onto the perennial othering of the low-caste person? There is some effort to explore this complex question in a piece on vaisnavī Bengal by J. T. O’Connell, in Romila Thapar’s classic essay, “The Tyranny of Labels,” and in substantial extracts from Brajadalal Chattopadhyaya’s definitive study, Representing the Other? (pp. 349–428).

What one would like to see in the near future is the work of younger scholars of India who are beginning to build on the strong foundation provided by the historians anthologized here. For now, we must move beyond simply identifying and documenting the occurrence of the terms and categories of marginality and subordination in South Asian premodernity. We need to provide fine-grained analyses and critical readings of historical materials that can make the case, contra Dirks, for
the long life of social inequality on the Indian subcontinent. Deciding how then to address this rather worrying piece of historical baggage in our political practice would be the next step on the agenda.

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*Women in Security, Conflict Management, and Peace*


Among India's highly diverse political entities, West Bengal stands out, owing to the long-standing dominance of its democratically elected Communist government and its volatile relationship with the central government in New Delhi over the past decades. Arild Engelsen Ruud's *Poetics of Village Politics* offers the reader an anthropological perspective on political dynamics in two Indian villages in West Bengal and accounts for the success of the Communist Party of India (Marxist, CPI-M) there through an analysis of local village politics. It contributes to a discourse established in the seminal works of Atul Kohli, G. K. Lieten, and Harihar Bhattacharyya.

West Bengal poses a problem: How does a party such as that of the Communists in West Bengal succeed electorally even at the village level when it is ostensibly committed to values alien to village society? Ruud traces how radical ideas of the *bhadralok*—that is, the Bengali social elite—have been made palatable to the larger Bengali society. He argues that new modes of education, the incorporation of new social values into Bengali literature, and increased interaction between urban and rural elites converged to transmit these new ideas into the sphere of village society and politics (p. 75). It is in this connection that increasing numbers of poetry recitals (p. 3) fertilized the ground for the CPI-M's success, thereby making power struggles come to life in the readers' minds. Ruud, like G. Ram Reddy and G. Haragopal ("The Pyraveekar—the Fixer in Rural India," *Asian Survey*, 25[11](1985):1148-62) and Subrata Mitra (Power, Protest, and Participation [New York: Routledge, 1992]), portrays village leaders as astute "political entrepreneurs" rather than as passive recipients of reformist or radical ideas. Village elites, vying for influence over local affairs, thus receive both new values (through education away from home) and new literature. But according to Ruud, they select from these values and ideas those which promise progress and influence for them in their home villages; they use media such as traveling theaters to effect change locally (p. 99). Based on surveys that he conducted at the village level beginning in the 1960s, Ruud also examines the palpable effects of new formal institutions (p. 154).

The anthropological perspective on grassroots politics, as employed by Ruud, can be useful in highlighting some of the distinctive features of state-society and intrasociety power relationships in the various regions of India. From this scholarship emerges a view of the state "from below" which attempts to relate the questions of high politics with respect to democracy and constitutionalism to the quotidian experience of *stateness* and local politics in the lives of ordinary citizens, especially in rural regions of non-Western political systems. In this sense, this tradition fills a gap in the contemporary research on politics. Two further commendable features of Ruud's work are that he focuses on and (unlike others) takes seriously the actor at the local level and treats perception (in the shape of reputation, for example) as a key variable.