



2017

## Book Review: *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print*

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### Recommended Citation

Robison, Claire C. (2017) "Book Review: *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 30, Article 18.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1670>

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homogenous tradition, unvarying in its approach to ethics and impregnable to other influences.

Friesen's *Ramana Maharishi* has a wealth of information, the main point of which is to dismantle the classic account of Ramana. The reader would like to know, in addition to understanding what he was not, what was he? What can one say with confidence about Ramana? Friesen's goal is to clear the ground for such a study, stating that he hopes the current

book "will assist in understanding his experience, and in understanding in what way Ramana can continue [to] be a model for us for enlightenment" (296). This book belongs in the libraries of those interested in twentieth century expressions of Advaita Vedanta, popular Hindu figures, and Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Edward T. Ulrich

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***The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print.* By Charu Gupta. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016, 352 pages.**

**CHARU** Gupta frames her book as an auto-critique of her first monograph, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* (2002), in which she examined similar topics—gender, nationalism, and popular Hindi print culture in colonial North India. In her present work, she seeks to illumine the interrelatedness of caste and gender in the construction of images of Dalits in popular Hindi print culture. Concentrating on print and visual culture produced within the first half of the twentieth century, Gupta guides the reader through a series of journal articles and editorials, cartoons, vernacular histories, newspaper archives, popular literature, and self-published pamphlets. In these, she traces the sequential development of a series of discourses surrounding Dalit women's identity. Her intersectional approach and focus on vernacular print sources highlights the erasures of individual identity and agency inherent in Dalits' representations in upper-caste Hindi publications and in official textual archives. Gupta draws inspiration from recent scholarship by Dalit feminists and Black

feminists in the US, including bell hooks, Anita Bharti, and Vimal Thorat. Her interventional approach to rereading the historical record to resituate non-elite groups alongside the hegemonic models that often exclude them also fits into a collection of earlier studies by Karin Kapadia, Mahua Sarkar, and others.

As Gupta notes, in the upper-case reformist-nationalist Hindi literature of the early twentieth century, representations of Dalit women as "vamps"—coalescing around notions of impurity, evil, and sexual danger—gave way to more sympathetic images of the bodily suffering of Dalit women under the harsh labor and frequent sexual exploitation encountered in their caste-based dispensation. In both cases, however, Gupta points out that these representations emphasized Dalit women's status outside of the ideals of upper-caste Hindu domesticity. Even in reformist caste critiques, the foregrounded descriptions of Dalit women's anguished, victimized bodies created iconographies of suffering that both homogenized lived experiences and often

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reinforced caste hierarchy in benevolent tones. In the popular religious imagination, the popularization of Shabari's story from the Rama traditions presented both a promise of low-caste elevation through *bhakti* but also the assertion that humble, selfless service was the natural inclination of lower caste women and men in an idealized *varṇāśrama* system. It was in Dalit print culture—although often male-penned and informally published—that Dalit women received their most valorous representations to date, as heroic *viranganas* who took up arms against the British in 1857. These vernacular histories not only popularized an image of Dalit nationalism but also launched counter-representations of Dalit femininity as noble, valorous, and agentive.

Gupta often locates tensions between these conflicting representations in relation to early twentieth century print-public discussions about low-caste conversions to Islam and Christianity. Concerns about who should be included in the Hindu community were discussed in publications from the Arya Samaj to the Adi Hindu movement. Foremost among the conversion anxieties expressed in high-caste Hindu editorials and cartoons were lamentations over the “irony” of Hindus' cordial relationships with Muslims but their systemic social exclusion of Dalits. In juxtaposing these relationships, high-caste Hindi print media increasingly advocated for a social segregation between Muslims and Hindus in the coalescence of a united Hindu identity. As the symbolic collectivity of a national Hindu community was being collated, increasing religious boundaries were reinforced to demarcate it.

Gupta also seeks to further extend the study of men also as gendered subjects through a consideration of the shaping of Dalit

masculinities during this period. She unpacks the gendered implications of conversion in relation to both Dalit men and women. Drawing on Hindi publications and missionary tracts at the time, she highlights assertions that a conversion to Christianity in particular bestowed a modern, “respectable” manhood decried as unattainable for Dalit men in their present system and enabled Dalit women to resignify their gendered habitus through donning forms of clothing and jewelry previously unavailable to them. High-caste anxieties about conversion were magnified by the ambiguous relationship Dalit communities had to the British colonial establishment. The promise of novel educational opportunities and upward social mobility, along with parallel processes of urbanization and increased regional mobility, made colonial allies among North Indian Dalit communities. Yet Dalit histories of 1857 also depict a two-pronged nationalist resistance in their narration of the uprising, representing Dalit fighters as battling against both foreign colonial oppressors *and* the revival of a coalition of high-class Hindu and Muslim dominance represented by the Mughal and *nawabi* rulers of North India.

Some of the most challenging issues Gupta considers coalesce around her analysis of gender in relation to conversion narratives, upward caste mobility, and print representations of Dalit women by Dalit men. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's analysis of mimicry, Gupta highlights the complex process of changing gender practices among Dalit communities during this period. A growing restriction of women's mobility and sexual agency accompanied negotiations of upward social and economic mobility. In this new gender dispensation, *purdah* and the prohibition

of widow remarriage radically transfigured Dalit women's lived experiences while subtly reinforcing high-caste projections of sexual promiscuity onto lower caste women. Gupta sees this internalization of early twentieth century high-caste Hindu narratives of femininity also reflected in the *virangana*-centered Dalit histories of 1857, which depict a balance of heroism and well-coiffed physiques familiar to any reader of popular, modern sanitized narratives of the Rani of Jhansi or Mirabai. Yet, the *virangana* narratives also carve Dalits into a national history that refuses dominant representations of their historic marginalization.

Gupta is careful to problematize falsely homogenizing identity categories such as "the Dalit woman," and she notes the plurality of regional and *jati* distinctions within the range of her study. This is underscored in her focus on the heterogeneous character of representations in the vernacular Hindi print archives, as well as in her emphasis on intimacy and quotidian rhythms within the sources. However, most of the print sources she consults are implicitly coded as male and the direct voices of Dalit women are rarely heard. Chapter 6, "Goddesses and Women's Songs," mitigates this by giving

examples of vernacular songs composed by Dalit women in the *kajli* genre. Here the reader briefly glimpses a direct self-fashioning among Dalit women through their own compositions. However, with a few noted exceptions, these voices were recorded largely within the sphere of orality, outside of the textual sources that fill most of the study. The very absence of Dalit women's self-fashioning in the remainder of Gupta's sources does highlight her assertions of both the heterogeneous and yet reductionist nature of their prevailing representations in this period along the lines of both gender and caste.

Gupta's study is an excellent contribution that brings forward scholarly discussions on gender, caste, and the role of print media in the formation of publics, highlighting the necessity for intersectional approaches in the study of Indian history. It provides an accessible entrance into the subject that would work well in graduate seminars and professional contexts and could equally contribute to transregional conversations on the role of gender and class in revisionist historical studies.

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***To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum.* By Nathaniel Roberts. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016, xv + 312 pages.**

**KEEPING** his word to the residents of a slum he called Anbu Nagar, Nathaniel Roberts eloquently and clearly interprets their world. Roberts *tells* us their story. He tells us *everything*, not just about their beliefs. With his lively

narration and insightful commentary, he makes us *understand* their religion. Studying a slum in Chennai, India, Roberts, a gifted anthropologist and a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic