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Book Review

Dalit Literature and Criticism

by Raj Kumar, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019, 159 pp., Rs. 250.00 (paperback)

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Chetan

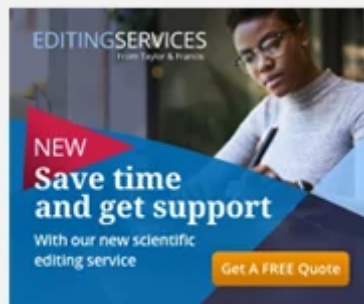
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SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW



BOOK REVIEW

Dalit Literature and Criticism, by Raj Kumar, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019, 159 pp., Rs. 250.00 (paperback) ISBN 978-93-5287-532-0

Written to familiarize people interested in Dalit literature and Dalit aesthetics, Raj Kumar has achieved the desired aim through his book *Dalit Literature and Criticism* that acquaints readers with the historical, sociological, political, and cultural aspects of Dalit writings. The book consists of six chapters dealing with a specific facet of caste-based discrimination in Indian society. These chapters show how Dalit writings capture the representation, articulation, contestation and opposition of caste-based oppression.

Chapter One, titled “*Introducing the Concept of ‘Dalit,’*” defines the term “Dalit” and provides demographical evidence to show how widely people relate themselves with the term. Dalit people are natives of several countries and have been consistently striving to exert their identity. The etymological roots of Dalit can be traced to the Sanskrit word “*dal*” (3), which means crack, split, trodden, and down. Explicating the pervasiveness and applicability of the word Dalit, Kumar writes that it is gender-neutral and extensively popularized by Marathi Literature. The Marathi Dalit Movement aimed at spreading awareness among marginalized people struggling for their rights. The word came into public discourse in the nineteenth century when the non-Brahmin movement gained momentum due to the efforts of social reformers such as Jotibarao Phule (1826–1890), who seems to have used the word “Dalit” to describe the condition of “outcaste” people. Then, the term “Dalit” became identical with socially outcaste people and widely used in the movements for oppressed and marginalized people.

In the second chapter, “*Dalits and the Caste Question,*” Kumar describes the theories of Dalit origin authenticated by evidence recovered from historical, cultural, ethnological, and lingual studies. The two theories explicated in detail are the Western theory (supplemented with historical research) and the Brahminical theory (supported by the Hindu scriptures and religious texts). Kumar quotes historians, sociologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists to exemplify different opinions on the origin, consolidation, and acceptance of caste discrimination. Caste society and untouchability became a rigid and extensively followed practice between 500 BCE and 500 CE when the *varna* system flourished and concretized. The *Varna* system was the hierarchical structure of Indian society dividing people based on their occupation. Under this system, the four basic categories were “Brahmins” (priests and intellectuals), “Kshatriyas” (kings, warriors, and administrators), “Vaishyas” (farmers, traders, and merchants), and “Shudras” (workers and laborers). Kumar also sheds light on alternative philosophies, religions, and movements that challenged social discrimination and served as passages for oppressed people to escape exploitation. While describing alternatives to the Brahminical system, Kumar traces the history of the tussle between upper-caste people and lower-caste people from ancient times to the present. Jainism, Buddhism, Bhakti Movement, British colonization, and social reform movements are decoded as the marks of contestation between upper-caste and lower-caste people.

Chapter Three, “*The Emergence of Dalit Literature,*” presents a summative repository of Dalit literature and its various forms from different historical time periods. The chapter asserts that though caste has been used as a tool of discrimination and exploitation, it has become a source of power for marginalized people. Kumar initiates his argument by

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