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BOOK REVIEW

Fragmented and Competing: Marginalities and Marginalized in India

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ABSTRACT

The social and political marginalities and the politics of the marginalized in today's India are fragmented and competing marginalities; they do not make for a unified force of opposition to the dominant theoretical or empirical frameworks. This is owing to the fact of the changing role of the political economy of the country, the role of the state whose economic and political reach has been tremendous, and the strategies of the mainstream political system which keep on inventing populisms of various kinds; and finally the nature of the social change itself, have all lead to the continued extension and prevalence of the hegemony of the dominant communities over the marginalized, particularly the Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Keywords: Dalits, Adivasis, Andhra Pradesh, India

1. Srinivasulu Karli (2026) *Caste Dominance and Resistance: Dalit Identity Politics in South India*, New Delhi: Aakar Books. pp. 256, Price: 695/-

2. Xaxa, Abhay Flavian and G. N. Devy (Eds) (2021) *Being Adivasi: Existence, Entitlements and Exclusion*, Rethinking India Series, New Delhi, Penguin Random house, Vintage imprint. pp. xv+180, price: 799/-

This review essay deals with two books that explain the existential condition of Dalits in one case (Srinivasulu, 2026) of Adivasis in another (Xaxa and Devy, 2021). The purpose of this review is to take stock of the nature of the marginalities and marginalized communities in India and forward an argument that the marginalized are increasingly pitted against each other as they are also increasingly fragmented and competing in all their struggles and movements.

Caste has always attracted the attention of Political Scientists when they tried to explain politics in India. As a pervasive social phenomenon caste shaped and is in turn shaped by politics. This despite the fact that some like Manor have argued that the effectiveness of caste as political category for mobilization has declined over the years. And that the caste has become more a segmented reality and less a hierarchical principle of organizing the society². The literature has been prolific on this subject ever since Rajni Kothari¹ first edited his book on the topic. This book by Srinivasulu is part of the literature but is unique in the sense that it not only speaks of the role of caste in general, but speaks of Dalit castes, their resistance to the social structure and oppression and Dalit movement and their transformations. All these as they have taken place in one South Indian State: The then united Andhra Pradesh. Most of the debate deals with the vicissitudes of Dalit castes and Dalit movements.



The book has a preface, an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. The book clarifies at the outset the contrasting theoretical approaches to the study of caste in general and Dalit caste movement in particular. Marxist, Modernization and Subaltern School of historiography are discussed. Gramscian approach is stressed among the Marxist approaches. The chapter consisting of this discussion is rich and insightful. Most of the discussion in the chapter deals with caste versus class and autonomy of subaltern groups from the elite politics. The point of contrast in the Marxist versus Dalit movements interpretations can be found throughout the chapter and the book. For example, elsewhere in the book the author asks whether we should dismiss caste as superstructural phenomenon as most Marxists seem to do or should we start from the superstructure following Gramsci to understand, interpret and throw away caste. Thus, such profound thinking and critical discussion is interspersed at many a place in the book with rigorous arguments throughout.

The book's initial chapters contextualize the condition of the Dalit castes in the rural/ agrarian scenario in the post-green revolution conditions. Here the objective social and economic conditions in which the Dalit castes are situated are the rural, agrarian conditions, particularly that of Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions. Coastal Andhra considered to be more developed and Rayalaseema sub-region predominantly semi-feudal. The chapters also detail and vividly describe the violent attacks and killings of Dalits in numerous instances from Chundur, Karmachedu and other instances with detailed studies of cases and numbers of the Dalits affected by violence.

In fact, as the author makes it clear it is these instances of violence meted out to Dalit caste men and women that have led him to ask the many important questions that he has asked in this book. The politics of caste and the resistance of Dalits to oppression have often led to violent reprisals from the upper castes. Here one should clearly note that the upper castes who have committed these atrocities were non-Brahmin peasant upper castes, namely Kammass, Kapus, Rajus and in other circumstances, Reddys. The point is that these castes have strengthened owing to the agrarian growth that resulted from green revolution led agriculture and developed interests and aspirations in rural and urban political power and dominance, hence when such hegemonic aspirations were met with resistance, the violence followed. The chapters discussing the incidents of violence are telling enough that one, the upper castes did not tolerate the resistance of the Dalits; two, the Dalit castes following these incidents started organizing into Dalit movement of resistance to caste oppression. The incidents described and mentioned have taken place mostly between 1983-2003 at various

villages of Coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema regions of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh.

The rest of the chapters of the book deal with the emergence and evolution of Dalit movement in the then Andhra Pradesh from mid 1980s up to the recent times. Three distinct phases of the movement are identified. A) that of resistance b) that of growth and interaction with larger politics of the Dalit castes as well as that of the political parties c) the different ways and types of dilution and decline of the Dalit movement. The resistance phase is vibrant and is analyzed as it took place in the initial phases. The second phase involved an ambition to develop a political party for Dalits on the lines of *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) of the Uttar Pradesh and the failure therein. The third phase, whose beginning we already find in the second phase, is that of development of Dalit sub-caste consciousness, the question of sub-classification of Dalits and politicization and mobilization in terms two distinct groups of sub-castes: *Madiga* Dalit sub-caste under the *Madiga Dandora* and *Mala* group of sub-castes under the *Mala Mahanadu* cluster of castes. There are altogether supposed to be 59 sub-castes among the Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Of the *Madigas* and *Malas* the former are the most marginalized groups. *Malas* are above the *Madigas* in the caste hierarchy. The rules of the caste distinctions are according to the principles of purity and pollution. Thus, bringing back the old sociological theory of caste into discussion. And besides all this, the more important reason is the resource-allocation capacity of the state. Thanks to the multifold increase in the state allocative capacity of resources—pace e.g., Manor- the antagonisms between the *Malas* and *Madigas* have turned increasingly competitive, 'ugly' and even bitter. Both caste clusters now compete for the state resources in terms of jobs, educational opportunities and state expenditure on development programmes. Thus, the marginalities of society are not only fragmented but have also become competitive and, in the process, divided.

Both the Dalit movement groupings emphasizing their share of reservation of the state resources in education, employment and development expenditure. The development of these two *Mala* and *Madiga* sub-caste groupings and their consequent dynamics has led to the dilution of the Dalit movement. The mainstream parties have played their own role of dividing, coopting and mainstreaming the Dalit political leaders. The attempt to mainstream the Dalit movement into electoral politics *a la* Uttar Pradesh was also not successful. This is in spite of the fact that both the Congress and the TDP (*Telugu Desam Party*) have coopted both issues and leaders from the Dalit movement of the united Andhra Pradesh state.

Later to the above phenomenon, there have been further changes and transformations of the Dalit movement in AP; such as the transformation of the Dalit movement into an



NGO movement being run on foreign funded- project mode. Thus, the erstwhile Dalit activists become project implementers in the process diluting the spirit of the Dalit struggle. The book towards the end notes the most recent challenge to the Dalit movement from the *Hindutva* forces and the *Sangh Parivar* and how they are attempting to coopt the Dalit movement and are undermining the same.

Set within a Gramscian framework this book asks more pertinent questions than even the Dalit movement can answer. Nor the Left movement in India can answer either. We are mentioning these two because there is consistent engagement with the ideological standpoints of different shades of the Left movement of India as well as the Dalit movement throughout the text. The questions pertain to the very nature, future and direction of the Dalit movement in the fast-changing neo-liberal India.

Throughout the book what one comes across is a shift from resistance to domination to cooption under the hegemony of the dominant dispensation. There seem to be a shift from 'domination' over the Dalits to 'hegemony' over Dalit movement. Gramsci makes this distinction clearly. Domination being outright and physical coercion while hegemony being intellectual, cultural and moral/political leadership. The book for instance begins with details of outright physical violence and domination of the upper castes over the locally situated Dalit castes; however, as we proceed with the book, and as the Dalit movement develops in AP it gradually comes under the overall hegemony of both the liberal party system and neo-liberal political economy--thus, leading to the questions that the author is raising at the end.

The point we are mentioning in this essay is that the marginalities discussed above are fragmented marginalities; they did not make for a unified force of opposition to the dominant political- theoretical or empirical-operational frameworks of state politics. The changing role of the political economy of the country, where the state is withdrawing from public sector but is also becoming increasingly populist, with increasing resources at its command, the role of the state which keeps on inventing programmes, policies, doles and schemes (Manor, 2010) and the strategies of the mainstream political system which keeps on deepening its hold on the grassroots, have all led to the continued extension and prevalence of the hegemony over the Dalit movement and Dalit castes.

This is a wonderful combative book about the caste question and the Dalit movement in the then existing Andhra Pradesh. Ever since, the state has been bifurcated in 2014 and now there are two separate states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. For reasons best known to the author, the latest developments on the front of the Dalit movement since the state-division are not addressed in the

book. The reviewer thinks the addition of the condition of the Dalit movement, divided as it had been—after the formation of the Telangana state would have brought the book up to date for readers who are not acquainted with either the old Andhra Pradesh or new Telangana or new Andhra Pradesh. The book should be warmly welcomed for its theoretical rigor, empirical detail and combative arguments.

While discussing the above book two aspects that are discussed by Manor come to the fore. The first aspect is the materiality of caste; and second is the fact of the multi-dimensional causality in the decline of the role of caste in politics. The materiality of caste pertains to the simultaneous presence of caste in both the economic base and superstructure. Caste occupations which have been concrete aspects of caste, for example reflect, or reflected in the past, the materiality of caste. The second and more important fact is mentioned by Manor in terms of the multi-causal explanations required for explaining the role of caste in Indian politics and its supposed decline therein. Are mono-causal explanations such as the Marxian ones wherein the changes in the economic basis lead to the disappearance of the caste enough? Is the question. Class/caste dyadic questioning should be replaced by a more plural causality in explaining the role of caste in politics or its decline.

The second book by Xaxa and Devy (2021) deals with the Adivasi question in India and is written by some academics as well as some practicing politicians. As such while the book clearly brings out the Tribal predicament in India being a multi-authored edited book brings in many perspectives. These clearly illustrate the fact that the Adivasis are the most marginalized, displaced and dispossessed communities in India. They form about eight percent of the total population of the country and are divided between hundreds of types. They speak different languages, practice different cultural practices and are governed by myriad and diverse indigenous systems. The book deals with the questions of governance in tribal areas, which is largely either lax or in favour of vested interests. The chapter on governance in tribal areas raises the question of the fact that unlike for the Dalits, for Tribals there has not been an Ambedkar or Babu Jagjivan Ram or any such vocal leader. Also, the most important fact is that for Dalits the most important factor is representation, while for Adivasis it is their autonomy. The book discusses the Nehruvian *Panchsheel* for tribals and as to how Nehru wanted both the simultaneous integration of the tribals and conservation of their cultures.

The most important fact is also that the tribal question too is a fragmented question, even if one does not find competition for state resources as in the case of the Dalit castes. There are simply different types of Adivasis in different localities in the Central and Eastern India and



they are affected by different types of marginalization. These are affected by displacement owing to dams, wild animal protection parks, mining and big capital ventures simply differently. Here therefore their politics too differ widely.

The book discusses many different political responses to Adivasi problems ranging from the implementation of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) to reinvigoration of customary governance systems to the reasons for the emergence and development of the Maoist movement in these areas. The book also discusses the approaches of the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) and the BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*) towards the Adivasi issue. The *Sangh Parivar* sees the Adivasis not as a distinct people but as vanvasis, who are part of the Hindu population living in the forest localities. And there are attempts to bring back the Adivasis who are not in the Hindu fold through *Ghar Vapsi* (return to home religion). While the Maoist movement has been neutralized of late, the Adivasi issues themselves persist. They persist in all their fragmentation. The representative institutions having taken only a weak hold in these areas, the questions loom for the longer range of time.

Here too much like in the case of Dalits the identity questions are entangled with those of class. At least one author in the edited book makes an attempt to explicitly identify Tribals as semi-proletarianized peasant laboring classes. Thus, the Adivasi identity dimension is compounded with agrarian question as well.

These two books considered here discuss two qualitatively different marginalized sections of the Indian society. The first book discusses the Dalit question and the caste and class entanglement of the question in the state of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. The second book deals with the question of the Adivasis condition in the Central and Eastern India from a plurality of perspectives. Arguably the Dalits forming about 16.6 percent of the Indian society and Adivasis forming about 8.6 percent of the Indian society constitute quite qualitatively different political questions. Dalits historically had strong vocal representation in the Constituent Assembly in the persona of Dr. Ambedkar and other leaders. While the Tribals too had leaders such as Jaipal Singh, they were not equally effective. However, both the Dalit and Tribal questions are still major issues before the polity. They are haunted by the questions of the dominant processes of neo-liberal development and processes of the growth of *Hindutva* in equal measure. These are fragmented marginalities unable to forge united struggles before dominant political processes. We do not hold that this is entirely a new discovery, rather that the books under consideration reiterate these points afresh, strongly and poignantly.

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