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Publisher Routledge

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Asian Studies Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713613499>

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Online publication date: 27 November 2009

To cite this Article Doron, Assa and Rao, Ursula(2009) 'From the Edge of Power: The Cultural Politics of Disadvantage in South Asia', Asian Studies Review, 33: 4, 419 — 428

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10357820903363561

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357820903363561>

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From the Edge of Power: The Cultural Politics of Disadvantage in South Asia¹

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India's cultural "soft power" overshadowed its much-touted economic credentials in 2008. *The White Tiger* won the Man Booker Prize for fiction, and *Slumdog Millionaire*, a rags-to-riches fable, won an Oscar. What can these portrayals tell us of India and its oppressed classes?

The first, written by Arvind Adiga, tells the story of a poor man from Bihar, who becomes a domestic servant in an upper-class household in the affluent suburb of Gurgaon near Delhi. The poor man achieves his ultimate release from the shackles of servitude by ruthlessly murdering his employer and stealing his money, then forging a new life as an entrepreneur in the burgeoning city of Bangalore. The second successfully employs the Bollywood style and formula, seducing us with a fairytale story of a Mumbai slum-dweller whose life story and everyday struggles provide a resourceful foundation for him to answer the questions levelled at him in the Indian version of the TV show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*?

The White Tiger and *Slumdog Millionaire* have stimulated passionate debate and attracted both criticism and praise from Western and Indian audiences alike. It is not our intention to evaluate the merit of the commentary, largely polarised around the issue of whether or not such depictions of subaltern worlds are accurate and authentic; we want to highlight the common thread that runs through these two controversial renditions. *The White Tiger* and *Slumdog* both employ the voice of the underdog to narrate their stories and in both the underdog triumphs, achieving upward social mobility. Nevertheless, this is a thin notion of upward mobility acquired through improbable means – a gameshow and murder.

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This is unfortunate as it leaves us with a somewhat conservative vision of Indian society. In such renditions the poor are reduced to the “other”, and emancipation and redemption are contingent upon escaping their social context, which is characterised by hate, crime and backbiting by the poor themselves. Consequently, liberation can only be achieved through unlikely methods and only by individuals whose movement upwards reaffirms the structures of domination. There is no scope for collective mobility or political action and change. Essentially, these are culturally disembedded practices connoting conservative and ultimately illusionary trajectories of upward mobility. They offer little insight into how the structures of domination (political/economic/social) within Indian society are subverted, negotiated, reproduced, transformed and, at times, overturned in culturally meaningful ways.

It is precisely these issues that animate our concern in this special issue on the cultural politics of disenfranchised groups in India. We attempt to highlight these politics by elaborating on particular stories, narratives, social practices, spatial forms and political struggles of subaltern classes. We hope this will enrich appreciation of the many and complex voices that speak from subaltern worlds. We aim to underline, too, the daunting structural inequalities people face, and offer insights into how power structures are being transformed, inflected and contested by subaltern communities in India. In these communities, meanings are constructed and negotiated across a range of cultural, political and spatial representations, practices and visions.

Culture, Power, Performance

The question of social mobility has been a major concern of scholarly literature on Indian society. The eminent anthropologist M.N. Srinivas (1989) coined the term “Sanskritisation” to describe the process by which low castes have been actively seeking to advance their collective status by emulating upper-caste values and social practices. He identified culturally grounded social practices that are pivotal to this process – for example, abstaining from the consumption of meat or alcohol (considered ritually polluting), and adopting customs, beliefs and values associated with the Brahminical tradition. While the social system itself remains intact, the concept and method of Sanskritisation allow for an understanding of the degree of dynamism and fluidity within what was generally viewed as the rigid and prescriptive social institution of caste. The adequacy of Srinivas’s model has been the subject of lively debate for 50 years. Its relevance and appropriateness depend significantly on local situations and historical contingencies. His formulation takes almost no account of power relations, and it is the issue of power that we take up, particularly as it was articulated within the influential Subaltern Studies School.

The importance of the Subaltern Studies School lies in its critical focus on structures of power and subordination. Scholars of the School pointed out that both colonial and national history-writing effectively excluded subaltern voices from the grand narratives of the nation. One method of recovering the subaltern voice was to explicitly politicise culture. Thus, David Hardiman (1984), a founding member of the School, criticises the concept of Sanskritisation for its ahistorical view of “culture”, insofar as upper castes are seen to possess a set of immutable and unified

cultural values and practices. He argues that even when claims for high status or political equality are made and located within a historical context, the political challenges inherent in such acts of assertion are rarely examined. Therein lies part of the appeal of the Subaltern Studies School: by investigating the workings of power, it succeeded in showing that subalterns engaged in politics and persistently sought ways of mitigating and improving their position in society.

The debate surrounding the agency of the subaltern has been almost inseparable from the question of consciousness and power, often expressed by subalterns through protest and resistance. It was argued that the discussion of subalternity too often fostered the conceptual separation of elite from subaltern, domination from resistance, and culture from politics. Subaltern agency and consciousness were equated with opposition, effectively constructing an artificial boundary between resistant subalterns and oppressing elites. This trajectory is anticipated in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* where Guha (1982) defines subaltern space alternatively as “autonomous domain” (p. 4) untouched by elite politics, or as reactive to exploitative relations, locking Indian history into a “structural dichotomy” (p. 6). Equally concerned with the question of power and subordination, James Scott (1985; 1990) has been highly influential in bringing to the fore the resistance strategies deployed by subaltern classes to improve their position and undermine elite domination. Scott’s fascinating studies shed light on what he argues are much more prevalent but less evident forms of protest employed by the poor, who rarely buy into or internalise the norms and definitions imposed by elite ideology. Scott’s work has been criticised for its overriding concern with class, and its failure to recognise other equally significant aspects of social identity and inequality, including gender, age, state structures, kinship relations and ethnicity (Ortner, 2006; Tsing, 1993). Scott’s analysis of resistance, however, is mired in a series of oppositional terms, such as on-stage/off-stage and public/hidden transcripts, that tend to inhibit a more complex appreciation of the meaning and practices that inform the day-to-day struggles of subordinated people (see Doron, 2008; Gal, 1995).

The notion of a pure, independent and authentic subaltern subjectivity opposing dominant discourse has been vigorously challenged by a host of scholars critical of its epistemological assumptions and the homogenising tendencies of early subaltern writings (Kaplan and Kelly, 1994; Ortner, 2006; O’Hanlon, 1988).² Scholars have sought to identify more nuanced modalities of subaltern agency by emphasising that the multiple projects pursued by people are never separate from wider transformative events, ideological movements and structures that shape meaningful practices (see, for example, Mahmood, 2001; Ortner, 2001). In the South Asian context, this move has been successfully carried by feminist writings. Raheja and Gold’s (1994) seminal study of a group of north Indian women focused on alternative discourses and practices, such as stories, proverbs and song, through which women are able to articulate their needs, wants and aspirations in meaningful ways, away from the gaze of the repressive patriarchal order. Others have sought to investigate expressions of women’s agency in various sites, such as the print media, the community, schools and the household (Busby, 1999; Ghosh, 2007; Kumar, 1994; 2007; Pintchman, 2005; Tiengtrakul, 2006).

These studies clearly demonstrate the ways in which the socio-ideological registers of power are produced, contested and manipulated in local settings: evidence of

diverse and often subtle modes of agency. For Nita Kumar (1994; 2007), to write histories of subalterns and attempt to gauge “the degree and efficacy of agency” one must also consider the “context of domination”: they are mutually constitutive (1994, p. 15). Methods of doing so vary across social interfaces, as this volume shows through its examination of life histories, autobiographies, myths, narratives, ritual texts, language, ideological movements and spatial arrangements. Indeed, the insights of this volume reinforce Kumar’s observation that all such texts and practices are “evidence of the submerged but struggling notion of subject identity that is otherwise displayed by radical action”. She suggests that such evidence, “even when revelatory of no radical messages, can be read for the doubts, confusion and aspirations that characterize the fashioning of a non-normative discourse” (1994, p. 14).

The case studies in this collection are significant in that they seek to emphasise the plurality of context and relationality, unearthing the complex relationship between agency *and* subalternity, power *and* domination. While our analysis is inspired by the rich body of literature analysing subaltern histories and experiences, it also adds to these studies by making more explicit the urge and intensity with which Dalits inscribe their claims, desires and hopes into the landscape of power. Of course, Dalits have long been actively engaged in the construction of their own representations, legitimacy and political agency. But rather than rejecting the system and its theological premise (e.g. Ambedkar), a more recent strategy employs the wide circulation of stories, myths and legends that elaborate upon the historical suffering of their community and its heroic contributions to Indian civilisation. This fusing of narrative truth and historical truth offers a more “active” representation of subaltern selves, what Rosland calls the “risen victim” (2009, pp. 304–05), where images, texts and physical spaces are reconfigured. The cultural politics of disadvantage highlights suffering and sacrifice as vital ingredients of Dalit legitimacy and newly acquired political power. It also demonstrates the vitality of Dalits’ cultural lives and underlines their demand to be accommodated as citizens and active participants in the narrative and institutions of the modern nation-state.

The rise of Dalit political assertion is paralleled by and often intertwined with more mundane acts of low castes, expressing their desire for inclusion in the realm of everyday life. These are acts that provoke and question dominant perceptions. In line with recent discussions on the performativity of culture (Butler, 1997; Carlson, 2004 [1996]; Schieffelin, 1998; Rao, 2006), we claim that the *act* as such is important, even when it is non-authorised and may potentially be ignored, sidelined or ridiculed. Put simply, the very fact that, say, a Dalit group/individual engages in a political act, even though it may not seem to achieve much, is significant because it indicates dynamism and agency and may in some cases generate unpredictable results. Voices and performances of dissent carry the potential to arrest attention and seduce engagement. The *doing* harbours the possibility for transformation, however gradual and incremental.

This collection of essays not only charts a nuanced picture of how communities, symbols, values and beliefs operate and travel across socioeconomic divides. It also demonstrates how these emerge out of a shared knowledge and cultural repertoire readily available for scrutiny, appropriation and celebration, for both more privileged sectors of society and those located on the margins. The essays unravel

the complex realities of everyday life that clearly demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of the subaltern world, as both a community of practice and an analytical category. By “practice” we refer to the multiple and often ambivalent ways in which disadvantaged castes seek to undermine or maintain their social environment and the challenges involved in social reproduction, cultural critique and political mobilisation. Such practices demonstrate that caste remains a meaningful category that bears affective and political capacities, which often escape the dominant idiom of subaltern politics anchored in the language of exclusion and resistance. Rather, we find that equality, participation and harmony may be equally valuable imperatives located alongside more familiar strategies of appropriation and creative reworking of hegemonic models. These diverse and ambiguous markers of everyday life and experience necessarily render the notion of a fixed and authentic subaltern category untenable.

The collection offers three different perspectives on the predicaments of people on the fringes of power. The first set of essays cries against injustice and exclusion; the second presents counter-practices of low-caste pride; and the third demonstrates how marginalised groups position themselves skilfully in a reshaped dominant discourse. In each set of papers the border between centre and margin is the focus. Subaltern views that speak of broken selves, humiliations and wrecked cultural projects are informed by the notion of human equality and the idiom of citizenship – key concepts in the postcolonial order. These concepts championed by both subalterns and elites also drive the project of caste pride, in which marginalised groups insist that all traditions, including their own, are valuable and must be accommodated and recognised by those in power. Declarations by subalterns against subjugation and for equality are complemented by practices of “cross-border” communication, in which they absorb and rework elite practices, adapting them to express and accommodate their own practices, desires and aspirations.

Uncovering Injustice

The first section confronts the violence of hierarchical caste relations in contemporary Indian society. Debjani Ganguly analyses two life histories that describe atrocities against Dalits, exercised on behalf of a social system that continues to preserve and reproduce caste inequality. The narratives have a global appeal and resonate with anyone familiar with the language of universal human rights. Yet they refuse to impart a sense of emancipation. Instead they conjure up the trauma of pulverised and fractured lives in which no coherent self-hood is possible. In her discussion of *Joothan* (Leftovers), Ganguly demonstrates the way the protagonist’s life of suffering and deprivation motivates him to become a Dalit activist. This, however, effectively distances him from his own caste community and relatives, who prefer to conceal their status rather than confront inequality and prejudice. The second work discussed, *Akkarmashi* (The Outcast), details the ambiguities and challenges of growing up as an illegitimate child, the progeny of inter-caste violence: born to a low-caste woman seduced/raped by an upper-caste landlord. As an adult, the protagonist does not find a sense of home or wider cultural identity in either social group. The power of these texts lies in their ability to capture the plight of the protagonist trapped between tenacious social practices and

institutions, and “modernity” concerned with social inequality and the promise of social mobility. Pain prospers where equality is a tantalising vision, never to be realised. The narratives, Ganguly argues, constitute a counter public, a “*dissensual force*” that reveals what is too often overlooked when India is celebrated as a potent economy and great democracy.

The second essay, by Badri Narayan, is no less unsettling. He moves the focus from individual to structure and from outrage to demand. Dalits formulate their grievances against the promise for a better future, reinvigorating the postcolonial dream of equality that today lies shattered and awaits resurrection. The ethnographic account engages with Dalits in Shahabour village in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Narayan demonstrates the significance of historicised tales of discrimination and cooperation for asserting Dalits’ right to respect and dignity. Dalits recollect fighting side by side with other castes in the independence struggle, when their suffering was valued as an indispensable part of the anti-imperial cause. But while the fantasy of social inclusion nurtured by Nehru seemed close, everyday reality did not keep pace with the grand predictions about the modern Indian state. Feelings of disillusionment and socioeconomic exclusion eventually found powerful political expression in the 1980s with the increasing success of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).³ Under the banner of BSP politics, the potent memory of collective Dalit struggles and the crowning of Dalit heroes became a means of asserting equal rights – a theme that Maxine Loynd develops in her paper on current Dalit spaces in UP. Whether these memories, symbolic actions, spatial strategies and political power can reinvigorate the Dalit dream of a more socially and economically just society remains an open question.

Historical contingencies produced a significantly different outcome in Bengal. In the third essay, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay recounts how a budding Dalit movement in eastern Bengal was over-determined by religious discourses produced by political actors in the emerging states of India and Pakistan. Caste injustice was overshadowed by enmity between Hindus and Muslims, inscribed onto the social body through communal violence and painful uprooting. Dalit refugees from east Bengal were subsumed within the undifferentiated category of Hindus, compelled to take refuge in a Hindu nationalist polity and to accommodate themselves to the social, economic and political landscape of their new homes. Resettlement does not erase caste prejudice, but it desolates the structures that nurture Dalit consciousness. The glaring contrast between Narayan’s and Bandyopadhyay’s essays reveals the intimate link between Dalit consciousness and historical process.

Engaging Space

Performances of pride complement and contrast discourses lamenting disempowerment. Performances that register emancipation and upward mobility powerfully position Dalit perspectives in the public arena. In this vein, the second group of essays examines collective memories, symbolic action and historical experience as culturally meaningful spatial strategies and forms. The authors focus on circumstances in which Dalits are able to introduce their symbols and versions of caste identity into areas that were once the preserve of power-holders and higher castes. The first two papers discuss places of grandeur created by Dalits for popular

consumption. These places are intended to stimulate pride. The topic is interrogated from two angles: architecture and scale, and ritual and performance. Loynd's paper focuses on a large, extravagant "party temple", the Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra erected in Lucknow by the BSP leader Mayawati. The site demonstrates the Dalit assertion movement's efforts to transform urban space. The BSP is well known for punctuating public spaces with Ambedkar statues, and naming public spaces and projects after Dalit heroes. The lavish Kendra continues this practice. Unlike the prominent Ambedkar figures in everyday spaces, the Kendra is a hidden, silent and well-guarded site. Entry is regulated and public exposure is mostly confined to occasions celebrating and propagating BSP achievements. Mainstream media have criticised the site as constituting another example of Mayawati's wasteful use of public money. Loynd offers a radically different interpretation. The temple-like structure disturbs the landscape of the sacralised nation, a monumental commentary on the absence of such awe-inspiring buildings that embrace and recognise the plight and contribution of the downtrodden to the Indian state. The Kendra is thus an expression of the ambivalent relationship that Dalits have with the nation-state: it celebrates Dalit achievements as at once distinct and inseparable from the project of nation-building.

Ursula Rao's article explains how celebrations of pride are part of a bottom-up strategy. Rather than creating a parallel symbolic universe, in Bhopal, Khatiks – a formerly untouchable caste of meat and vegetable sellers – act as caste Hindus, reworking local traditions and weaving them into the texture of a new urban Hinduism. A temple dedicated to Kali engages devotees of all castes with Khatik tradition. Khatiks are proud to provide a unique service to the urban community by making accessible the particularly potent goddess. In accord with Loynd's example, we find that scale matters. Khatiks are determined to make their temple one of the largest and tallest in the city. The building excites them and instils a sense of pride in caste traditions graced and energised by the goddess. But the temple is also central to caste relations, providing a meeting space for caste communion, against the backdrop of the alienating centrifugal forces of urban living. Rao remains sensitive to the way in which the everyday experiences of urban life are often directly at odds with this spirit of inclusiveness evoked in the temple. While socioeconomic cleavages and conflicts exist within the community, the regular celebrations and ritual activities, and the temple space create the potent and potentially transformative fantasy of a proud and united caste.

Mythic Re-positioning

The last section focuses on the ways in which marginalised actors interact with elites. A common theme of this collection is articulated most clearly in these last two examples: discourse and practices of marginalised populations are never simply constituted as opposition to hegemonic regimes. They are reworked political projects of engagement with the centres of power, re-positioning actors, myths and traditions in ways that carve out spaces for survival, dignity and, at times, political expression.

Kalpana Ram evokes the power of Tamil rhetorical speech and describes the way it is harvested in discourses of female empowerment that transgress class and caste

boundaries. As an affective language, poetic speech plays a significant role in popularising messages of empowerment of anti-Brahmanism, gender equality and Dalit assertion. Intellectuals and NGOs challenge social inequality in their communication with low-class, low-caste women by drawing on the early twentieth-century Self Respect movement with its established repertoire of assumptions and sentiments. Such appropriation is further refined in performances that draw on the Tamil poetic tradition to absorb audiences in an aesthetic experience that fuses emotional experience and intellectual engagement. In this communicative arena, boundaries between class and gender are invoked and reconfigured. A modernised elite uses the “traditional” medium of a “rain of words” to shower the message of equality on subalterns. The very speech act re-establishes status and difference. Yet it also evokes a shared cultural repertoire that allows subalterns to reflect and articulate their personal experiences of injustice through popular metaphors. The subalterns’ familiarity with the modern idiom of caste prejudice, and their fluency in the metaphors of “traditional” speech, facilitate participation in enlightenment discourses. While this does not eradicate economic inequality and social discrimination, it provokes reflection on power relations and stimulates aspirations.

In the final paper, Assa Doron analyses a narrative of empowerment within an established Hindu traditional framework. Members of the Mallah caste in Banaras regularly recite the text Trilokinath Vrat Katha during a ritual fast. The narrative of this text focuses on the fate of the ritually low Mallah man who, as a result of bad deeds in his past life, suffers social discrimination and economic deprivation. He is liberated from the shackles of the karmic cycle through divine grace and devout ritual practice, which ultimately bring about individual and collective prosperity, harmony and respect. The ritual story’s ambivalence and political overtones are enunciated in an encounter with a Brahmin who refuses to accept the ritual gift from the Mallah. The ritual realises its transformative power by delivering instantaneous liberation to the honest devotee and punishment to the arrogant Brahmin, undermining the social hierarchy through divine intervention. Nevertheless, Doron refuses an interpretation that yields solely to the “resistance” paradigm, insofar as it suggests that the Mallah is rejecting completely Brahminical authority and hegemonic cultural values. Rather, he argues that the *vrat*’s story and its efficacy are best viewed as reflective of low-caste projects and aspirations concerning social stability and cohesion, rather than disruption and agitation. The performance and narration of the ritual story is a proactive (rather than reactive) effort by subalterns seeking to ameliorate the effects of everyday life and ensure their spiritual, economic and social well-being.

This volume’s originality and strength lie in its interdisciplinary nature. The contributors draw on history, literature, anthropology, political science, human geography, religion and cultural studies in their efforts to challenge us to examine and rethink many of the common assumptions and binary oppositions underlying the analysis of the cultural politics of disadvantaged castes in contemporary India. The volume seeks to shed light on some of the rich resources deployed by marginalised people. It charts both the pitfalls of exclusion and the promises of liberation and empowerment that emerge through historical processes, political triumphs and culturally grounded social practices. The writers have attempted to

identify and understand the potential pathways that subordinated people follow in their struggle to improve their lives and overcome the barriers they encounter on their journeys. From the edge of power emerge dynamic projects (Ortner, 2006), instigated by an increasingly assertive desire by marginal groups for social inclusion, political rights and economic benefits.

Notes

1. The articles in this volume are based on papers presented at a two-day workshop organised by Assa Doron, Debjani Ganguly and Robin Jeffrey on 'The Cultural Politics of Disadvantaged Castes in India', held at the Australian National University (ANU) on 26–27 June 2008. We are particularly grateful to Robin Jeffrey whose inspiration, assistance and generosity were instrumental in making the workshop a success. We take the opportunity to thank the Australian Research Council's Asia-Pacific Futures Research Network, the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific and the ANU College of Social Science for sponsoring the workshop. We would also like to thank the participants for their lively discussion. Three anonymous reviewers offered valuable critical commentary and suggestions on individual articles and the volume as a whole. We also thank Helen Parsons for her editing work, and the editor of *Asian Studies Review*, Maila Stevens, for encouraging us in our efforts.
2. It is important to note that the Subaltern Studies project has evolved over time and incorporated many of these criticisms into subsequent volumes. These volumes offer further reflections on the problems and possibilities associated with identifying the "subaltern" as an authentic and recoverable entity. For a detailed account of the debates surrounding the Subaltern Studies project, see the edited volumes by Chaturvedi (2000) and Ludden (2002).
3. The name literally means the Majority People's Party, suggesting both that the oppressed constitute the majority of the population and the need for a united front.

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