

Aniket Jaaware, *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019, 235 pp., ₹895 (Hardcover). ISBN: 9789352875405.

DOI: 10.1177/2455328X211008359

Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching is a ground-breaking, open-minded and futuristic magnum opus of Professor Aniket Jaaware, 'A true polymath' who breathed his last shortly before the publication of this work. The book is a major break in our academic and everyday understanding of caste in India. It not only takes Dalit studies from its accustomed ideas to an unpredictable encounter with contemporary theoretical writings, observed events, unexplored lands and some literary works but is also a tribute to the author and cements his name as one of the most important intellectual voices of our time. The work is unprecedented and simultaneously calls to new scholarship. 'How shall we study caste so as to produce new knowledge of it?' (p. 8).

This text moves through a series of philosophical and methodological flavours, initially a Husserlian phenomenology to structuralism, and poststructuralism. The book offers both a profoundly new way of thinking about the fundamental issue of caste and a variation on the grounds of discussion. It offers an inclusive argument for thinking about caste in terms of touchability, and untouchability giving rhetoric and semantics of touch, scaling up from the body to literal, and metaphorical layers of touch. He calls *Practicing Caste* a tropology and invites us to view caste as 'a potent, powerfully precise virtualization of touch'. The argument is presented in a humble yet rigorous manner, making it accessible to everyone: casual readers and experts. 'I offer this study of touch and Caste in order to understand these operations so that we can find ways to end them,' (p. 1) and gives a casual mention of the relation between 'caste' and 'class', and 'societies that are more easily understood as 'class-based' also have regimes of touchability and untouchability' (p. 9). Although it is just the author who is saying it but the archaic 'we'

that the author has used throughout the text is meant to be an *invitation* to the readers to think aloud *with and against* the text.

To arrive at an understanding of caste that is variant from those already available in the field of Dalit studies/caste studies, one has to think of everything differently. For that one has to abandon dependence on available material: writings, texts and analysis done to date. Jaaware explains the method as ‘deliberate forgetting’ in which a significant amount of deliberate and undeliberate forgetting is necessary. Earlier practices need to be *oubliered* (a portmanteau word from the French *oublier* and the English *err*), a careful forgetting which is necessary for some relatively independent thought to occur in one’s mind. The author argues that given this methodological step, a study of caste can advance only in a deductive manner. The first two chapters attempt such a priori study and understanding of operations of touch. The author presents an imperative thought of society and the social operations of touching and not-touching but not in a received sociological manner. The next chapters comprise discussion on ‘touch’ in its social and historical aspects, ‘touch’ and texts, (un)touchability of things and people, questioning the categories of ‘society’, ‘social’ and ‘sociality’. The eighth and the final chapter is recapitulation with variations. ‘Coda’ is also attached to relieve the dryness and impersonality of the style of the main body of the text.

The author suggests the viewpoint that rearticulating caste at the level of economic and social destitution does not seem to have changed things as much as expected, so perhaps rearticulating at the intellectual level might be attempted. Hence, atheism becomes indispensable and *caste*—a promiscuous word. It is used in so many ways and brings so many references and meanings. For instance, the word *jaat* in Marathi. ‘It could even be said that it is not one word but many’ (p. 190). Diverse practices as dressing in a certain way, speaking in a certain way, eating certain foods, marrying certain people, performing certain rituals, the author affirms, ‘[V]arious things that we do are given the name of Caste’ (p. 190). As a result, if we need to criticize caste we need to disseminate its ‘semantic operability/functionality in our criticism’ (p. 193). Thus, the text is an invitation to readers and researchers to modestly attempt to see aporia itself because any anti-caste struggle to end caste would not be successful if any evaluations of ‘caste identity’ are damaging in ending the caste. Over and above all this personal and impersonal collective emotion is narcissistically planted on to caste easily rendering others as enemies.

Our thoughts on caste are caught in an aporia which cannot be avoided. So, we must consider the possibility of entering it in such a way that it rejects us by its logic and sends us away on a different tangent altogether. The text opens up a way of doing by ‘giving up the notion and practice of caste identity’ (p. 194) for it is attributed to us by others or we assume for ourselves. Hence, the need is to ‘unlearn’. The author emphasizes, ‘We need to forget that we are “of” this or that Caste. If we do, there are so many more people and places to embrace’ (p. 201). Quoting Emily Dickinson: ‘I’m Nobody! Who are you? Are you-Nobody-too?’ Jaaware reaches ‘dstitution,’ which in itself is ‘the condition of liberation’. He enlightens that we have been told to constitute us, ourselves, in a limited manner. Me, my family, my friends, my clan and my caste. This limits the ‘us’ to ‘ourselves’. We must reject this limited us (p. 196).

The text may be a radical approach to advance the study of caste but gives a therapeutic effect to the readers whether the lower castes who are enduring caste struggles or the upper castes of the current generation who do not practice caste discrimination but are made to face the guilt. Gopal Guru, the editor of *Economic and Political Weekly*, states that because of its innovative idea the volume deserves horizontal reading—line by line and page by page. The work is a seminal and timely contribution to the advancement of the social movement of Dalit literature that is re-shaping the larger fields of South Asian Studies. The reading of the text broadens our visions and opens up new thinking, hence is highly valuable and a must-read for the scholars.

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