

**Sharankumar Limbale and Jaydeep Sarangi, *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* (AuthorsPress, 2018)**

In 1949, anticipating the pending and hard-won constitution of India, eminent Indian social rights campaigner B.R. Ambedkar soberly prophesised:

“On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.”<sup>1</sup>

Ambedkar then asked, “How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life?”<sup>2</sup> Close to seventy years later, in a world where – constitutional requirements notwithstanding – ‘the entire process of seeking administration [to higher education] reflects the discriminative nature of the institution’ and ‘[h]umiliation of one sort or another is woven into the life experiences of a Dalit student’, the apparent answer to Ambedkar’s question is equally sobering.<sup>3</sup> It has taken a long time, and will yet take longer to achieve the dreams of freedom and equality for which he and many others strove. This problem – vitally a problem of privilege and subjugation – is one pertinent not only to India, but likewise in Australia, America, Britain, and a multitude of contexts in which certain members of the population enjoy access to opportunities, freedoms and comforts that certain (‘other’) members of the population do not.

In this context – this deeply problematic world – there is a crucial need for action to make visible the social injustices that persist despite all the battles human rights advocates have fought and the formal changes they have indeed won. Commendable, then, are the objectives of the Dalit literary movement – ‘to bring in awareness in society so as to restructure it into a society based on equality and liberty’<sup>4</sup> – and of the new edited collection, *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt*, which gathers twenty erudite chapters, plus two interviews, all focused on literature’s social and political role in Dalit movements for human rights. This book holds currency not only in India, but in all countries and contexts where issues of privilege and subjugation continue to divide society and limit lives. Although the situations and issues may be different, and although these important differences should never be elided or overlooked, Dalit struggles and strategies may nonetheless provide a valuable

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<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar qtd. in Deshpande, ‘Caste Quotas and Formal Inclusion in Indian Higher Education,’ *Beyond Inclusion: The Practice of Equal Access in Indian Higher Education*. Eds. S. Deshpande and U. Zacharias. (New Delhi and Oxon: Routledge, 2013) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ambedkar qtd. in Deshpande 13.

<sup>3</sup> Sukumar, ‘Quota’s Children: The Perils of Getting Educated.’ *Beyond Inclusion: The Practice of Equal Access in Indian Higher Education*. Eds. S. Deshpande and U. Zacharias. (New Delhi and Oxon: Routledge, 2013) 207, 212.

<sup>4</sup> Limbale and Sarangi, *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* (India: AuthorsPress, 2018) 9.

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model for human rights activists and change-seekers across the globe.<sup>5</sup> The questions for this review, then, concern the form of contribution that *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* offers the Dalit literary movement. In other words, how successfully does this book represent Dalit struggles in – and as – literature? To what extent does the collection in itself contribute to the Dalit literary canon, not to mention the social justice objectives around which that canon is built?

Indeed, *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* strongly represents both Dalit struggle and key literary works that have brought awareness to that struggle while simultaneously playing a part in it. In these ways, *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* offers a valuable contribution to the Dalit literary canon, to the Dalit movement, and indeed to social justice broadly. The purpose of this review now becomes to demonstrate how and why this is the case. In overview, the book possesses three particular strengths, each of which shall shortly be discussed in turn: the first is the diverse range of literary practices and voices the book's chapters collectively discuss; the second is the book's attention to intersecting issues of gender; the third is the additional insights that come through the editorial introduction and the two interview chapters.

A first strength of *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* is the diversity the collection encompasses. As Damrosch observes, the boundaries of literature are broad and growing broader as technological developments continue to offer new and different possibilities for creative communication.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary literature includes not only prose and poetry published in book form, but also theatre, film, oral literature, autobiographical writing, electronic literature and multimodal texts. *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* recognises this and impressively manages, through its sequence of chapters, to represent Dalit literature from all of these categories. Rajeshwar Mittapalli offers a compelling critique of the emergence of Dalit characters as heroes in Bollywood films – one that secures the relevance of this book to fields of scholarly study and research including not only Literary Studies and Creative Writing but also Cultural Studies, Film Studies and the Social Sciences. Raju Das's account of Bangla Dalit Theatre similarly provides an analysis of interest to those working in the field of Performance Studies, as well as community-based theatre-makers including writers, actors, directors, producers, critics and theatre-lovers. The sometimes-overlooked genre of the short story is given the careful, sophisticated treatment it deserves in chapters by Indira Nityanandam (on Bama Faustina Soosairaj's *Kondattam*) and Ashok Gopal (on 'The Story of the Dalit Autobiographical Story' in Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*). The role of electronic literature such as weblogs – sometimes overlooked – is likewise recognised in a chapter by K. Pankajam (248), the primary focus of which is poetry. Other chapters on poetry include those by Partibha Biswas (on Meena Kandasamy), Gobinda Sahoo (on Pitambar Tarai) and M.B. Gaijan (on Manohar Mouli Biswas). Chapters discussing novels include those by S. Horizan Prasanna Kumar (on Bama Faustina Soosairaj's experimental *Sangati*) and Rajeshwar Mittapalli (on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*), which additionally considers film.

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<sup>5</sup> A. Walker (2016), Book Reviews: 'Three titles: *Breaking Boundaries; The Transnational Story Hub; Surviving in My World*,' *Transnational Literature* 9.1 (2016) 4.

<sup>6</sup> Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Malden, Oxford and West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2009) 7.

The wide array of literary genres and practices is a strength of *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt*, for it extends the reach of Dalit literature to a wide audience of potential readers with diverse interests. In connection with this, the book is also wonderfully diverse in the range of authors, voices and perspectives its chapters present. The word ‘Dalit’, after all, does not signify a single group of people with a single culture and set of interests: it is a collective term that can indicate many very different groups of people, all of whom possess their own distinct cultural values, practices, knowledges, struggles and strengths, yet are united through shared (yet also different) experiences of subjugation, and thus a shared struggle towards a fairer world. The differences between and diversities of these groups should not be elided or downplayed, for to do so would be to misrepresent, silence and erase Dalit people – one of the precise problems that the Dalit literary movement aims to combat. Instead, the distinct features of the diverse groups need to be brought to attention – and celebrated – and *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* responds to this need by explicitly considering Tamil Dalit literature, which to date has received less attention than it deserves (see 24 in the chapter by Nityanandam) as well as subaltern literature from Odia, which Sahoo (52) identifies as similarly overlooked, in addition to better-known sub-categories of Dalit literature including Bengali Dalit literature, Marathi Dalit literature and Gujarati Dalit literature.

In addition to the cultural diversity of the Dalit literary voices Limbale and Sarangi’s edited collection represents, the book is also commendable for its representation of female voices – as Indira Nityanandam points out, ‘when a woman Dalit writes, it is obvious that her voice is that of one marginalised three times over: economically, socially and also gender-wise’ (25). Partibha Biswas similarly observes how ‘regulation/repression of female sexuality is central to the institution and perpetuation of caste system’ (109). A second strength of *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt*, then, is that five of the chapters deal explicitly with issues of gender. These include chapters by S. Horizan Prasanna Kumar and Indira Nityanandam, both of whom separately consider the writings of Bama Faustina Soosairaj. Partibha Biswas offers a compelling investigation into ‘Caste and Gender Interface’ in the poetry of Meena Kandasamy, and Rajeshwar Mittapalli sensitively addresses difficult issues of violence in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Priyadarshan’s *Aakrosh*. Yet critical analysis of gender needs to consider not only women’s experiences of oppression, but also the complexities of masculinity and its social construction. This is given eloquent treatment in R. Arul’s chapter on “‘Presence’ through ‘Absence’ in J. Sanakya’s ‘The Men’s Ghat’ and ‘The Echoing Voice is Indeed Yours’”. *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* thereby draws out critical intersections between gendered oppression and the oppression of Dalit people. *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* can thus be considered an important contribution to intersectional feminist theory and scholarship, defined by American critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw as

attention to the interface between the dynamics that constitute race, gender, and class power, as well as to the way these dynamics converge and rearticulate themselves within institutional settings to manufacture social punishment and human suffering.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Thinking Intersectionally About Women, Race, and Social Control,’ *UCLA Law Review* 59 (2012) 59. I recognise that the word ‘class’ in the quotation from Crenshaw is potentially problematic, for class is not caste. I do not wish to elide or confuse the two. However, I do believe that the movements for caste equality and

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*Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* also offers startling insights into how gender issues intersect with Dalit struggles through presentation of an interview with notable feminist Dalit author Bama Faustina (by interviewer Jaydeep Sarangi). Bama shares compelling memories of her childhood, her relationship with her grandmother, and how experiences of oppression drove her towards literature as a means of activism. She reflects on Dalit literature as

the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their in born tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights. (273)

This interview with Bama is one of two in the collection, which, together with the book's informative editorial introduction, form the third key strength of *Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt*. The other interview features Jaydeep Sarangi and Angana Dutta in conversation with Arjun Dangle. In addition to a celebrated writer, Dangle has long been deeply involved in activist struggles in India, including Dalit struggles. He speaks compellingly about his involvement in these, and about how the experiences of his childhood motivated him to seek change. The editorial introduction, meanwhile, provides a detailed explanation of the Dalit literary movement's history and aims – one that dispels myths, maps key features of Dalit literature, and probes the generic implications of these features. In this way, the editors Sharankumar Limbale and Jaydeep Sarangi make the book accessible for international audiences, including those potentially not familiar with Dalit literature and/or struggles. Yet the introduction is also detailed and critical in ways that will provide fresh insights and perspectives for scholars already well-versed in these things – as the book overall provides numerous such insights.

*Dalit Voice: Literature and Revolt* is successful in its representations of both Dalit struggle and key works of Dalit literature. This review has considered three particular strengths of the book: the diversity of literary practices and voices it encompasses; its attention to intersectional issues of gender; and the extra insights offered in the two interviews as well as the strong editorial introduction. Yet it must be noted that there are many other strengths to the book. For practicality's sake, it is not possible to discuss them all here, but readers are strongly encouraged to read and discover the book's many fascinating offerings. It bears appeal across a wide range of scholarly disciplines, including Cultural Studies, Film Studies, Performance Studies, Critical Race Studies, the Social Sciences, Creative Writing and Literary Studies. It is also a valuable read for all writers, theatre-

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class equality share certain features and that those working on both (separate) struggles may share strategies and work as allies. My intention in using Crenshaw's quote about gender and class is to do just this.

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makers, performers, literature lovers and activists. Overall, Limbale and Sarangi's efforts in compiling this edited collection are to be commended and celebrated.

### **Amelia Walker**

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