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Nandanar's children: the Paraiyans' tryst with destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850 - 1956

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Nandanar's Children: The Paraiyans' Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850-1956, by Raj Sekhar Basu, New Delhi, Sage, 2011, lxvi + 424 pp., ISBN 978-81-321-0514-5

According to legend, the 'untouchable' (now Dalit) saint Nandanar performed the low-caste tasks of removing the carcasses of dead animals and playing leather drums but ardently worshipped Lord Shiva. He was distraught by his inability – as someone of lowly caste – to enter and worship at the deity's shrine until Shiva asked Nandanar to purify himself in fire after which his immaterial form – now in the form of a Brahmin – was permitted to pay homage. This tale, recounted early in the book, is an apt metaphor for the continuing travails of contemporary Dalits who still campaign for an end to caste injustices and entry into temples and other institutions. Whilst Basu does not explicitly make this point, he demonstrates how Dalit politicians desiring to enter political institutions in colonial and post-colonial India have been compelled to adapt to dominant political currents.

At a time when caste violence has flared up around cross-caste marriages and when autonomous Dalit politicians have entered both state and national parliaments this is a timely account of the historical emergence and development of Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu. Contemporary accounts tend to start with Ambedkar's centenary in 1990, and the rise of autonomous Dalit parties but this volume highlights the antecedents of these movements. The book focuses on the Paraiyar cluster of castes. The name derives from the Tamil word for drum and indicates their traditional occupation as musicians as well as cultivators and agricultural labourers. They are the most populous Scheduled Caste (SC) in Tamilnadu though there is some confusion about numbers because many Paraiyars adopted the term *Adi-Dravidar* (original Dravidian).

Basu draws on archival research and secondary sources to highlight the various strategies employed by Paraiyars to escape bondage and make their voices heard in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Whilst the book offers rich insights, the author occasionally tries to do too much and spreads himself rather thin. There are, thus, short theoretical discussions of caste and nationalism that lack in detail. At the heart of the volume, though, is a compelling argument that caste is socially constructed and constantly subject to negotiation and contestation. Beginning with a discussion of slavery and servitude, Basu charts how Paraiyars sought to escape caste dominance by acquiring land, converting to egalitarian religions, migrating to urban areas or overseas plantations, seeking education and alternate employment, and engaging in politics by turn. In each endeavour Paraiyars enlisted the aid of colonial authorities, missionaries and progressive members of the upper castes to gain some degree of independence.

The book is excellent in highlighting how each attempt by Paraiyars to improve their lot, occasioned a backlash by landlords and dominant castes. The violence witnessed in Dhamapuri in 2012 – when over 300 Dalit houses were ransacked and set ablaze – is shown to be part of a longer history of casteist violence designed to keep Dalits in their place. The volume could have been further edited prior to publication. Parts of it are difficult to read, there are elements of repetition and some chapters are far longer than others. The author also employs colonial era spellings of Tamil names and places throughout, though the uncritical reproduction of terms like 'Chuckler' to refer to Chakkiliyars/Arunthathiyars grates in the current context. Finally, some attempt to relate this history to contemporary politics would have been welcome. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the book is worth reading

for those interested in caste identities and politics and the complex negotiations attending the formation of political subjectivities in India.