

*Outcaste Bombay: City Making and the Politics of the Poor*. Juned Shaikh. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021. 242 pp. \$30. Paperback ISBN-13: 9780295748504.

*Outcaste Bombay* by Juned Shaikh is a fascinating study of the politics of urban poor in the rapidly shifting landscape of twentieth-century Bombay city. Similar to preceding works such as Gareth Steadman Jones's *Outcast London*, the eponymously titled *Outcaste Bombay* engages extensively with working class lives in the industrial town of Bombay, although the extra "e" in *Outcaste* refers to the Dalits, who occupy the bottom rungs of the caste hierarchy in South Asia. Shaikh identifies built environment and language as the two major sites for the formation and contestation of caste identities. The book makes extensive use of the rich labor and urban historiography in conjunction with official reports on town planning and housing schemes to foreground caste as a significant factor in the production of space of Bombay city, notably the slums which also functioned as the crucible for Dalit politics. Shaikh focuses on language as another key site for the reproduction of caste-based hierarchies, particularly in the Marathi language translations of Marxist texts. He identifies translation as an important process through which insurgent literary works of "foreign" Marxist provenance were "domesticated" to appear organic to the Indian conditions, but nonetheless also served to concretize vernacular caste consciousness. The book further engages with Dalit literature as signifying a rupture in the Marathi public sphere for its deliberate and creative deployment of obscenity as a literary device, irreverence for bourgeois social norms, and its appropriation of the *mavali* or the lumpen-proletariat which as a class group is considered potentially counter-revolutionary within the Marxist canon.

The demarcation of housing as an important locus for Dalit activism is particularly insightful. Unlike the seasonal migrant industrial worker of upper caste lineage for whom wages were a means to supplement their agrarian lives in the village, urban migration for Dalits assumed a permanent character owing to caste-based oppression in the villages, famines, and landlessness. Secondly, the lack of access to kinship networks and credit made life in the city for Dalit laborers exceptionally precarious. Moreover, fears of ritual defilement expressed by the upper caste laborers and high rent ensured that even in a cosmopolitan city such as Bombay Dalits had to secure separate housing which were often dilapidated and in conditions of squalor. Therefore, Shaikh's attention to the centrality of housing as a political issue to the emerging Dalit leadership in the 1920s is especially noteworthy. However, Shaikh's analysis stops short of answering some of the broader issues pertaining to the hegemony of Mahar caste group within Dalit politics in Maharashtra. The tensions and disparity between *Konkanastha* and *Deshastha* populations, and between Mahars and other Dalit caste groups constitute several fault lines within Dalit politics. The book also leaves out the context of the proliferation of Dalit caste associations in the early twentieth century as it occurs at a juncture wherein various communities regrouped as caste associations to advance their interests with the colonial regime.

The other significant area to which Shaikh draws our attention is the development of sociology in India, and its instrumentality in the knowledge production on the working classes for the state in the 1930s in an effort to offer solutions to the problem of overcrowding and

town planning in industrial centres such as Bombay city. However, histories of disciplines such as sociology unmoored from the histories of working class struggles limits the scope of their research as largely aiding the state policies geared towards social reform. As noted by Fred Cooper in the context of Africa, sociological research played a crucial role in gathering information on the living conditions of the workers in the 1930s, as colonial regimes rapidly reoriented their policies to manage the discontent among workers evidenced by the wave of strikes across Africa and the pressures of decolonization. In the Indian context, sociological studies influenced state policies on suburbanization, which pushed the workers away from the place of work and made striking progressively harder. The Bombay Plan, which was also framed as offering policy solutions to the housing problems of the urban poor, was similarly devised by the Indian capitalist class to manage the growing workers' discontent, in addition to providing a development plan to accommodate its interests in the post-war economy. Therefore, the housing question, despite being central to anti-caste struggles, needs to be approached from the lens of the working classes, which is a universal category that encapsulates the outcastes.

The book similarly provides detailed textual analyses of Marxist and Dalit literature. Shaikh emphasizes on the role of the Brahmin identity and the middle class social location of early Communists leaders in the solidification of caste hierarchies within the translations of key Marxist texts. What the book does not delve much into is the context in which Communists operated, especially as a centralized party apparatus under Stalin. The context of Stalinization is integral in not only explaining the lack of access faced by the Indian communists in accessing Marxist literature that critiqued determinism, but also the inconsistencies of Indian Communists in relation to their position on imperialism, indicated by their support for Britain during the second world war in accordance with the position of the Soviet Union. A global perspective to the activities of Communist Party would have provided richer insights into the inner logic of the Communists leaders that goes beyond their immediate identities. The influence of European orientalist scholarship on Communists also does not appear exceptional as it does in the book when viewed within the larger national context. As Susan Bayly argues, caste had become a national question by the twentieth century, and presented immense ambiguity to the modernizing impulses of the nascent nation-builders, who then relied extensively on orientalist scholarship and colonial ethnology to determine the function of caste within the modern nation. Engagement with the broader context is, thus, helpful in complicating the fraught legacy of the Communists vis-à-vis caste, which has led many anti-caste radicals to wholly reject Communist political program as a mode for emancipation from the caste system.

Shaikh's discussion of Dalit literature is illuminating and extensive as it comprises the main theme of the last three chapters of the book. The appraisal of Annabhau Sathe's work stands out on account of him being the only non-Mahar caste Dalit whose cultural contribution is recognized within a literary landscape dominated by the Mahar caste group. Among the Bombay-based writers, Shaikh chooses to focus on the writings of Sathe, Baburao Bagul, and Namdeo Dhasal. While the rationale for choosing these particular writers is not clearly specified, Shaikh nonetheless provides an excellent account of the intellectual genealogy, and the formative years of Dalit literature in Maharashtra within the restive milieu of Marathi language print culture. The discussion on Dalit Panthers and Dalit literature more broadly could

have been further enriched by addressing the inter-caste tensions among the Dalits, the shared non-Brahmin genealogy with reactionary elements such as the Shiv Sena, and the split between Dalit Marxists and Ambedkarite Buddhists. Shaikh's discussion on Bagul's seminal work *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli* (When I hid My Caste) could have also explored the phenomenon of passing, which is an important survival strategy deployed by many Dalits to avoid caste-based discrimination and physical violence in some instances. The analysis of passing as a phenomenon could have also been expanded to critically reflect on the aims and frontiers of Dalit politics.

With respect to the textual analysis, Shaikh restricts himself to explore the thematic elements of the works under scrutiny. However, the tenor and form of the text such as anger, which is quite often associated with Dalit writings, could have been interrogated further, perhaps by contrasting it with the register used by contemporary women Dalit writers. The last chapter, provocatively titled "Slums, Sex, and the Field of Power," provides extensive commentary on the figure of the sex-worker represented as the "ultimate symbol of human degradation" within Dalit writings of radical oeuvre. Here, the discussion could have been supplemented with more critical commentary on the subjection of the sex worker to the male gaze. Luise White's work on sex workers in *The Comforts of Home* would have been particularly instructive in departing from conventional narratives on prostitution that are predominantly associated with degradation and victimization and helped situate their role within the laboring economies of the industrial centres such as Bombay. The exchange between Namdeo Dhasal and Vijay Tendulkar in *Outcaste Bombay* also begs the question on how abstracted Dalit literature was from the other intellectual currents within Marathi public sphere, given that Tendulkar's own plays such as *Sakharam Binder* similarly critiqued bourgeois morality, and contained heavy imageries of sexual promiscuity, and obscenity.

Conceptually, Shaikh draws upon the theory of formal subsumption deployed by Harry Harootunian to view caste as an archaic element that is mobilized by capital in the early stages of capitalist transition. However, the chapters in *Outcaste Bombay* do not map the reconstitution of caste by capital, but instead imply a dichotomy between class and caste. In this regard, Shaikh's conceptualization of caste is closer to formulation of caste being an immutable pre-capitalist category propounded by many scholars, notably Dipesh Chakrabarty. Some of the other notable omissions include the contributions of labor organizers such as Narayan Meghaji Lokhande whose work indicates the merging of the non-Brahmin movement and class-based struggles. Given that the scope of the book extends up to the twenty-first century, the housing struggles of the mill workers post the closure of the mills remains conspicuously absent. Regardless, *Outcaste Bombay* is successful in broadening the scope of histories from below by expanding its enquiry into the worlds of the lumpen-proletariat, the petty bourgeois shop keepers, and the sex workers. It offers a glimpse of Bombay as it is lived, reshaped, and appropriated by its Dalit inhabitants, and makes a great contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on Dalit labor and Bombay city.

Komal Mohite, doctoral candidate, Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University