

VISWANATH, RUPA. *The Pariah Problem. Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India.* [Cultures of History.] Columbia University Press, New York (NY) 2014. xviii, 396 pp. \$60.00.

For many decades, a rich corpus of historical writings has systematically explored varied aspects of modern caste relations in South India. Historians have looked at the transition from premodern to colonial times, tracking changes in the relative status of “pure and impure” castes; at interventions of the colonial state and of Christian missionaries in modifying caste relations; and at the extent and nature of change under the British. More important for our purposes, debates in the 1950s and 1960s closely considered the relationship between unfree agricultural labour – also called *agrestic slavery* – and untouchability. Left-nationalist historian S.J. Patel attributed the entire responsibility for landlessness among agricultural workers – often tied to a particular plot of land and master on a hereditary basis – to the new colonial agrarian relations. Others, like Dharma Kumar, argued that landlessness was a carryover from pre-colonial times and was a function of caste norms that enabled upper caste landowners to establish property rights over untouchable agricultural labourers. Caste and class, therefore, perpetually influenced and reinforced each other.

More recently, historians have tended to emphasize experiential aspects of untouchable lives. These histories have largely cohered around their iconic leaders – such as Iyothee Thass and Periyar – and highly visible movements: Non-Brahman and Self Respect movements in particular.

In her book, Viswanath revisits the debates on caste and labour, but departs from all these historiographical traditions in several important ways. First, her study revolves around everyday contestations over land rights, featuring the activism and initiatives of ordinary labourers. Second, it has a four cornered structure: the state (both Indian and Madras governments); Christian missionaries; high caste Brahman and Vellala landlords and masters; and untouchable *agrestic* labourers, especially from Pallar and Paraiyar communities. Caste names and labour forms were mapped onto each other, one easily denoting the other. The British first referred to untouchable labourers by the generic name of Pariah, changing it in the early twentieth century into Depressed Classes. The older Sanskrit term *Panchama* originally meant a “fifth order”, a caste too polluted to be part of the four tiered caste structure, and therefore placed below the lowest caste to constitute a community of permanent outcastes. In the early twentieth century, in a highly significant act of self-designation, Panchamas established the South Indian Oppressed Classes’ Union, squarely locating their wretchedness in upper-caste ritual, social and economic stranglehold on their lives.

Strategies of naming are significant, as Viswanath shows. Pariah signified a consensus that colonial rulers shared with upper caste Hindus about the “unclean” nature of untouchable communities, while the later shift into the Depressed Classes nomenclature acknowledged their wretchedness and, simultaneously, accepted some responsibility for amelioration. The new word for Panchama, “oppressed”, expressed a leap in collective consciousness that inexorably led to formidable protest movements from the 1920s. Viswanath’s book begins with the 1890s when *agrestic* and caste servitude emerged as a problem for the state and for the Hindu public sphere. However, she does not quite explain why this new historical eruption happened in this particular decade. This part concludes with the 1920s when Panchamas began to challenge the agrarian order and to denaturalize traditional pollution taboos. In a concluding event – one that recalls the Alabama bus incident that

initiated the civil rights movement in the US – a group of Panchamas were thrown off a bus and violently abused when their caste was discovered by upper caste passengers. In a second episode, a “Brahman Street”, previously closed to “low castes”, was opened up to them by government orders. When Ezhavas entered it in a celebratory procession, they were stoned by upper castes and arrested. Both events threw up Panchama protests and legal battles. Viswanath shows how older forms of discrimination changed slowly but surely and a new Panchama activism emerged, forcing the state to concede important civic rights and a new notion of public facilities like roads and transport. It also shows, through a deeply dialectical approach, how older values still haunted the new openings. However, despite state compromises, and entrenched upper caste power, the change in Panchama self-awareness was ultimately undeniable, as they translated their earlier struggles for a share in land into citizenship claims.

Much of Madras Presidency – the site of this study – consisted of abundant and rich agricultural land. Viswanath ignores large parts of the Presidency that had a different geography of arid “dry zones”. In a land surplus situation, groups of landowners, Mirasidars, who divided up control over specific tracts of land among themselves, needed to limit the bargaining power of agrestic labourers in order to maximize their profits. The ritual degradation of untouchable castes, along with their traditional poverty, created a debt trap, which Mirasidars exploited most successfully to turn agrestic labourers into virtual slaves, working for subsistence rather than for wages, and therefore unable to repay the original loan. Other safeguards ensured that Mirasidars had the right of first refusal over unused surplus village land, which could not, therefore, be granted to or acquired by labourers whose homes were also owned by their masters.

From the 1870s, conflicts abounded around control over land – communal or common land, homestead land, public thoroughfares from which “unclean” Pariahs were rigidly excluded. The state, on the whole, refused to alter a system that allowed them a smooth and secure flow of revenue. It sheltered behind its promise to respect the religious injunctions of Indian communities, designating caste as an integral part of faith.

In the late nineteenth century, a flood of “low caste” people converted to Christianity. This surprised Protestant missionaries, who had so far concentrated on upper caste conversions and who had observed caste segregation in their churches, considering caste to be a non-religious part of Hindu social identity. Initially, most refused to engage with the issues of caste and labour, which they saw as matters irrelevant to their purely spiritual concerns. Some, like Reverend Kabis, however, argued that the spiritual and the material were inseparable and that the extreme poverty of Pariah converts led them into sinful ways: to correct the one, they had to address the other and ensure converts’ survival with security and dignity. A vexed battle began between those who sternly refused material inducements and struggles for social change for conversion and called agrarian relations “free servitude”, and others who bought land themselves to create Pariah villages. Pariahs themselves were actively involved in the contests and even a semblance of alliance with missionaries bore some fruit for them in disputes. They enjoyed the mission schools as a space of their own, while uniforms were a pleasing contrast to the severely caste segregated dress codes. Viswanath acknowledges these new resources as sources of self esteem. But she keeps her distance from a historiography that celebrates missionary benevolence uncritically, since the ultimate aim of even the most interventionist groups was to create a class of free but docile labourers.

State functionaries were similarly divided. Some officials reported extensively on Pariah exploitation, while others called the system a “gentle slavery”, superior to free-floating

wage labourers who had no assured entitlements to subsistence. Viswanath, thus, usefully contradicts the commonsensical attribution of a single imperial logic or character to the colonial state, across space and time, even though, she does admit that something like a singular “state effect” did prevail.

From the early twentieth century, two important developments reconfigured the scenario. On one hand, Indians began to be nominated for legislative bodies and the eventual entry of untouchable members created a more effective site for continuing the conflicts around caste and labour. On the other hand, the emergence of anti-colonial mass movements made the state keen to keep Panchamas out of the nationalist upsurge and inclined it slightly towards reforms. The colonial state now tilted towards some reform measures in order to keep Panchamas out of the nationalist movements. Unfortunately, Viswanath does not describe the content of this new liberalism, nor how it was transmitted to the colonial officialdom. The new elements introduced by an upper caste dominated nationalism into the earlier dynamic are not particularly well substantiated. These, however, are minor quibbles about an otherwise substantial and excellent work.

All four narrative structural elements are closely historicized, and large and small shifts within each of these elements, as well as internal differences and their changing mutual relationships are meticulously tracked. The complicated history is expressed with exemplary lucidity and elegance. Viswanath elaborates and clarifies all the interlocking variables while providing a sparkling account whose crisp narrative elucidates the dense complexity of its plot ingredients. The work puts faces and flesh on long term and intricate historical processes. It retrieves the material dimensions of caste and vividly explains the ways in which they reshaped untouchable lives and struggles.

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WEMHEUER, FELIX. *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union*. [Yale Agrarian Studies Series.] Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) [etc.] 2014. Maps. xi, 325 pp. \$65.00; £39.00.

This study compares the background, history, and interpretations of the Soviet famine of 1931–1933 and the Chinese famine of 1959–1961. Wemheuer devotes much more attention to the Chinese famine, because he is a China specialist, and his research in Chinese villages revealed its importance for the peasants (p. 17). He relies on an extensive array of primary sources and recent Chinese-language scholarship in dealing with the Chinese famine, to which the book is an important contribution. But he relies on a more limited array of secondary sources on the USSR. The book makes valid comparisons and criticisms of conventional views, but has several important inaccuracies.

Wemheuer argues that the history of these two famines are comparable because both occurred when the countries began rapid state-run programmes of industrialization, urbanization, and collectivization of agriculture, and he labels them both as “Great Leap” famines – applying the Chinese concept to the USSR. He describes how Soviet and Chinese