

Dalit Politics at Crossroads

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Badri Narayan, *Fractured Tales: Invisibles in Indian Democracy*, New Delhi: OUP, 2016, pp.xii-186, Rs. 650.

Fractured Tales is a collection of articles written by Badri Narayan on the lives and worldviews of the most marginalized castes among the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The declared intention of its author is to record the desires and aspirations of these castes in order to make an assessment of Dalit identity politics and its limits in the context of Indian democracy.

Badri Narayan is one of the foremost scholars working on Dalit Studies and *Fractured Tales* represents much of his most recent, considered and even self-critical views on the subject. Underpinned by a self-corrective tone, *Fractured Tales* makes a case for giving primacy to the study of Dalit lives over the study of Dalit Politics for a broader and long-term view of the progress and performance of Indian democracy. One may even say that he argues for a primacy to identity politics over redistributive justice. The central problematic raised by Narayan is that Dalit identity construction and Dalit political assertion in Uttar Pradesh since 1990s, as epitomized by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) movement, is coterminous with the reinforcement of marginalization of numerically small and scattered Dalits castes, and the emergence of Brahmanical forms of domination by more visible and politically conscious castes over voiceless and marginalized castes within the Dalits. His concern is the 'growing silent zone' in democracy in the age of Dalit political assertion. Thus, he shifts the scholarly gaze from more visible Dalit castes like Chamars to invisible and voiceless Dalit castes like Musahar, Sapera, Dharikar, Jogi and fifty-odd other castes. In other words, it has been quite rightly argued that the 'Dalit subject is irretrievably heterogeneous and there exist multiple marginalities among them that are constantly being produced and reproduced'. Undoubtedly, for this bold and path-breaking approach alone, *Fractured Tales* marks a signal shift in the study of Dalit identity and politics.

An important section of the book is devoted to the

exploration of the 'cultural citizenship' of the *marginalized* Dalit communities. It underscores the fact that the Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCC) have ignored the art and culture of the *marginalized* Dalit castes of UP, thus defeating their very purpose, which was to provide space to all communities of the country and promote 'peoples' culture'. Thus, exclusion of these castes is not only social and political but also cultural: indeed, so pervasive is their marginalization that they are neither 'political societies' nor even 'subaltern citizens'. Unlike advanced/dominant Dalit castes, they are still very far away from attaining the language and competence of citizenship and welfare.

Badri Narayan claims to have been eclectic in his use of sources in writing this book. These sources range from interview notes and recordings of long-term participant observation of a large number of Dalit communities to folk proverbs and administrative accounts. However, it is plain from the references given by Narayan in various chapters that a greater reliance has been placed on participant observation and texts of the Dalit public sphere. This is not surprising given the main concern of Narayan. Indeed, throughout this book, he calls us to represent the marginalized Dalit communities' voices before the academia, civil society and the state till such time as these communities develop the capacity to aspire and assert their voices or Dalit organic intellectuals come forward to play their natural, historical role. Thus, *Fractured Tales'* overriding concern is to prepare a basis for activism and state action and for this reason it shuns the main concerns of conventional approaches of research, that is, knowledge-building.

At various places in the book, Narayan presents the narrative as well as an analysis of the differentiated and uneven nature of progress of various Dalit castes of UP. Much of his approach and analysis draws heavily on his previous works on the emergence and empowerment of what he now calls as the *dominant* Dalit castes, the Chamars and Pasis. He argues, following Partha Chatterjee, that since Indian democracy, unlike European democracies, is a state-led democracy (which

has degenerated into 'gift democracy'), excluded social groups assess and experience their successes and failures in terms of shares in the status and material rewards or 'gifts' bestowed by the state. As far as the Dalits are concerned, it is largely the Chamars and Pasis who have been able to experience relative success with the rise of BSP to power. This capture of state power by these Dalit castes was preceded by occupational diversification, abandoning of traditionally degrading occupations, educational attainment, rise of organic intellectuals, and construction of history and identity based on dignity and self-respect in overt opposition to that constructed by the Brahmanical caste order. Other castes among the Dalits have not been able to do this and consequently failed to have a voice and visibility in democracy. For example, the Valmikis have tended mostly to stay with their traditional occupation of scavenging and also have not been able to develop democratic assertion and independence. The same applies to the Bansphors (bamboo workers), Bahelias (bird hunters), Jogis (beggars), Musahars (*pattal* makers) etc.

While one would certainly agree with Narayan's main argument about the uneven nature of social inclusion of Dalit castes and the historical factors behind it, his argument that the dominant Dalit castes are deliberately seeking to monopolize the 'gifts' of state-led democracy at the cost of *marginal* Dalit castes may be controversial. He has cited a few instances in the BSP government policies, especially those of political and public recruitment, as well as the perception shared by some individuals belonging to *marginalized* Dalit castes, to drive home his point. By mechanically juxtaposing certain post-modernist concepts (like logo-centrism) with social theory (like

cultural capital), he seeks to bolster the view that identity construction by and representational politics of the 'dominant' Dalit castes has created meta-narratives which suppress excluded and voiceless Dalit castes. But so far as this argument is concerned, *Fractured Tales* is arguably both theoretically and empirically weak. For example, many of those who were interviewed by him believe that it is the upper castes and backward castes that oppress them most and it is the lack of educated people in their community which accounts for their failure to become economically independent and politically assertive. This is not to deny the failures of the BSP government and Dalit organic intellectuals vis-à-vis the empowerment of *marginalized* Dalit castes; however, to impute a deliberate intention to them from Narayan's field studies seems too far-fetched a conclusion.

Fractured Tales makes for lucid reading. At various places the main arguments are repeated but this is because the author seeks to constantly remind the reader about his central arguments on Indian democracy. The book will expose the social science researchers to hitherto unexplored perception of the *marginalized* Dalit castes about Indian nation, citizenship and their displacement in it. Indeed, no one would disagree with the author's basic conclusion that India's democracy would deepen further only if it can be meaningful for this important segment of the population. Perhaps with the decline of BSP in UP in recent years, we are at a crucial historical juncture to better understand and analyze the successes and failures of Dalit political assertion in the deepening of democracy in North India. At the least, *Fractured Tales* inspires us to undertake such a task.