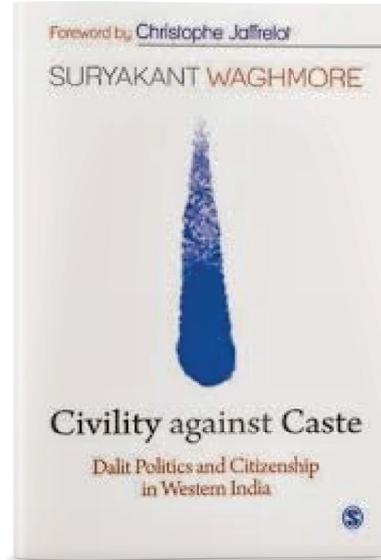


**Title:** *Civility against Caste:  
Dalit Politics and Citizenship  
in Western India*

**Author:** Suryakant Waghmore

**Publishers:** Sage Publications,  
New Delhi: India (2013), xxxvii, 235 pp

**Reviewer:** *Juned Shaikh*  
Associate Professor  
Department of History  
University of California, Santa Cruz  
E-mail: jmshaikh@ucsc.edu



The concept of civil society flourished after the undoing of the global communist bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union captured the imagination of intellectuals, policy makers, social movements, and non-governmental organizations keen to imagine a space beyond a putatively authoritarian communist state. Democracy, private enterprise, and globalization now became the abiding mantras of social and political life. The history of ‘civil society’ though is much older: its antecedents lay in pre-modern Europe. The early modern liberal theorist, John Locke, dwelled on it, the Scottish and French enlightenments reflected on it, and German philosophers like Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century, and Marxists in the twentieth century weighed on it to theorize a space in which individuals and groups conducted their activities (Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2002). The European provenance of the concept did not impede its relevance to India. It was deployed during the British colonial period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as in postcolonial India where it signified the numerous associations that were created to engender newer forms of sociability and also to access or put pressure on the State at particular historical moments. An influential postcolonial theorist, Partha Chatterjee, described civil society as the domain of the Westernized elite who may have willingly or

unwittingly imbibed the concept's 'secularized Christian' ethos. He introduced the notion of political society, a conceptual category distinct from the attenuated civil society, to capture the drama of subaltern or non-elite politics that thrived beyond the sterilized associations of India's elites.

Suryakant Waghmore, in *Civility against Caste*, upends this distinction. Waghmore terms the dilution of civil society - 'absolutist' (p.7) – an essentialist reading of the concept that does not pay heed to the process through which it was formed in colonial India. The author argues that caste played a seminal role in the making of civil society and the anti-caste and anti-Brahmin movements thrived in this domain too. To cordon off civil society from political society and offset its relevance would be akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As he says, caste engenders inequality 'but is also a resource to mobilize against inequality' (p.21). That mobilization happens in civil society. Waghmore illustrates its germaneness to the lives and politics of one of the most economically marginalized and socially stigmatized groups, Dalits, in a non-metropolitan setting: villages in the Beed district of Maharashtra. According to Waghmore, civil society is the domain in which Dalits of Beed form solidarities with each other and other marginalized groups and contest the dominance of the upper castes. In fact, civil society, with its moral expectations of civility, holds the dominant castes and the state responsible for instances of incivility, which includes routine violence against Dalits and their humiliation. By deploying the concept of civil society, Waghmore underlines the aspirations for respect and tolerance among Dalits of Beed and their desire for equal rights of citizenship enshrined within India's constitution. Thus, Waghmore and Chatterjee's works leave us with two distinct understandings of the term civil society. For Chatterjee, civil society is not hegemonic precisely because the subalterns are/were outside this domain. For Waghmore, civil society as it existed in Beed, was hegemonic and dominated by the Maratha castes. Dalits in the region engaged with civil society, reactivated its expectations of civility, and sought to transform it.

Waghmore highlights the role of a political party – Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)- and a non-profit organization, *Manavi Hakk Abhiyaan (MHA)* or (human rights campaign) in mobilizing Beed's Dalits (particularly those belonging, but not restricted, to the *Mang* caste) and engaging with and countering elite dominance. The book is based on field work and interviews conducted in the region during 2008-09. The chapters of the book lay out the process of the engagement. In the introduction and chapter one Waghmore lays the conceptual framework and thesis: civil society as it existed (and still exists) in India was/is inflected by caste and its attendant inequities. However, Dalit politics views this space as critical to its 'political freedom and self-realisation which can reform, politicise, and civilise caste relations. 'They, therefore, work within it. Chapter two elucidates the context in which Dalit politics operates in Beed. The decline of the earlier vehicles of Dalit politics in the region – the Republican Party of India and the radical Dalit Panther movement, created the space for the rise of the BSP and the NGO which works at the grassroots and is networked with transnational human rights organizations. Thus, MHA vernacularizes the discourse of human rights

(p.115). Waghmore imagines the relationship between the local and global NGOs to be 'dialectical' (p.29). Chapter three reveals the economic transformations in the region particularly among Dalits. They work as labourers in sugarcane fields and industries which provided them with income. Dalits, leveraged their changing economic status to renegotiate their social and political status in the rural public sphere (p.63). This incited more violence against them which they countered by demanding justice and invoking laws designed to protect them. Dalit mobilization is not just about the recognition of their dignity, but they also made substantive claims to land redistribution. With the help of MHA they claimed rights to the cultivation of *gairaan* (common village lands designated for grazing cattle). Chapter four sheds light on the politics of the demands Dalits make on the state; the local and transnational NGOs play an important role here. Chapter five focuses on the cultural repertoires devised by BSP to form a viable electoral front in Beed. The BSP envisioned itself as a multi-ethnic party of the lower castes and was open to forming alliances with other religious and caste groups. It emphasized its commitment to the Indian constitution and invoked the cultural traditions of protests by saints of the *bahujan* (majority of the lower castes) castes to cement this alliance (p.119). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was projected as an important icon of the political community of Bahujans. Chapter six charts the political effects of the Bahujan imaginary. One important outcome was the dilution of rivalries among Dalit castes particularly the *Mangs* and *Mahars*. The latter had hitherto dominated Dalit politics. Mangs, through the MHA and the BSP and leaders like Eknath Awad, engaged with intellectual and cultural legacies of older Dalit politics, particularly the ideas of Jotirao Phule, and Ambedkar, and the latter's conversion to Buddhism. This facilitated solidarity among Mangs and Mahars. These alliances were formed and dissipated in the heat of electoral politics. This theatre of politics during the 2009 elections is the focus of chapter seven. The BSP contested the elections but MHA did not support it and instead aligned with a political formation of the dominant Maratha caste, the Nationalist Congress Party. This chapter provides a fascinating account of political calculations and decisions made by individuals and parties. Chapter eight, the final chapter of the book, reiterates the case for Dalit aspiration for civility and civil society.

Waghmore's book makes many riveting theoretical and empirical interventions. For instance, theoretically, Waghmore's case for the resonance of civility and civil society in Dalit politics helps us reimagine the transformative power of these concepts. When the categories are untethered from their European origins and the attendant charge of Euro-centrism, we can pay attention to their translation and vernacularization in unfamiliar contexts and appreciate their relevance for Dalit lives. Similarly, Waghmore's attention to rural settings in Beed and Marathwada and the politics there provides a welcome addition to literature on this woefully understudied region. However, Waghmore's consideration of caste as the bane and the balm of Dalit lives make one wonder about his stance on Ambedkar's forceful demand for the annihilation of caste. Ambedkar is the icon of the Dalit movements in Beed and invoked frequently in actions for substantial transformations there, but his radical desire for an end to caste is edited out of the picture. Similarly, Waghmore's depiction

of Dalit movements as vehicles for social and economic change, but not for revolution, perhaps attenuates the horizon of Dalit politics.

However, these are minor quibbles about an otherwise excellent book. Political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and scholars of agrarian studies and development studies will benefit tremendously from engaging with it. The compelling account of the intersection of policy making and politics will also be of great interest to policy makers, graduate students, and readers interested in the dynamics of caste in South Asia.

## Reference

Kaviraj, Sudipta and Khilnani, Sunil. (2002). *Civil society: history and possibilities*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.