

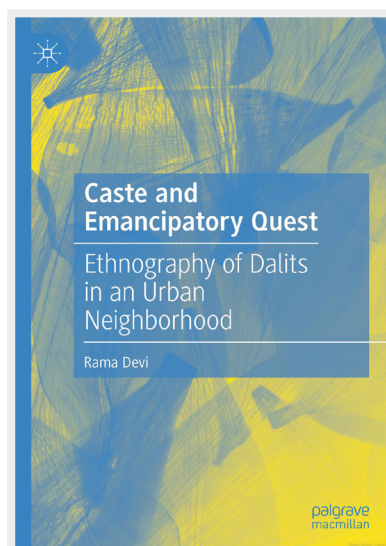
Caste and Emancipatory Quest: Ethnography of Dalits in an Urban Neighborhood

Author: *Rama Devi*

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Reviewers: *Ratan Sarkar*¹, *Santhosh J.*²



Rama Devi's *Caste and Emancipatory Quest: Ethnography of Dalits in an Urban Neighborhood* (Springer, 2025) is a deeply engaged ethnographic exploration of how caste, despite predictions of its decline under urban modernity, continues to structure everyday life, aspirations, and politics in India's metropolitan contexts. Based in Ashanagar, a pseudonymous neighborhood in Delhi, the book presents an ambitious attempt to examine the interplay between caste, neoliberal urban transformations, and Dalit struggles for emancipation. It achieves this through a combination of fine-grained ethnographic detail, critical theoretical engagement, and a reflective commitment to Ambedkarite thought.

The book opens with a careful reconsideration of B.R. Ambedkar's prescient observations about urban as a site of potential liberation but also enduring caste oppression. Ambedkar envisaged the city as a space where caste hierarchies would weaken, yet he remained skeptical about their full disappearance. Rama Devi captures this paradox well, noting Ambedkar's remark that untouchability would not vanish "within an imaginable distance of time" (p. 2). This sets the stage for her central argument: that while neoliberal urbanism reconfigures opportunities, aspirations, and exclusions, caste continues to persist in both subtle and overt ways. The book thereby

¹Assistant Professor, Tezpur University (A Central University), Assam, India

²Assistant Professor, Assam Don Bosco University, Assam, India

E-mail: 'ratan91@tezu.ernet.in, 'santhosh86.jnu@gmail.com

challenges modernization theory's assumption that caste is a "traditional" institution bound to vanish in urban contexts (pp. 5–7).

A major strength of the book lies in its dismantling of the spatial binary between "caste-ridden rural" and "casteless urban." The author draws on contemporary critiques of Western-centric urban theory, particularly Jennifer Robinson's call for "ordinary cities," to argue that Indian cities must be understood in terms of their own complex trajectories rather than as derivatives of Euro-American modernity (p. 6). In Ashanagar, caste is not erased but adapted—present through patterns of civility, housing segregation, and neighborhood relations. Chapter Two vividly demonstrates how Dalits negotiate what the author calls the "paradox of absent presence," where caste is simultaneously denied and enacted in everyday interactions (pp. 54–57). Civility allows different caste groups to coexist, but underlying notions of purity and pollution shape boundaries of intimacy and trust.

Marriage emerges as another site where caste reproduces itself with remarkable tenacity. Chapter Three shows how the principle of endogamy continues to dictate social legitimacy. Love marriages, especially inter-caste unions, are resisted or reluctantly tolerated under conditions of necessity, revealing how honor and shame remain gendered and caste-inflected (pp. 87–95). Here the ethnography resonates with earlier scholarship on caste and marriage, but the book's contribution lies in demonstrating how even urban, educated Dalit youth often remain ensnared in negotiations between modern aspirations and caste-based constraints.

Chapters Four and Five are particularly significant for situating caste within the neoliberal educational and occupational order. The author captures the "mahaul" (atmosphere) of constrained educational aspirations, where Dalit students, despite ambitions for upward mobility, are often steered toward "easy subjects," distance learning, or vocational diplomas due to structural barriers (pp. 120–129). Dreams of professional careers are frequently abandoned because of financial compulsions or systemic exclusion. Similarly, in the labor market, Dalit youth encounter precarious employment, short-term contracts, and the stigmatization of their caste identity (pp. 173–185).

While neoliberal discourse emphasizes meritocracy and individual responsibility, Rama Devi shows how caste invisibly shapes life chances—an insight supported by the economic analyses of Thorat and Attwell (2007) and Thorat and Newman (2010), and Deshpande (2011) on caste-based discrimination in urban labour markets, and by Jodhka and Newman's (2007) and Jodhka's (2015) sociological studies on the continuing salience of caste identities in urban India.

The later chapters expand into the terrain of politics and representation. Chapter Six offers a valuable account of Dalit political engagement in Delhi, tracing reserved constituencies, electoral alliances, and the fragmentation of Dalit politics (pp. 212–218). Rather than romanticizing Dalit unity, the author highlights the contradictions of co-option and factionalism. Chapter Seven explores youth politics, showing how young Dalits navigate between aspirations for "casteless" citizenship and the pull of caste-based organizations (pp. 230–240). Ambedkar's iconisation appears here

as a double-edged phenomenon: while his figure inspires mobilization, it is also appropriated in diluted, non-transformative ways (pp. 251–254).

The book's conclusion (pp. 263–269) reflects on the “mirage of castelessness,” arguing that despite urban modernity and globalization, caste hierarchies are not dissolved but rearticulated in new forms. The author proposes the notion of “Dalit cosmopolitanism” as a framework to think about how Dalits creatively negotiate exclusion, assert dignity, and reimagine urban belonging. This is one of the book's most original contributions: it refuses both the pessimism of caste's eternal reproduction and the naïveté of casteless modernity, instead emphasizing the incomplete, contested, and aspirational character of Dalit struggles.

Methodologically, the book exemplifies the strengths of ethnography: thick descriptions of neighborhood life, dialogues with participants, and sensitive reflections on positionality. The long-term field engagement (since 2015) allows the author to capture both continuity and change in Dalit experiences. The reflexivity in acknowledging pseudonyms, ethical concerns, and the influence of earlier collaborative projects (Author's Note, p. ix) adds credibility to the research. While the ethnography's focus on Dalit lives powerfully illuminates the micro-worlds of caste and precarity, future research could build upon this foundation by introducing a more systematic comparative lens. Examining interactions or contrasts with other caste groups in Ashanagar or similar localities could help sharpen our understanding of relational hierarchies and intersectional dynamics within urban spaces. Such extensions would not address a shortcoming of the present work, but rather expand its scope—complementing the *emic* depth of this ethnography with *etic* perspectives that further situate Dalit experiences within wider urban and social frameworks.

Similarly, while the ethnographic design justifiably privileges qualitative immersion over quantitative breadth, future studies could consider integrating larger datasets or macro-level policy analyses to trace the structural underpinnings of the experiences so vividly portrayed here. Incorporating labour market or educational statistics would strengthen the dialogue between micro-level narratives and macro-level inequalities, offering a more layered understanding of urban marginality. Moreover, as the book incisively critiques neoliberalism (pp. 18–19), subsequent research might extend these insights through engagement with global debates on precarity, informal economies, and the politics of urban exclusion in the Global South. Framed thus, these suggestions emerge not as critiques of the book's method, but as productive pathways for future comparative and interdisciplinary work that could further consolidate its analytical and theoretical contributions.

Despite these limitations, the book makes a substantial contribution to multiple debates. It extends the scholarship of Dalit studies into urban ethnography, complementing works like Deshpande's *Contemporary India: A Sociological View* (2003) and Jodhka and Naudet's *Oxford Handbook of Caste* (2023). It also engages with broader discussions on urban inequality, resonating with Loïc Wacquant's work on advanced marginality, while highlighting the specificity of caste in shaping exclusions. Most importantly, it embodies, as Gopal Guru (2002) powerfully argues, that there is

a pressing need to foreground the “Dalit voice” in knowledge production—treating Dalit perspectives as epistemic interventions rather than mere data points (see also Guru and Sarukkai, 2012).

For pedagogy, the book is well-suited for courses on caste, urban sociology, and South Asian politics, as it bridges theoretical debates with lived realities. For policy, it underscores the urgent need to recognize caste not as a rural residue but as an active determinant of urban inequality. Urban planning, labor policies, and educational reforms must address caste-based exclusion if the promise of inclusive urbanization is to be realized. For future research, the idea of Dalit cosmopolitanism opens fertile ground for comparative studies with other marginalized groups globally, inviting reflections on how identities adapt, resist, and reconstitute in neoliberal urban spaces.

In conclusion, *Caste and Emancipatory Quest* is a timely, reflective, and scientifically rigorous ethnography that dismantles the myth of urban castelessness. It shows how Dalits in Delhi navigate between exclusion and aspiration, stigma and dignity, precarity and hope. Its strength lies in illuminating the everyday negotiations of emancipation, reminding us that the quest for equality is not a completed project but an ongoing struggle. While the book has limitations in scope and comparative reach, it stands as a significant contribution to caste studies, urban sociology, and the wider quest for social justice in India and beyond.

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