

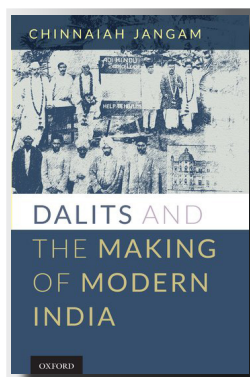
## *Dalits and the Making of Modern India*

Author: *Chinnaiah Jangam (2018)*

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Colonialism and nationalism serve as vantage points to understand the historicity of modern India. Many celebrated leaders of modern India, such as M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, presented the mainstream notion of nationalism to counter colonialism or colonial rule in India. They represent the ideology of Hindu elites to signify an underlying unity of Hindu consciousness. In the twentieth century, the only real challenge to this “mainstream” nationalism came from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s imagined nationalism through his philosophy of *Prabuddha Bharat* (enlightened India) and the nationalist discourse through the Dalit resistance to Hindu (Brahmanical) hegemony. Ambedkar, one of the founding fathers of modern India, offered a thesis to annihilate the caste system. The debates with his political opponent, M.K. Gandhi, have served as popular texts that are highly cited sources in academia. Drawing upon Ambedkar’s conception of nationalism, the book, *Dalits and the Making of Modern India* (2019), by Canada-based Indian historian, Chinnaiah Jangam, critically challenges the unitary notion of nationalism and colonialism. One of his key arguments is that particularised understandings of “nationalism” are undoubtedly susceptible to change. Drawing upon archival sources on the Madras Presidency and Andhra region, the volume draws from several untold narratives and shines light on the contribution of Dalits to the formation of a unique nationalist discourse.

With his lucid writing style, Jangam divides the volume in three sections concluding with an epilogue: 1) *Dalits and the Colonial Conjuncture*, 2) *Making of the Self and Political Identity*, and 3) *Dalit Imagination: An Egalitarian Ethics*. Each section centers on the Dalit experience and unfolds the historical realities that failed to document the untiring struggle of Dalits for social justice. This struggle coincides with the colonial developments in India affecting every walk of life. For example, for centuries, Brahmans had a monopoly over education. The British government opened schools in villages to all castes without discrimination is evidence of democratisation of education that directly benefitted the socially marginalised groups especially Dalits who were victims of untouchability practices. The volume offers a historical analysis of these democratic shifts that led to anti-caste resistance. Jangam challenges the dominant narrative by documenting the stories of democratic, egalitarian Dalit consciousness that has been excluded from the mainstream Hindu narrative. Thus, the author challenges a unitary construction of the nation and its imagination. In his words, “Dalit imagination of the nation and nationalism significantly altered the meaning of nation” (204). The book provokes the reader to critique the idea of nation. “From ancient times to the postcolonial present, Dalits have been articulating anti-caste ideologies, and aspiring to an egalitarian, ethical society based on principles of social equality and human dignity (5)”.

“Dalit” has been the most researched category in contemporary Indian social sciences. Until the late 1980s, Dalit was primarily used as a category of reference for caste, yet caste as a category did not gain much critical reflection by scholars. With the rise of Dalit literature in the 1990s, the interests of understanding the epistemology and ontology of caste started gaining ground in Indian academia as well as in the West. Jangam critically presents the history of nationalism in the Telugu public sphere and justifies how Dalits remained a solid contributor of nationalism through their anti-colonial struggle at the grassroot level. In this context, the author makes an important point that Dalits developed a different concept of nation and nationalism, and made securing a commitment to social equality, human dignity and egalitarian democracy—a pre-condition for the independence of the country (11).

While explaining the complexities of caste and class in colonialism, Jangam claims that “no South Asian scholars has to date employed the concept of internal colonialism...”(137). This is an important observation. However, my own study on the formation of Telangana state was published at the same time using this concept to demonstrate how Telangana served as an internal colony to Andhra. The First State Reorganisation commission in 1955 also pointed out the same danger of Telangana subjugation by the “Andhra settlers” (see Pathania, 2018).

## **Erasure of Anti-Caste Epistemology**

The political resistance of Dalits can be measured in terms of how successful they have been in expanding the meaning of democracy; in other words, in forcing civil society to acknowledge their presence and agency, and to embrace their agenda. Dr. Ambedkar in his writings on the origin of untouchability (1948), traces the historical

legacy of Dalits' resistance and anti-caste tradition. Centuries of oppression and material deprivation institutionalized by religious scriptures articulated Dalit's sense of self-worth. The abuse left a deep "ontological wound of self-negation and self-esteem," which the author refers to as "self-doubt" (6). The book connects the pre-colonial, anti-caste cultural memory with the ideological forms, which were used by Dalits to counter the colonial Brahmanical trajectory of modernity (5).

Historians who eulogise Gandhi's non-violent struggle often overlook Ambedkar's *satyagrahas* (peaceful non-violent protests). He led the most popular *Mahad* satyagraha. Jangam portrays how Dalits have tried to mobilise themselves by organising political rallies, public meetings, and temple entry *satyagraha*. The most significant contribution of this chapter is that the author views Dalit consciousness as a continuum rather than fragmented between precolonial and anti-colonial struggles. The author carefully presents the details of Ambedkar's struggle to secure civil and political rights for untouchables by organising them into a political community (188). He briefly mentions the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate on Hinduism and concludes that "Gandhi refused to accept equality as a religious and ethical necessity" while addressing the untouchables' claim of rightful status as equals (189).

These movements represented a fundamental cultural revolt against the caste system. A prominent caste scholar, Gail Omvedt (2011), notes that the cultural revolution that had begun in colonial India—and been heralded in struggle and dialectic process long before that—remained incomplete (312). The mainstream Hindu narrative served to erase their precolonial heritage of anti-caste consciousness, thereby rendering Dalits rootless. Dalit imagination and politics are very much in tune with the nationalist imagination (204). In the epilogue, Jangam suggests that the "roots of contemporary Brahmanical Hinduism became entangled with the structural foundation of the state, thereby threatening to undermine the ethical and egalitarian principles..." (213). In short, what Dalits have been struggling with in their daily life today is their political struggle to establish modernity as opposed to deeply entrenched Brahmanism in India.

Jangam duly highlights the critical role played by the vernacular political actors and unfolds the linguistic politics of Telugu-speaking regions of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. This region had witnessed the presence of Dalits in the politics of nationalism that ran counter to both the colonial and Brahmanical project of nationalism. Jangam views it as "upper caste Brahmanic nationalism" (211) bringing forth the untouchables' culture as counter to the ongoing Brahmin dominance. Through the experience of several Dalit activists in early twentieth century Telugu-speaking Madras Presidency, Jangam underscores the ongoing ideological tension between Gandhians and the Ambedkarites on the question of untouchability.

The book devotes significant attention to the politics and ideology of Bhagya Reddy Varma, who was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj Movement in Hyderabad. Reddy was a social worker, journalist, publisher and writer who made a tremendous contribution in the area of education during the Nizam rule. Reddy started the most popular magazine *Bhagyanagar Patrika*. He proposed that the medium of instruction should not be Urdu but rather the mother tongue of the students. Reddy was a flagbearer of Telugu nationalism and further, defined lower castes as *Adi-Hindus*. Jangam, in his

historical analysis, critically evaluates the content of this publication. In his words, “The *Patrika* reveals the contradictions in the cultural and ideological articulation of Bhagya Reddy, especially the way in which he oscillates between the construction of a separate identity and history for untouchables, and attempts to integrate them into the Hindu social and cultural processes within in the reformist framework (149).” The author also highlights Reddy’s leadership contribution in the modernization of the capital city of Hyderabad that brought education and employment opportunities to the untouchables (163). This eventually led to Dalit resistance to Brahmanism from the nineteenth century onwards. Amidst this, Bhagya Reddy who accepted the reformist Hindu agenda, was accepted by the Brahman reformers (164). With the aid of extensive archival work of *Krishna Patrika* and *Reform Committee* reports, Jangam demonstrates the political articulations of Dalits in Telugu-speaking areas (140) and concludes that the pre-colonial counter-cultural memory is rooted in anti-caste ethics and anti-caste imagination of Dalits.

The insightful analysis of India’s colonial history makes *Dalits in the Making of Modern India* a valuable resource for the scholar exploring modernity, nationalism and anti-caste movements. In this probing and thoughtful work, Jangam establishes several claims on the basis of the comprehensive and exhaustive archival work. The work is even more relevant in contemporary India which is undergoing ideological churning. The meaning of communal and secular are manipulated by the ruling class who have mastered sectarian politics. It is a time when India needs more “imaginative power” or “invincible imagination” which Jangam claims can serve as an “antidote to communal nationalism.”

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