

It's not all about caste

It might sound like a paradox to shift the focus away from caste in order to speak of Dalit (former untouchable) and low-caste women political activists in Lucknow, the capital of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). For decades now, this state has been the epicentre of low-caste politics. The paradox gains strength when adding that the above women are activists within the Bahujan Samaj Party (the majority of the people's party, or BSP), for which Dalit caste-based identity has played a pivotal role. However, as I entered the world of politics through women in the BSP, when my fieldwork began in the mid 2000s, other sociological features such as gender, class, and politics – and their interplay with caste – signalled their importance in capturing women's identities and activities.

Manuela Ciotti

DALIT AND LOW-CASTE WOMEN ACTIVISTS were 'different' compared to the same caste women I had encountered and researched until then. What is more, the women activists were also hardly 'explainable' through what I have termed the 'Dalit woman trope', an expression with which I refer to an existing body of knowledge that has emerged from the study of these women and which has returned them as victims of marginalisation, violence and exploitation within their caste communities and Indian society at large. Indeed, many women are victims of these phenomena, and in 21st century India, Dalit communities as a whole still experience atrocities, discrimination and marginality.

Women activists neither fit the Dalit woman trope, nor would they represent themselves in that manner; so how to write about them? My forthcoming book *Political agency and gender in India* offers alternative conceptual tools to look at Dalit and low-caste women, whose broader constituency of individuals has been overwhelmingly identified, researched and written about through the prism of caste.¹ This book is a counterintuitive account of Dalit and low-caste women, who do not fit existing representations, accompanied by a new conceptual framework that their very presence invokes.

Overall, the book is an invitation to think of these women in the plural. One of the most notable signs for the need of this plurality consisted of the difficulty in encapsulating women's agency and identities under one (and important) label: 'Dalit'. Some of the BSP women resisted the label as a tool of self-identification; to acknowledge this resistance, I speak here of Dalit and low-caste women. To complicate the picture further, a double positionality runs throughout the book: women in the BSP could be called 'a proletariat of politics' for the subordinate position they held within the party – yet, they could simultaneously be referred to as an 'elite' (in very relative terms), as far as Dalit women masses are concerned.

One of the tasks of the book consists of reconstituting BSP Dalit women as non-victim subjects, and the vantage point chosen to carry out this intervention is that of agency. In doing so, the book aligns itself with the re-orientation of women's studies in India that has occurred over the past decades and which was aimed to correct the passive woman/perennial victim representations present in the literature. However, not only has *Political agency and gender in India* shifted the attention to agency among women, but it deploys its analytics in the study of women largely believed to be the quintessentially marginal and powerless. This implies more than the above alignment, and I will return to this later in the essay.

The book does not treat the assertiveness observed among women political activists as a synonym of agency. Likewise, the book holds the analytical overlap of agency with resistance equally limiting. The ways in which Dalit women's 'difference' was displayed as 'assertiveness' in the field, the book shows, needs to be interwoven with factors such as marriage, husbands' profession, and the urban location, among others, the combination of which went to significantly shape women's choices. While signalling the importance of how these factors were 'put to use' in the field of politics, women's assertiveness in the field constitutes a snapshot of their political career and biography – a fixed moment – but does not constitute the 'process' itself. It is in fact the processual and generational nature of agency, and the transformative effects of politics in women's lives, which cannot be captured simply by collapsing agency with the assertiveness that women displayed in Lucknow. Rather, assertiveness could be taken as an entry point into a more complex picture.

Speaking of agency

Political agency and gender in India offers three interlocking analytical directions for thinking about agency among Dalit and low-caste women activists. The first places attention on elements that women activists in Lucknow share with actors of political participation in the history of women's activism in India: women wove BSP political ideology and praxis with long-standing traditions of activism amongst women in India. In this process, underlying deeper structures of gendered political agency cutting across time, class and caste were found among BSP women, who are largely regarded as separated from the rest of the society as a result of their Dalit identity. Thus, Dalit and low-caste women connect to and disconnect from wider historical and contemporary societal trends in India. And their agency sits at the intersection of these movements – that of connecting and disconnecting – rather than at one end or the other.

Second, the ethnographic insights from the study of Dalit and low-caste women constitute a vantage point from which to interrogate the relations between society and politics. The book is a rare account of these women as subjects of political participation in post-Independence India; it is essential to ask how and why certain gender regimes produce certain kinds of women activists at which historical juncture. Further, the book asks to what extent the realm of politics – both discourse and praxis – could be considered as a mirror of gender relations, and whether a society and its gender regimes can be exhaustively gauged through the lens of its political worlds.

Against this backdrop, the third analytical line set up by the book for the study of agency concerns Dalit and low-caste women as subjects of politics in a comparative perspective. Spencer has argued "The 'universal' subject of post-Enlightenment political theory [...] is not universal at all – 'he' is gendered, white, European, heterosexual – and the appeal to universalism conceals the way in which marks of culture, race, gender, class, all work to exclude certain people from power".² A great deal of political theory in India has focused on de-constructing the life of ideas such as democracy in their universalising western renditions, and through political ethnography scholars have fleshed out the workings of this idea, bringing to light the modalities of postcolonial citizenship and political participation. Concerning women political subjects – outside the confines of spectacular examples of female political leadership in South Asia – I have argued elsewhere that the process of deconstructing this post-Enlightenment universal subject and comparatively re-constructing non-western female political subjects, drawing on features of political participation observed in India, has only just begun. And the book does some of it. Further, with Spencer's observation in view, it is no longer a matter to explain exclusion through the lines of culture, race and class in a given geographical context, but inclusion; that is, explaining the entry of a large number of citizens into politics, through the line of caste, for example. With Dalit communities in focus, the issue at stake has been to understand how exclusion (namely untouchability) and positive discrimination policies have produced politics through the formation of political organizations such as the BSP. In this respect, women have been an absent subject in the inquiry.

Producing theory

In pursuing the three analytical lines outlined above, the book's premise lies in considering Dalit and low-caste women's political agency not as a poor imitation of women in 'advanced' western democracies, or of those hegemonic subjects of gender and politics in India (that is upper caste and class women). Dalit women are analysed in their own right, as non-western political subjects, and *not* as

a case study of incomplete and injured political personas. This is why the interventions the book wishes to accomplish imply more than an alignment with women's studies' efforts of recuperating agency. But there is more to it.

Research on Dalit and low-caste women has led to the production of novel theoretical insights. But why is there a need to state an almost obvious point? Almost three decades ago, Appadurai poignantly argued "Although there have been a number of fine and detailed ethnographic portraits of Untouchable communities, their status in anthropological theory mirrors their lowly role in South Asian social life".³ After reviewing studies informed by a theoretical framework that asked whether these communities replicated the hierarchical system they lived in, Appadurai concluded "the ethnography of Untouchables places them at the service of external theories. [...] Untouchables are fodder for scholastic battles that could equally well have been fought without dragging them in".⁴ Since the publication of Appadurai's article a number of lines of inquiry have emerged from the study of these communities. A great deal of scholarship has, however, focused on what research insights might have to say on Dalit communities and their predicaments (which is indeed a crucial task) – often without venturing further to ask what those insights might contribute to debates beyond Dalit identity and the Dalit studies rubric – a 'sub-field' of South Asian Studies – and how, for example, the categories and arguments generated through research have reshaped South Asian Studies, rather than the other way around. By contrast, *Political agency and gender in India* re-imagines Dalit and low-caste women as actors of political participation generating theoretical insights on agency, and not only Dalit agency – on gender and not only on Dalit gender. And the list could be extended.

If situated research has brought to light lived difference, heterogeneity and plurality of a group of Dalit and low-caste women, this has led to think of these women in the plural, beyond the Dalit woman trope, and it has inaugurated new representational lives for them as objects of knowledge. In turn, this work will hopefully inaugurate new ways in which these women are viewed in the public sphere.

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Notes

- 1 Ciotti M. Forthcoming. *Political agency and gender in India*. London, New York: Routledge
- 2 Spencer J. 2007. *Anthropology, politics and the state: Democracy and violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p.9)
- 3 Appadurai A. 1986. 'Is Homo Hierarchicus?', *American Ethnologist* 13(4):745-761 (p.750)
- 4 Ibid., p.751

The elephant is the symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party. Photograph reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of opoponox on flickr.