

# Review: Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages edited by Prathama Banerjee

By Suraj Yengde

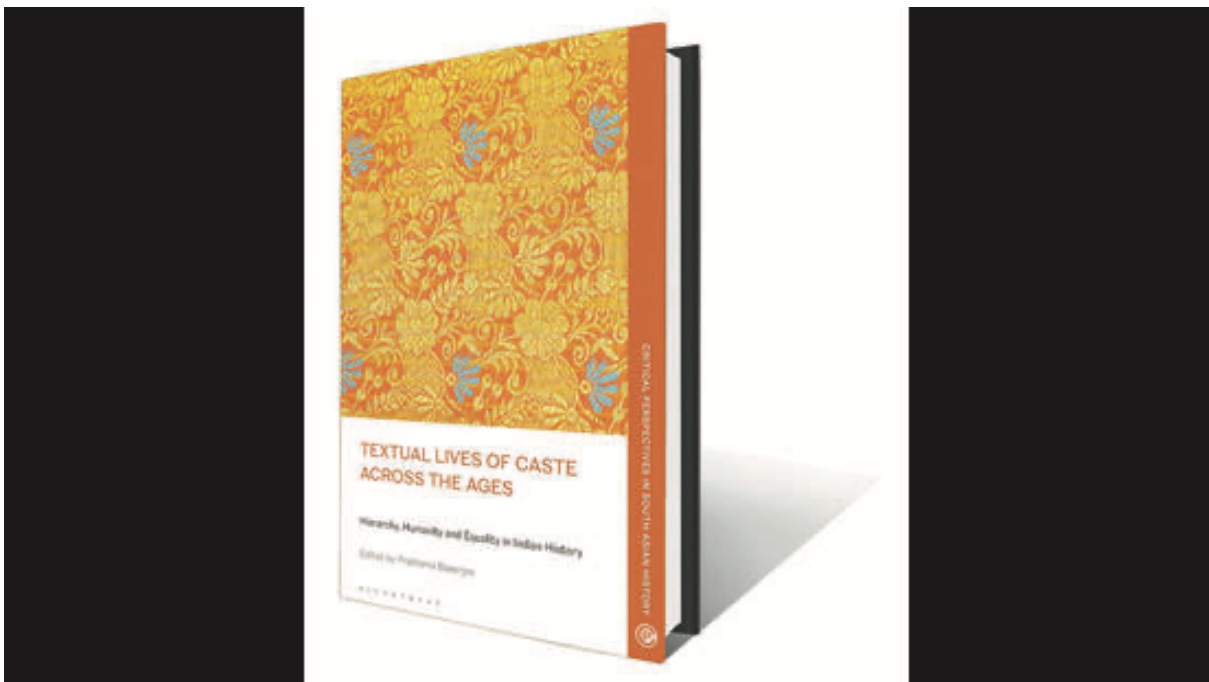
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Touching on everything from anti-caste traditions to the Buddhist legend of Matanga and Persian and Arabic perspectives on caste, 'Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages' edited by Prathama Banerjee presents much fresh knowledge about Indian antiquity

The antecedents of caste are generally mired in speculation and popular mythography. Among modern scholars of the subject, the question of the past, and therefore, that of religion, religiosity, culture, and tradition, are placed within the curated Sanskrit or Indological stream. This means that, apart from reading widely and having an adaptive appetite for the period, enthusiastic scholarship also demands a study of the present. Contemporary scholarship on caste is dominated by the social sciences. The rise of democratic opportunities for the outcastes along with self-reflection done at the state and societal level has provoked a colourful curation of intellectual motifs within these disciplines. Still, there is an absence of knowledge about the past.



Figures from the Jatakas on pillars at the Sanchi Stupa. (Shutterstock)



293pp, ₹943; Bloomsbury

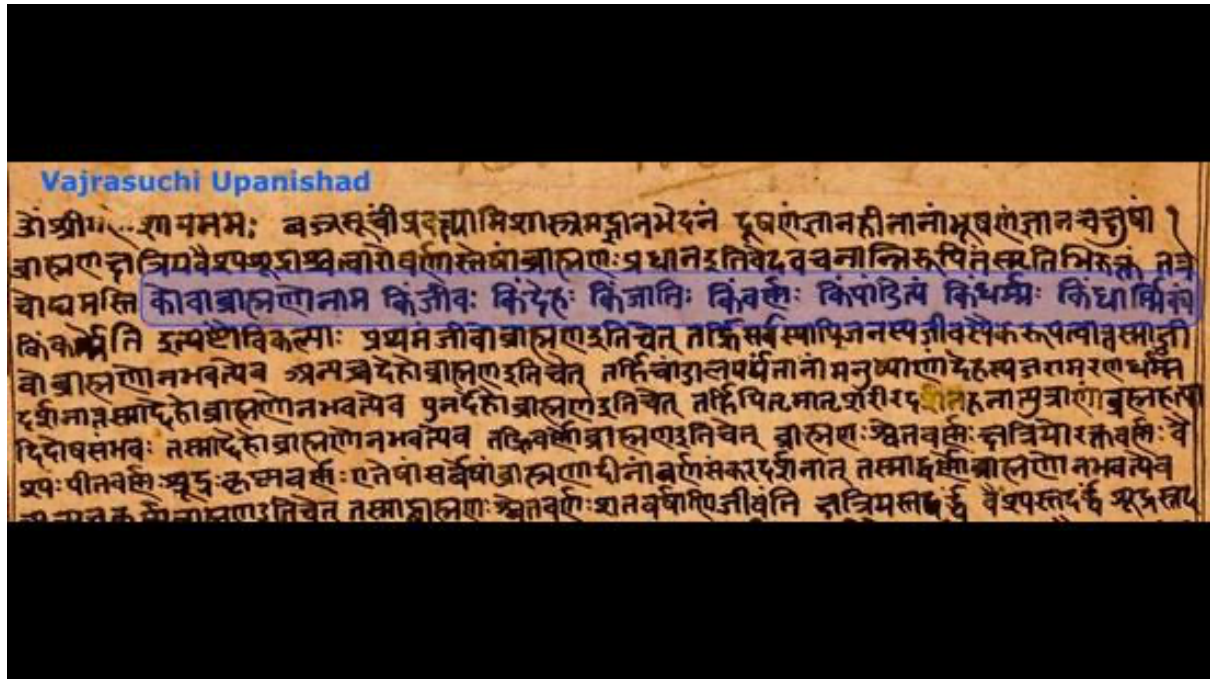
This is why *Textual Lives of Caste Across the Ages*, which touches on anti-caste traditions, materialism of Indian thought, Buddhist interconnections between the practices of various religions, Arabic and Persian textual embodiments of caste, the kingly pasts of the Dalits including of figures like Raja Matanga, and the gynocracies of women

from Dalit backgrounds like queen Humsa of Kashmir or Soyra Bai of Shivaji, piqued my interest.

Neatly arranged, the chapters in this volume carry the independent, autonomous voice of each author even as it all holds together as one standalone text. The editor Prathama Banerjee is widely read in the area of ancient history and her introduction gives us an insightful snapshot of the field. Starting with how caste and race were constituted in Portuguese measurements to how it was manifested in global hierarchical debates, she covers history through disciplinary angles and touches on everything from philosophical renderings to the sociological modernizing of caste, and how it was made a religious idea in the colonial construction of nationalism. I especially loved her reading of the metaphysical as being beyond hardened "religion" and including "critical religiosities... material and public lives of philosophical ideas, epistemological propositions and ontological concerns, often as abstract and esoteric".

This book brings forth various dimensions of caste interpreted hermeneutically throughout the ages and in different regions. As the editor correctly argues, most caste studies are done through colonial or modern archives and most scholars, myself included, have not thoroughly studied the ancient archives. Richly footnoted, this book introduces debates and conversations into the cacophonous area of caste dialogues and provides a proper primer on the caste past. Each chapter presents new knowledge and a critical review of specific fields and I read all of them with awe.

Chandrabhan Yadav writes about the *Jatakas* where lower-ranked social groups disproved the superiority of Brahmins “uncontaminated” by labour. The central figures in these stories are not only intellectuals but also hunters, snake charmers, carpenters, agriculturists and traders – all vocations that Brahmins, who are presented as villains in the *Jatakas*, disdained.



Meera Visvanathan looks at the Vajrasuci and the Vajrasuci Upanishad to tell us how Buddhist knowledge was appropriated. (Wikipedia)

Meera Visvanathan looks at two texts, *Vajrasuci* and *Vajrasuci Upanishad*, to tell us how Buddhist knowledge was appropriated to reinvent Brahmin superiority. Ashvagoshā, author of the *Vajrasuci*, downplays the four varnas. However, the corrupted later edition of the text re-establishes the quality of a Brahmin as a moral and spiritual category, thereby upholding the virtues of the varna advocated by Adi Shankara in Advaita Vedānta. Samyak Ghosh informs us of how texts in the medieval era were changed according to the ruler’s caste location. It was a way to legitimize a position. Various ideations in the *Upanishads*, then, were constructed in the medieval times up to the sixteenth century.

Because these are polyphonic texts, they appear similar and we cannot confidently differentiate between the two texts of the *Vajrasuci*, their dates, origins, authorship, contexts and orders. This, as Ambedkar contended, is essentially about the mortal conflict between Brahminism and Buddhism.

### **Buddhism's triumph**

The anti-caste tradition of Buddhism was led by Ambedkar's predecessor from Tamil Nadu, Iyothee Thass, who used speculative readings of history to serve the purpose of anti-caste justice and Buddhist revivalism. He did not fall easily into debates between the colonial administration, especially the census takers, the Christian missionaries, or the Vaishnava and Vellala Saiva traditions and maintained that the untouchables were former Buddhists who had become victims of Brahminism argues Leonard Dickens. Once the Buddhists were termed as such, ethical schools were closed down and ignorance and rituals were promoted.

Gunasekaran presents *Tirukural*, a didactic text belonging to the earlier corpus of Tamil literature, to trace when and how caste emerged in Tamil textual traditions and what happened to its practice. Sangam era literature adduces caste and recognizes varnas and the Vedas. Around the same time, the *Asarakkovai* flips the *Tirukural's* concern for the purity of the mind to the purity of bodies. It then became the embodiment of Brahminical practices. The irony of Tamil history is that justifications of varnas and the *Dharmashastras* were offered through practices within communities even as there was simultaneous dissent in textual forms.

### **The Chandala Jatakas**

The chapter that looks at the view from below through the lens of Matanga king Trishanku is one of the easiest to read. Complex discourses animate historical literature and outcaste groups often made fun of Brahminical orthodoxy. This is also visible in the Buddhist canon which mocks these traditions. Pradip Gokhale examines Mahayana philosopher Prajnakaragupta, who refuted caste duties and separation as irrelevant logic.

Meanwhile, the Chandala stream of knowledge advanced through vocations such as sorcery, witchcraft and shamanism. Two noted Chandala scholars were Manipushpa and Bhaasvara. Through the story of Vishwamitra and Trishanku, the *Matanga Jataka* reveals the alliance between the Kshatriya and Chandala kings against Brahminism. The legend of Trishanku appears in various forms. In Buddhist lore, he is the father of Ananda, whose kindness made Prakrti, an untouchable woman, want to marry him.

The Chandalas protested against their subordination through knowledge, argument and profession. The Matuas of Bengal who are the descendants of the Chandala people, own their history. Praskanva Sinharoy argues that through miracles attributed to their god, Harichand Thakur, the Matuas delegitimize Brahminical power. Likewise, they oppose Vaishnavism for its upholding of Brahminism. In their everyday practice, they preach social, intellectual, economic and familial responsibility and not just a search for the Lord.

As can be seen from texts such as the *Vajrasuci*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were primarily a tradition secured by bards who belonged to diverse castes. However, when Brahmins took over this form, they adulterated it with "several alterations, revisions and interpolations"



and added the Vaisnava tract to turn Rama and Krishna into avatars of Vishnu.



A monument to Afanasy Nikitin in Tver, Russia. Nikitin visited India in the 15th century. (Wikipedia)

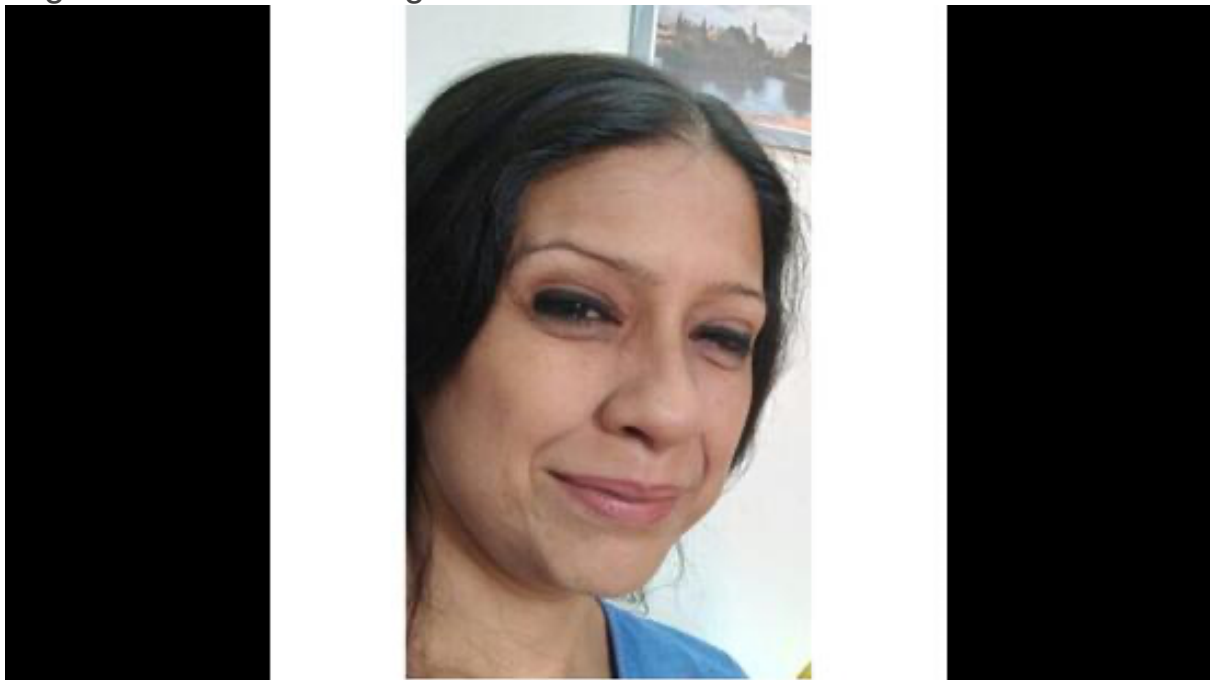
My forthcoming book, *Caste A Global Story*, has a chapter that examines how caste was studied and used by foreigners. This book too has a section on Persian and Arabic texts that cover caste. Rizi examines texts by Al-Biruni and his use

of *tabaqat* (occupation), *maratib* (ranks), *darajat* (order of degree), and *alwan* (colours) to describe caste and establish how it was maintained. While Abu'l Fazl, counsel to Akbar, typecasts caste as *gunah*, Qatil, a Khatri convert, places it in the ranks of *sharafat* (respectability) *firaq* (sect), *qism* (type) and food habits to explain the castes operating among Muslims in India.

Moroccan Ibn Batuta and Russian Afanasy Nikitin in the 14th and 15th centuries respectively also spoke about caste practices in India. Drawing from Kerala-based texts, PK Yasser Arafath describes how Brahmins tricked the area's Shudra kings and established their dominance. Two

Malabar texts, the *Sankarasmriti* (15/16th C) and the *Vyvaharamala* (17th C) show that they fooled rulers into thinking that they needed protection from polluting Dalit bodies. Thus, an entire system was created to keep “devils and filthy” groups excommunicated.

As Pradeep P Gokhale has shown, Shudras were required to be slaves of the Brahmins because the creator made them so according to the *Manusmriti*. Reform movements within the Vedic tradition also excluded the Shudras. Vedanta’s position of spiritual egalitarianism and non-dualism as a caste criticism was set aside by Badarayaana’s *Brahmasutra* (around 5th C CE). However, Vedantic non-dualism was, in fact, an appropriation of *Shunyata*, the Buddhist concept of emptiness where dualities collapse, language reaches its limits, and cognition stands challenged.



Editor of the volume, Prathama Banerjee

Wright demonstrates that the philosophical practices of the *Nyayashastra*, developed in the 3rd C CE, were politicized. Shudras and women debated on whether they qualified for liberation. The other



three varnas were assumed as birth superiors. However, Gadadhara, a 17th C commentator of Nyaya philosophy, reserves the right of liberation only to Brahmin males. Other varnas need to be reborn as Brahmins to be liberated, making caste a temporal concept. In the Tamil canon, as Gunasekaran has shown, the beef-eating Pulaiyar can enter the temple after walking through fire and discarding his impure body to become a Brahmin.

Though the last section felt like an unnecessary stretch and the size of the font makes for a tragic reading experience, this book really is the most educational volume I have read on Indian antiquity in recent years. It will definitely be my go-to text for any concern regarding select histories.

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<https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/reviewtextual-lives-of-caste-across-the-ages-edited-by-prathama-banerjee-101744383094727.html>