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however, it strikes me as a distraction. To see the motivation for Lalla's spiritual seeking and attainment in such social and psychological issues devalues not only her own life and greatness but devalues spirituality in general.

On the other hand, experiences of unfairness and suffering often trigger spiritual endeavour. This, of course, is equally true for men and women, and therefore statements like the following are highly controversial: "Lalla's insistence on the withdrawal from the world in the Shaiva tradition arises from her location as a woman practitioner in a patriarchal social structure which provides no space for her to fully engage in the world by acting upon it" (p. 52). Are there not many men who also withdrew from the world?

With this we have entered chapter 4, "Shaiva Literature and Female Subject." The author continues with the same type of argumentation: "The first principle of the Western discourse, the Idea, truth, presence, or God is based on the masculine imaginary which suppresses the feminine" (p. 55). The Greek word "idea" is feminine and to seek gender-issues in the realm of Platonic ideas is rather amusing. Or what indeed is the author referring to? The male God of the Judeo-Christian tradition? "He" can certainly not be called the first principle of the Western discourse. "Thus, whereas man already is, woman must become in order to be 'normal'" (p. 56); And: "the ultimate principle is finally unitary and masculine into which all the differences are subsumed" (p. 62). Unitary *and* masculine? The author herself writes later: "Shiva/Shakti are not opposites. . . . Shiva and Shakti are two aspects of the same indeterminate reality" (p. 97). Yet here she continues: "Shakta descriptions can be interpreted as a reversal of the Shiva-centered descriptions and for that very reason contributing toward keeping the feminine still locked in the patriarchal framework of setting the other in conflictual stance to define itself" (p. 67). Yes, a woman *can be interpreted* as a human being who is not a man but it is by no means cogent to do so.

With chapter 5, "Lalla's Thought. Beyond Shiva/Shakti Duality," the book takes a very pleasant turn. The author summarizes quite masterfully the complex ideas of Kashmir Shaivism and applies them inspiringly to Lalla's verses. She provides a philosophical background for Lalla's life and work which allows us a much deeper understanding than the previous arguments, which she unfortunately picks up again: "Lalla's poetry . . . expresses a woman's resistance to patriarchal norms" (p. 91). Chapter 6, "The Ocean and the Waves," finally summarizes and expresses again the higher vision of Lalla's life and poetry.

The second half of the book (pp. 103–76) contains 148 of Lalla's verses in the original with a beautiful translation and several helpful explanatory notes. The concordance and bibliography add to the usefulness of the book, whereas the index could be more extensive.

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*Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community.* By VIJAY PRASHAD. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. xx, 176 pp. \$23.95 (cloth).

When I discuss Nepal's caste system and untouchability with a variety of people, I usually come away with one of two impressions. Either they find the practice so incomprehensible that they are compelled to dismiss it. Or, they regard it as an archaic

tradition which has yet to be corrected by South Asian democracies, but soon will be. In a relatively short and well-researched book, Vijay Prashad refutes the latter perception that “culture” and its role in the caste system is an ahistorical entity that can be corrected through activism and legislation. For when the needs of the “nation” were put forward in colonial and postcolonial India, the needs and rights of untouchables were subsumed within a politics that either denies their importance or redefines and appropriates them to other goals (countering Muslims, for example). Prashad has written a balanced but not uncritical treatment of the political and social history of northern untouchable communities in *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community*.

The six chapters are organized by single identities for untouchables, beginning with the heterogenous urban “Mehtar” sweepers, followed by the early rural beginnings of the specific caste of “Chuhras,” the development of the urban glossed “Sweepers,” the religiously based “Balmikis,” Gandhi’s “Harijans,” and finally, the definitive nation-state group of “Citizens.” Throughout each chapter, Prashad analyzes a variety of data of specific north Indian untouchables’ political and religious movements for the past one and a half centuries, including origin myths, colonial land policy, national debates, early rural organization and later urban migration, urban waste management policies, and educational reform movements. He shows that untouchable trade unions, strikes, and even Gandhian penance have all fallen victim to Indian elite politics.

Prashad locates his early subject by tracing how city administrators and politicians exploited sweepers’ impurity to prevent their establishing any true leverage. The Delhi Municipal Committee gained control over the organization of untouchable labor that traditionally had been organized by sweeper families and neighborhoods. A clean city was achieved not through negotiation and compromise, but through broken promises and a modernist, nationalist agenda. The one weapon the sweepers held was the broom, and they frequently called citywide strikes in protest of low wages and poor living conditions. Fear of retribution and fear of filth prevented others from replacing the sweepers, yet this did not contribute to sweepers’ greater bargaining power. Are untouchables defined only by what untouchability does to them? Theirs has been a struggle to eliminate discrimination and work toward rights, rather than to eliminate their caste. Their ability to organize was curtailed for over forty years (1889 to mid-1930s) by fear of reprisal and lack of community identity (their neighborhoods were scattered throughout Delhi).

The second half of the book will interest the nonspecialist in that it focuses on untouchables during India’s independence movement, and provides the general outline of Gandhi’s complex and contradictory relationship with dalit communities. The chapter “Balmikis” connects social justice to the divine in the oppressed groups’ quest to translate the message of ecumenical egalitarianism into one of social equality, this within the context of explosive nationalism through the second, third, and fourth decades of the twentieth century. Collective salvation was organized around radical mythological figures such as Bala Shah Nuri, the prophet of the Chuhras, or Rishi Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana*. Prashad describes how cultural traditions and specific salvations became subsumed within both the colonial project and the movements of independence from it; what both shared is a universality that threatened the stability of certain core dalit identities and their claims to special status. For the first time questions, such as how to represent dalit Hindus, and what was the dalit religion, were asked. Colonial organization of information through census-generated

attempts to force diversity into broad categories clashed head-on with individual and community heterogeneity.

Prashad suggests that perhaps more than any other group in India, dalits suffered the consequences of colonial administrative needs to make the census tables manageable. "The problem of political representation produced a communalized polity in which the dalits became the preserve of the Hindus; militant Hindus, in turn, used the dalits in an ideological war against Muslims" (p. 75), fueled in part by misleading census returns indicating that the Muslim population was increasing faster than Hindus. As political elites debated whether to include dalits as Hindus or not, the interests of the dalits themselves remained unheard. "At the core of the Hindu reformers' reconfiguration of dalit notions lay a markedly anti-Muslim argument" (p. 83). The rise of dalit aboriginal radicalism and the strength of Ambedkar drew strong responses from Gandhi and Hindu elites, who sent volunteers to work with the Chuhras and "convert" them to Hinduism. The book ends in the middle of the twentieth century, with two principles of dalit liberation—territorial independence and cultural parity—and outlines the development of communist politics and the rise of nonviolent and violent resistance among dalits against the state.

The book will interest scholars of South Asia, particularly historians and anthropologists, as well as graduate students in those fields. In certain places, the book suffers from a lack of organization, and a short index. The relative absence of definitions might make reading difficult for the nonspecialist, and the author's tendency to span large periods of history and to abruptly skip to different time periods detracts from a study whose strength is in historical details and lucid writing. Broad summaries and generalizations would have provided more of a big picture. For readers attuned to other social distinctions relevant to caste, the absence of gender as an interpretive or analytical concept (with the exception that a decrease in women sweepers during the early part of the twentieth century is mentioned) is problematic.

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*From Independence Towards Freedom: Indian Women Since 1947.* Edited by BHARATI RAY and APARNA BASU. Gender Studies Series. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxii, 248 pp. IRS 645.00, \$29.95 (cloth).

In this book Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu present a collection of twelve papers addressing "the presence and participation of women in national life in post-independence India" (p. xiii). As is evident from the papers, women are acquiring a sudden visibility in India, but when we evaluate material and objective conditions of well-being and compare them with those of men, women still remain behind in all respects—with the exception, as we can read in the paper by Aparna Basu, of women's employment in lower rank, low-paid teaching jobs in colleges and universities, where 56 percent of lecturers and 61 percent of instructors are women. (These data confirm that at every level the number of women declines as we go up in the hierarchy).

The essays are not organized thematically into categories or into historical periods, and are not addressed to specialists but to all readers (p. xiv). This is perhaps the deficiency of this book, where scholarly papers are mixed with papers that deal with the subject either superficially, or in confusing ways, or carrying wrong data.