

Book Review

Gyanendra Pandey,
*A History of Prejudice:
Race, Caste, and Difference in India
and the United States*

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 255 p.)

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As its title suggests, this is a book about prejudice. Contrary to the apparent plainness of the title, however, its intellectual lineages are far from simple. This is no conventional piece of historical study, nor is its approach to the question of prejudice straight-forward. While the book is written in an admirably simple prose, making it accessible to a non-specialist readership, its readers might well be reminded that this book comes from a scholar who has long been one of the central figures of *Subaltern Studies*—a three-decade-old intellectual enterprise that has aimed not only at writing alternative histories of colonial South Asia, but also at challenging the discipline of history itself. Anyone expecting detailed empirical histories of the Dalits (ex-Untouchables) of India and/or of the African Americans of the United States might find themselves somewhat unsatisfied. However, those interested in such themes as memory, archive, modernity, and above all, subalternity will find it intellectually stimulating and morally inspiring. It is a theoretically informed piece of work written with immense sensibilities and a rare sense of balance. For instance, while registering the historical significance of the struggles of Dalits and African Americans, he never fails to deal with the problem of patriarchal and class hierarchies within these communities. The book devotes many of its pages to a discussion of the lives of subaltern women, which were almost always marked by double-discrimination and by a lack of recognition by conventional historiography.

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Pandey begins his investigations with a theoretical chapter entitled 'Prejudice as difference' (Chapter 2). Prejudice in modern times, he explains, is fundamentally a politics of *difference* inseparably coupled up with majoritarian dominance and interests. It allows those in the mainstream, like the upper-caste Hindu or Anglo-Protestant American adult males, to mark the rest as 'other', pigeonholing them into a range of different categories based on their race, caste, religion, gender and so on. The ultimate power of the majority derives from their *sameness*—their taken-for-granted status as free and rights-bearing 'modern' individuals. This places them *above all categories*, leaving them free of any identifiable markers that may be turned by others into sources of prejudice. It is in contrast to such 'categorylessness' that minorities find themselves collectively identified as belonging to distinctive categories and treated not as unmarked individuals but as problematic collectivities that are at odds with the values of the modern, such as 'rationality' and 'democracy'.

The following two chapters discuss the liberation movement pursued by Dalits and by African Americans respectively during and after the Second World War. How have these two peoples sought to challenge caste/racial prejudice and to find a way out of what may be called 'internal colonization', a condition that has permanently fixed them as targets of exclusion within their nation? Pandey stresses that political leaders of these communities at the time demanded freedom and equality, hoping for their members to be admitted as rightful citizens. They expected that the historical changes brought about by the Great War and decolonization would give them fresh opportunities to make their nation more truthful to the proclaimed liberal principles of modernity. In India, for instance, as shown in Chapter 3 ('Dalit Conversion: The Assertion of Sameness'), the Dalit movement emerged as a distinctively 'modern' movement. Its leader, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, presented himself, and was represented by his Dalit followers, as a typical modern figure. As Pandey usefully points out, this emphasis on the modern emerged in stark contrast to Gandhi's critique of modernity and his ideal of the village community. Being a Dalit himself, Ambedkar had no share in Gandhi's conservative yearning for simple village life since it was precisely in the countryside that Dalits had long been subjected to caste oppression. In fact, their different views on modernity was closely related to the fundamental question of how to approach the problem of untouchability in post-colonial India. Whereas Gandhi insisted on a preservation of the caste system as the basis for Indian national unity, believing that the problem could be solved by reforming Hindu tradition, Ambedkar called for a thorough transformation of the same tradition. As Pandey argues, the collective conversion of Dalits into Buddhism—which has taken place on a massive scale as a result of the Ambedkarite movement—can only be understood as a 'modern' claim for justice and equality. Similarly, Chapter 4 ('"Double V": The Everyday of Race Relations'), discusses the minoritarian claim for equal rights by analyzing how African American men in the United States sought national inclusion through active participation in the Second World War. By stressing the black contribution to America's

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war as a fight for freedom for all the peoples in the world—both abroad and at home—, the proponents of the movement sought to advance their status *as Americans*, not necessarily as ‘African’ Americans. In both India and the US, these political struggles faltered in the face of majoritarian counter-actions, reflecting how deeply prejudiced both nations were despite their claim to be secular and democratic. For example, the racist violence against African Americans only increased after the war precisely because many whites feared that black soldiers might claim, as they actually did, the same rights as those enjoyed by themselves. In India, those Dalits who made their way into respectable jobs, such as those in the civil service, often found themselves ill-treated once their caste origins were disclosed.

The next two chapters are entitled as ‘An African American Autobiography: Relocating Difference’ (Chapter 5) and ‘Dalit Memoirs: Rescripting the Body’ (Chapter 6), respectively. Whereas the preceding two chapters are about struggles waged in the public realm, these two here focus on the personal experiences of Dalits and African Americans in realms that were more private and thus were less obviously politicized. Partly as a consequence of this focus, the protagonists of the stories Pandey focuses on are often women, whose activities were often confined to the domestic realm because of their assigned gender roles within their patriarchal community. The materials Pandey uses are autobiographies that were written not by established writers but by ordinary persons. The choice of these materials over others stems from his desire to present a possible way of narrating the past experiences of Dalits and African Americans without being assimilated into the grand—and often masculinist—narrative of the liberation movements. What he tries to show is that the everyday experiences of ordinary Dalits or African Americans were not just diverse but were *singular*, and hence were not readily generalizable into categories of historical studies such as ‘community’ or ‘identity’. For example, the unpublished autobiography by Viola Perryman Andrews (1912–2006)—an African American woman in Georgia—is mostly about her families, particularly her life as the mother of many children, and it is not easy to discern any direct influence of the liberation movement or her views on it. But, at the same time, it remains the case that Viola *did* live through the years of the movement, and that the lives of herself and her children *were* affected by it in one way or another. What is important for the historian is not to dismiss this kind of writing as trivial or insignificant but try and come to terms with it precisely to question his/her own stereotypical assumptions about politics, community and identity. As Pandey writes, ‘Viola’s life-story defies the scholar’s attempt to give it political coherence’. Her writing ‘points to the instability—but not for that reason the reduced force—of assumed identities and the powers and privileges attendant on them’ (p. 160). In a similar way, in Chapter 6, Pandey explores the struggles of ordinary Dalits as appearing in several autobiographical writings such as *Jina Amcha* [*Our Lives*] by Baby Kondiba Kamble (1986), a piece which the author wrote in hiding for fear that her husband might find out. Dalit women, such accounts tell us, faced gender oppression at home as well as caste discrimina-

tion outside—a fact that the historical narrative of the Ambedkarite movement has largely failed to register.

Towards the end of the book, Pandey focuses on the experiences of those Dalits and African Americans who were successful in moving up the social ladder, becoming members of the middle class, at least economically. This shift in focus is natural for Pandey since, as shown in Chapter 2, he is particularly interested in one aspect of prejudice, namely prejudice as that which helps liberal democracy to practice its covert politics of exclusion. Why and how do 'black bourgeoisie' or 'Dalit brahmans', as they are sometimes called, continue to face discrimination? How, at this level, does the question of caste/race affect the lives of Dalits and African Americans as individuals and as members of their community? After meeting the required economic and educational conditions, what more would be required of these people to be admitted as equal with white protestants or upper-caste Hindus in a society which is supposed to be egalitarian and democratic? It is these questions that Chapter 7, entitled 'The Persistence of Prejudice', addresses.

At several significant levels, this book is distinct—and to some extent intentionally so—from conventional historical studies of prejudice. In what follows, this review will show two aspects of the book that seem to make it distinctive. One obvious uniqueness of Pandey's work is its two-tired approach to the question of prejudice. Pandey discusses the prejudice against Dalits and that against African Americans in the same text. As an Indian historian of South Asia, the choice of Dalits as a subject comes as little surprise. But instead of confining himself to the field of his acknowledged expertise, Pandey ventures to take up the question of prejudice in the United States—a country which he is not a native of, a country whose history he has not hitherto specialized in.

Such a bold move would naturally invite both applause and criticism. On the one hand, one can expect that such a trans-national approach as adopted by Pandey would allow us to address the question of modern prejudice at a general level, forcing us to move away from the narrow interests of either South Asian Studies or North American Studies. In this age of globalization, historical studies cannot afford to remain bounded by national or regional frames. On the other hand, however, any comparative approach faces the danger of collapsing into a set of crude generalizations. When such sensitive subjects as prejudice are at stake, comparing different contexts requires particular caution so as not to end up producing questionable moral judgments. Surely, one cannot decide, for instance, which forms of prejudice are more malign than others. Insofar as comparison tends to invoke these questions, its use as a method for writing history needs to be carefully qualified. It is only fair to point that Pandey himself is sharply aware of these pitfalls of comparison. In fact, he emphatically rejects that his book should be labelled as a 'comparative study' at all. Rather than blindly comparing caste prejudice in India and racial prejudice in the US, Pandey attends with extreme care to

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the 'processes of minorization' in both contexts to see how they produced 'minorities' at a time when, in the few decades around the Second World War, 'majorities' came into being (p. 9). As will be seen below, Pandey's interest in prejudice is inseparable from his critique of the hegemonic forces of modernity in the global spread of nation-states during and after the period of decolonization. In this book, Pandey has produced a theoretically coherent account of how parallel processes of minorization took place in two nation-states, India and the USA, under different conditions of global modernity.

As a researcher working on the 'politics of comparison' in inter-empire relations, I am particularly interested in the part where Pandey mentions in passing the contemporary relationship between Indian anti-colonial nationalism and the African American struggle against racism. As Pandey remind us, Gandhi, for instance, served as a great inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 6). Just recently, historians of empire have started to pay attention to how colonized peoples around the globe practiced 'comparison' across imperial boundaries¹. Pandey's work is a welcome contribution to the growing body of research that focuses on parallel and comparative developments of discriminatory and counter discriminatory practices in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Another distinctive feature of the book is its approach to both 'history' and 'prejudice'. For Pandey, the combination of the two should never be taken for granted. Despite the title, *A History of Prejudice*, the book does not offer itself as a piece of historical study in any conventional sense. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that the study of prejudice is 'not quite the stuff of disciplinary history' in the first place (p. 31). By definition, prejudices are produced through a process of spontaneous, un-thinking judgment and thus their traces tend to pop up in improbable places in unexpected ways. Evidence of prejudice, therefore, is hardly the kind that finds its way into the archive on which historians rely for primary sources. But this is not the only reason why Pandey claims that prejudice resists being historicized. For him, prejudice becomes even harder to capture when it gets cloaked behind the uncontested norms of modernity, particularly the liberal principles of equality and democracy. Extremely marginalized peoples like African Americans and Dalits end up being subjected to prejudicial treatment not in spite of but precisely *through* the narratives of modernity—a story of individual freedom in the case of the US and a tale of secular democracy in the case of India. Members of these communities are invited as rights-bearing individuals to participate in the modern but only find themselves simultaneously faced with a prejudice that says, 'African Americans are not quite American yet' or 'Dalits are not quite Indian yet'. Through such a rhetoric of deferral—one which was so familiar in colonial situations—the very discourse of equality makes African Americans and Dalits unequal. When prejudice

¹ See for instance, Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

takes this mode, it does not exhibit its characteristic ugliness otherwise associated therewith. It passes for common sense, remaining unnoticed. Pandey calls this ‘universal prejudice’, distinguishing it from what he calls ‘vernacular prejudice’, which, with its obvious bad faith, is more visible and thus easily subjected to public condemnation.

The way in which Pandey formulates ‘universal prejudice’ is closely connected with his own distinctive philosophy of history. As a distinguished member of the *Subaltern Studies* collective, which has long taken issue with the very idea of history², Pandey has criticized academic historians for having been complicit in the mythologization of the nation-state as a political apparatus that serves its ruling majority. As Pandey asserts in an earlier work, ‘the writing of history—in each and every case—is implicated in a political project, whether consciously or unselfconsciously’.³ If universal prejudices are deeply rooted in the common sense of the nation-state, then no conventional forms of historical research would be appropriate as a tool to radically engage with them. Using its legal and security apparatuses, the nation-state may problematize and even intervene in ‘vernacular prejudices’ as a threat to its liberal credentials, but it would not question ‘universal prejudices’ as they are part of its very identity. Insofar as history remains as a storyteller of the nation-state, it would have to be deconstructed, and what would be needed in its place are alternative histories that challenge its hegemony. If the archive serves the national majority who control the state, then critical historians like Pandey would need to look elsewhere for materials that remain uncontaminated by its self-serving teleology and arrogant rationalism. To counter the dominant narrative of modernity, they need to find materials that narrate experiences of Dalits and African Americans that are not quite assimilable into the modern mythology of the nation-state.⁴

To some extent at least, it is Pandey’s aforementioned perspectives regarding both modernity and history that seem to have helped him choose the range of topics covered by his book. *A History of Prejudice* is less about Dalits and African Americans as victims of deprivation under exclusionary practices than about their ambivalent inclusion into the modern and the painful contradictions it has inevitably engendered. In Chapter 3, for example, Ambedkar—the famous leader against untouchability—becomes a primary subject of discussion precisely because Ambedkar rejected Gandhi’s anti-modern ideal of the village community and became recognized as a quintessentially ‘modern’ figure. In Chapter 4, the

² One of the sharpest expression of this trend can be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 10.

⁴ These arguments are also found in his ‘Unarchived histories: the “mad” and the “trifling”’, in (ed.) G. Pandey, *Unarchived Histories: the “Mad” and the “Trifling” in the Colonial and Postcolonial World* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 3–19.

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African American movement for rights and equality during and the Second World War is discussed. What particularly interests Pandey here is how African Americans at this historical moment took on the promises of liberalism and claimed to be recognized as the bearers of 'American-ness'. Furthermore, the book is much less an archive-based history of prejudice than a critique of the historical narrative of the nation-state from the vantage point of unarchived subaltern voices. In Chapters 5 and 6, Pandey introduces and analyses personal narratives of African American and Dalit women. The stories they tell in the form of highly personal autobiographical memories indicate their concern with the control of their body and domesticity, rather than with the public struggles for rights often dominated by the men of their communities. Their unarchived experiences are shown to present a radical heterogeneity that rejects being assimilated into the 'universal' rhetoric of deferral that has continued to stigmatize Dalits and African Americans to this day.

A History of Prejudice is a masterful account of modern prejudice whose arguments are at once subtle and bold. There is no doubt that it will greatly advance our academic understanding of prejudice whilst empowering those who are variously involved in the struggle against it. Like any great work, however, it leaves some points that would need close examination for further constructive discussion on the subject. One such point is related to how Pandey distinguishes 'universal' from 'vernacular' prejudice and how he relates this distinction to the discursive hegemony of the nation-state. Especially, I am interested in how the apparatuses of the nation-state—law and state in particular—emerge in Pandey's account of prejudice.

In Pandey's paradigm, the state is explained first and foremost as responsible for 'universal prejudice'. The 'universal', he writes, is 'the language of law and state'(p. 2). At the same time, in matters of 'vernacular prejudice', the state appears more as its regulator than its perpetrator. In his own words, 'Prejudice thus as bias, malice, or inherited structures of discrimination' is something 'which the state believes it can measure or contain' (pp. 1–2). My concern is that such a distinction might give us a misleading impression that modern states have somehow managed to elevate themselves above such 'bias, malice, or inherited structures of discrimination' and thus whatever racist/ casteist policies based thereon. Certainly, since the Second World War, liberal states have presented themselves as guardians of equality and democracy, often inscribing these values in their cherished constitutions. Yet, at the same time, it was these same states, not just their xenophobic national populous, that have exploited their legal and other apparatuses to pursue policies of exclusion and discrimination. Post-war Britain, for example, always made sure to present itself as anti-racist, officially banning racism by law. At the very same, however, this same Britain closed her doors to 'non-white' immigrants from its ex-colonies, practicing a policy clearly based on a kind of racial prejudice. The prejudices held by those people who may influence state policies—politicians, public servants, political party leaders, and intellectuals—may well be

‘vernacular’ as well as ‘universal’ if we use Pandey’s terminologies. To that extent, I believe, historians should not give up on the idea of engaging with the archive, looking for evidence of prejudice that inform racist/casteist policies⁵. In actual historical contexts, as Ann Laura Stoler sharply reminds us, state-building has rarely been so idealist a project as has often been assumed. Therefore, presupposing the universalist character of the archive and then reading it against the grain has its own limits. The archive should not be regarded solely as an epitome of universalist ideas. For, it can be full of scripts that do not even conceal fears, ambivalences, inconsistencies, or doubts⁶. The archive may turn out to be a useful repository of sources for critical historians as it may contain traces of prejudice—not just those of ‘universal’ but of ‘vernacular’ prejudice, helping them see how certain prejudices may become translated into discriminatory policies of the state.

⁵ For a brilliant analysis of racist state policy, see Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009)