

## Dalits in the New Millennium

*Dalits in the New Millennium* interrogates the major aspects of Dalit experience in multiple spheres and traces how Dalit politics is no longer merely content with desire for social justice but has become more assertive and aspirational in its demands.

The volume represents the individual voices of the editors and contributors, who are eminent academics and activists, and situates Dalit life amidst all the major changes that have occurred over the last three decades. It aims to provide a more holistic approach to studying the community's socio-economic and political life in the new millennium and adds to the existing literature on Dalit politics, focusing especially on the changes that are taking place in the realm of electoral politics, popular culture, political economy, ideological worldview, and representation, among others.

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# Dalits in the New Millennium

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## Acknowledgements

Perhaps more books have been written on Dalits than on any other social group in India, and yet our understanding of how Dalits are engaging with and in turn getting shaped by the new socio-economic and political forces remains rather vague. Dalits are unique in three aspects among the persecuted minority groups in the world: First, the social and economic subordination of Dalits goes far back into antiquity. Second, together with the tribal communities and Muslims, Dalits not only form more than 40 per cent of India's population but are found at the bottom on most development indices. Third, the sheer size of the Dalit population in India, now roughly standing at 240 million, makes it difficult for any political or policy platform to ignore the community.

In this volume, we make an attempt to document the shift in Dalit experience by focusing on the complexity (hundreds of endogamous sub-castes who speak many languages are clubbed into one group) which further accentuates multiple uncertainties regarding social and economic life that Dalits confront. These two factors – complexity and uncertainty – we suggest shape the community's social cognition in the sense of how Dalits, like any other social group, internalize certain aspects of political culture and confront them simultaneously. No community is static, and Dalits too are moving with times. Their work-participation profile, food habits, lifestyle, and modes of social and political assertion, among others, are changing. Still, so much seems to be frozen in time: celebrations over their upward mobility are marked by humiliation, and political assertions are often punctuated by everyday discrimination, humiliation, heinous cases of sexual assault, physical violence sometimes culminating in cold-blooded murder, and social boycott of the community members, among others.

The volume situates Dalit reality in the new millennium in the most holistic manner possible, broadening our horizons to interrogate the major aspects of Dalit life: political economy, popular culture, ideology and identity, public sphere, and electoral politics. All these aspects, in our opinion, are linked together in complex

ways, and such an integrated approach would be immeasurably more helpful than the hitherto preferred isolationist approaches. A central argument that runs through the volume is that in the backdrop of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ascendance to power at the national level, the Dalit movement has entered a new phase. We believe that this volume builds up on the work done in the past and advances our understanding in many ways. It has acquired a more complex character and thus necessitates revisiting many scholarly formulations theorized earlier.

To take stock of the developments since the 1990s insofar as they are concerned with Dalits, the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi, hosted a round table of more than two dozen scholars, journalists, and activists to discuss 'the future of Dalit politics in India' in November 2019. The day-long round table was an eye-opener for many of us, and everyone echoed during the concluding session that the research agenda on this subject needs a revisit. In the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, we, the editors of this volume, met on several occasions to conceptualize the research agenda and agreed to compile a comprehensive volume that situates Dalit life amidst all the major changes that have occurred over the past three decades.

We have accumulated multiple debts in the process of completing the volume. Our foremost gratitude goes to the CPR for becoming the institutional home of this project. Yamini Aiyar, the CPR president, was generous in accommodating our various request related to this project.

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In many ways the participants of the CPR round table in 2019 and the contributors form the intellectual backbone of this project. We sincerely thank the contributors, who weathered several personal hardships induced by the pandemic in the past two years and yet responded to our messages and queries related to this project at each stage with great urgency. Not only did these contributions make our task easier in compiling the volume, but we also hope that collectively the arguments presented here raise several sets of new inquiries.

We would also like to thank Ankita Barthwal in helping us with the logistical arrangements during the paper-presentation workshop and to Tript Kaur for editorial assistance on the first draft of the manuscript that was submitted to Cambridge University Press for peer review. This volume in many ways is better organized thanks to the suggestions and helpful reflections offered by the three reviewers.

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14 April 2023  
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