

BOOK REVIEWS

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Gopal Guru (ed.), *Humiliation: claims and contexts*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Edited by Professor Gopal Guru, a leading scholar on caste in modern India, the eleven articles presented in this noteworthy volume seek to draw our attention to a phenomenon which pervades social life, yet is often absent in our academic analysis: humiliation. The book claims three objectives. First, it seeks to expose ‘_humiliation’ as a complex social phenomenon occurring in different forms, contexts and discourses. In doing so, it highlights our current lack of understanding and convinces us of the need to make ‘_humiliation’ an object of academic inquiry. Secondly, it argues how humiliation rests at the heart of the major problems of modern Indian life: the tension between the private and the public; the national and the local; a state based on western ideas of self and society, and a culture based on inherent inequality. This makes understanding ‘_humiliation’ not only interesting, but imperative. Thirdly, the volume claims to provide us with a new ‘_conceptual language’ for identifying and understanding humiliation.

The first goal is immediately accomplished by Bhikhu Parekh. He gives us eleven scenarios of humiliation occurring at different levels of social life, featuring different actors, and having various outcomes. Parekh then systematically analyses these cases, generalising across their diversity and complexity to give us a definition of humiliation as a distinct concept. While his distinctions between humiliation, degradation and humbleness might not be final or exhaustive, Parekh succeeds in inviting critical thought on the notion of humiliation and provides us with an example of how to grapple meaningfully with the complex ways in which it manifests itself. In doing so, it constitutes an excellent introductory chapter. Nandy sees humiliation as a relationship which is realised only when both humiliator and humiliated understand and accept their relative positions (Chapter 2). She examines the ethics involved in the interference of a third party pointing out humiliation in a relationship where humiliation is not understood or accepted. Given that this ‘_third party’ might well be the researcher, this text can be read as a text on reflexivity, ethics and epistemology. Similarly, Baxi cautions us against the use of existing academic discourses on humiliation. As these discourses are based on Western conceptions of the self and of society, carelessly imposing them on other cultures would then constitute an act of ‘_etymological violence’ (Chapter 3). While the other chapters see humiliation as a ‘_concept’ or a ‘_relationship’, Sanjay Palshikar considers it to be a ‘_claim’ that has an internal structure (Chapter 4). When humiliation is claimed, one is also essentially

1) creating or mobilising a victimised group, 2) throwing into relief a sharp or unjust hierarchy of power, 3) mustering a narrative of a lost past, and 4) outlining a way to respond to an oppressor. Rather than being a sign of defeat, the claim to humiliation imposes upon the world a moral way of looking at it. The strengths of this chapter are also its weak points. Because humiliation is a claim, the text is not bogged down by whether the claimants are ‘truly’ humiliated, or whether other parties recognise this claim. It also assumes that the humiliated can launch a claim in the first place.

Section 2 is more ethnographic in content. Geetha’s contribution is interesting, for it examines Dalit humiliation from the point of view of the hegemonic Brahmanic discourse. In this discursive regime of myths, cosmologies and rituals, the Dalit are total subjects, helplessly part of someone else’s world view. Here knowledge is indeed power. This chapter also implicitly asks an urgent question: why do the humiliators humiliate?’ Chapter 4 provides an answer: humiliation is a claim that throws existing power structures into relief. This claim can be used not only by the subaltern, but also by the powerful.

Rodriguez argues how the refusal of the masses to clean public spaces is seen by the frustrated bourgeois leaders of India as the refusal of the archaic masses to accept their enlightened guidance and patronage (Chapter 6). Rather, Rodriguez argues, this ‘refusal’ comes from the bourgeois inability to understand fully the connection between filth and untouchability. The warning here is clear: it shows the ease with which one could fall into narratives which inadequately account for social life. This inadequacy leads first to frustration, then eventually to social disillusionment and distrust. Ronald deSouza gives us an interesting case of how the refusal by caste Hindus to allow Dalits to be cremated in a shared crematorium developed into a national drama. The author uses ‘humiliation’ as a window through which the complex relationship between the ‘local’ and the ‘national’ is analysed. In Chapter 8, Chandhoke asks some provoking questions about notions of equality and concludes that caste is a ‘state of mind’, not just a set of boundaries to be dismantled.

Section 3 shifts the action away from the symbolic to economics and politics. Chapter 9 is another highlight of the volume. Suhar Palshikar here describes a strike by mill workers in 1982. The strike failed so spectacularly that it left the previously strong, proud and organised industrial labour in disarray. The humiliation at the hands of the employers and the state that followed was so great that the workers then refused to speak of, or even remember, their ignominious past, neutralising the labour group entirely. As Maurice Halbwachs once suggested, a group with no memory is no group at all. Thomas Pantham (Chapter 10) compares Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s discourses of untouchability. In doing so, he presents caste as a constantly negotiated reality. Professor Guru concludes the volume by encouraging us to reject rejection. He argues that this can only be achieved through self-respect and a strong moral courage to stand up to an oppressor. It could have been an outstanding follow up to Chapter 9, but this potential is left untapped.

While the book certainly succeeds in presenting humiliation as a complex phenomenon that needs to be urgently studied, I also think that it suffers from two problems. First, the volume seems to lack a definite conclusion. While it gives us many interesting perspectives and approaches to humiliation, they are explicitly linked together only through Professor Gopal's introduction. Superficially, I pointed out how some of the articles could have been connected. A concluding chapter highlighting these connections could have taken this already impressive study to a new level. Furthermore, as the articles are loosely informed by each other, one finds several occasions where different authors subtly contradict each other. For example, Parekh's effort to separate humiliation from other, similar concepts is ignored later on. More pressing is the slippage from humiliation to caste. The two, admittedly, are inextricably connected. However, in my view, they should remain conceptually separate, and this slippage hinders rather than contributes to a theory of 'humiliation'.

Despite these criticisms, the volume has many strong points. Its very existence is already a plus, and Professor Guru succeeds in showing us the dangers of taking humiliation for granted. Moreover, many authors are not satisfied by just giving us a description of the problems they are concerned with. Informed by their theoretical and ethnographic knowledge, they also offer solutions to the issues they describe. Finally, the individual articles are coherent and broad in their interests, making it relevant not only for scholars of India, but for anyone interested in power, discourse, human rights and statehood.

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