

Front Page

China
Southeast Asia
South Asia
Japan
Korea
Central Asia

Middle East
War and Terror

Business in Brief
Asian Economy
Global Economy

Letters

Archive

About Us

Contact Us

Advertise

Media

South Asia

Sep 20, 2003



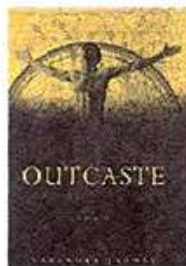
BOOK REVIEW

An oppressed voice heard

Outcaste: A Memoir by Narendra Jadhav

Reviewed by Jason Overdorf

In the 1960s, when author Narendra Jadhav's father Damu retired from his job with Indian Railway, the old man had trouble adjusting to life without schedules to meet and work to do. The "virtually illiterate" pensioner turned his hand to repairing all the gadgets in the Jadhav house - even those that were, until he got hold of them, in perfect working order.



It was only to keep his father from becoming a nuisance that Narendra, his youngest son, pushed him to write his memoirs. That the old man persevered, wrestling with language, testifies to the unforgettable character he was: stubborn, perhaps irrationally confident, and, above all, unwilling to accept his supposed limitations.

More than 20 years later, his recollections became the framework for *Outcaste* - a tribute to an inspiring father by a son who rose to become an adviser to the executive director (India) at the International Monetary Fund and head of economic research at the Reserve Bank of India. That such a remarkable story of success began, literally, as what the Indians would call "timepass", somehow makes the book more enjoyable, like a \$20 bill found unexpectedly in the pocket of a crumpled pair of pants.

Indian family sagas are as commonplace as they are charming, but nearly all of them are tales of one kind of elite or another. *Outcaste* - a family memoir not of high-caste, scholarly Brahmins, so well represented on the bookshelves, but of three generations of untouchables - is different.

Twice as likely to live in poverty than other Indians and still bound to face powerful discrimination at every turn, India's untouchables - now known as Dalits - remain (except in politics) virtually silent and invisible. No major Indian newspaper or magazine employs a Dalit editor, and reporters are few and far between. Bollywood, where many Muslims have found fame, has no Dalit directors and no Dalit stars. And Dalit authors - already few in number - rarely find publishers eager to translate their books into English.

If *Outcaste* may be used as a measure of those stories waiting to be told, that is a terrible shame. Written in a simple, artless style, *Outcaste* traces the journey of Damu, the author's father, from a

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Book Reviews

small village in Maharashtra to Mumbai. In the city he uplifts himself and his family, overcoming great odds, with a clever wit, good humor and an amazing force of will.

Inspired by the movement of Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar - the Dalit leader who struggled against caste discrimination and untouchability during India's battle for independence and eventually became the chief architect of the new country's constitution - Damu refused to allow his children to grow up uneducated.

His eldest son became a district collector with the Indian Administrative Service - one of the country's most powerful and coveted positions. His youngest son, Narendra, with a PhD in economics from Indiana University, became an adviser to the executive director (India) at the International Monetary Fund and, later, head of economic research at the Reserve Bank of India - and, of course, an author.

Damu's life alone would provide material for half a dozen movies. In just one chapter, Damu wins a job selling newspapers by hanging around the train station. Before long, a *gora saheb* (white gentleman) picks him out and pays him extra to save a copy of the Chronicle for him. One day, the *gora saheb* takes him home to play with his little blond daughter. Damu, who thinks he is there to perform some errand, sits on the floor at first, but the *gora saheb* pulls him up and makes him sit on the couch next to him. "I was very uncomfortable and felt totally out of place," Damu recalls. "My lowly place was so deeply etched in my mind that when I was treated well, I could not believe it. I thought there was something wrong. After much thought, I reasoned that perhaps *saheb* did not know that I was an untouchable."

For months, Damu and blond Missybaba play together, until one day the *saheb* tells him he will have to accompany the little girl to school. There is, of course, something patronizing about the relationship between Damu and the *saheb*, for whom the little boy places bets on the horses and continues to run errands. But the way Damu tells the story is as disarming as a famous actor recalling his big break - and as free of rancor. A gambler and a drunk, the *saheb* does not last long with the railways before he is dismissed, given one month's notice to return to England. Jadhav dispenses with the farewell party in a handful of paragraphs. The *saheb* buys Damu a new suit and hires a photographer to take a picture of Damu and Missybaba. Memsahab gives him his first glass of wine. And then, in a deadpan sentence fraught with emotion, the episode concludes: "About a month later, Saheb and Missybaba returned to England, but he was not able to take Memsahab with him because she was half Indian."

Like *Angela's Ashes*, *Outcaste* manages powerful sentiment without the maudlin embarrassment of sentimentality. *Outcaste* lacks the literary flair of Frank McCourt's memoir, however, possessing neither its forceful, lyrical rhythm nor its artful cohesiveness. Jadhav's unaffected prose serves him well, but certain editorial decisions - concluding with an essay by the author's 16-year-old daughter, for example - give the book an amateur's earnestness. Yet despite that artlessness - indeed, perhaps because of it - *Outcaste* captures the life of India's villages and Bombay's slums with an anthropologist's precision and a novelist's humanity.

Outcaste: A Memoir by Narendra Jadhav, Penguin India, August 2003, ISBN: 0670049727, price Rs395 (US\$8.60), 296 pages.

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