

Review

The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India, by Dilip M. Menon. Pondicherry: Navayana Publications, 2006. 168 pp., \$25.00. ISBN 81-89059-07-6 (pb).

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This excellent study of the caste system of modern India marks a significant contribution to the growing literature on issues of caste, colonial modernity, and identity during the modern time period of India. Dilip Menon's careful examination of the issues of caste and colonialism from an interdisciplinary perspective offers a penetrating and nuanced assessment of the caste system in modern India. In particular, Menon examines the intertwined character of socio-religious and political context and how some issues are expressed in literary texts—especially novels written during the colonial period of the south Indian state of Kerala. In addition, he vividly discusses the caste system in its modern day manifestation. In this regard, he is able to emphasize caste as an integral part of colonial modernity and communalism of Kerala.

This book is divided into four chapters. After providing general background information on caste issues and some methodological lacunae, Menon argues, 'communalism in India may well be the return of the repressed histories of caste' (p. 25), and it is through inequality and violent suppression within Hinduism and Islam that unitary militant identities are forged because local intellectual tradition came to be structured by colonial governmentality (Chapter One). Menon, in the second chapter, turns to E. M. S. Namboodiripad, a communist leader of modern Kerala, and argues Marxism allows Namboodiripad to reconceptualize the caste system because it proved beneficial in the development of individual skills and regional culture. However, Menon questions the usefulness of communism as he points out Namboodiripad's denial of the 'long shadow of the past in the present' thereby emphasizing inequality in the present. In Chapter Three, Menon analyzes three nineteenth-century Malayalam sub-altern novels, *Ghatakavadham* (*The Slayer Slain*, 1865, Kottayam), *Saraswativijayam* (*The Victory of Knowledge*, 1893, Kozhikode), and *Sukumari* (1897, Cannanore); and asserts how the imagination of freedom—newness, place elsewhere, and redemptive death remain central tropes for all these novels and how these themes shape an idea of the self and social modernity. In all these novels, Menon argues persuasively that the formulation of caste self and new collectivity depends on religious imagining. In addition, through the tropes of death and freedom soteriology operates. He points out how religion functions in all these writings. Menon concludes by reading *Saraswativijayam*

and highlighting how conversion to Christianity ensures a low caste person or an excommunicated Nambutirī woman her right as an individual because up until their conversion, they are referred to as a 'thing' (p. 141). He candidly affirms neither tradition nor nationalism remains imperative for the subordinates; rather, it is the colonial dream of mobility and wealth and the construction of an oceanic world of possibility that remains central to them.

The Blindness of Insight succeeds on many levels, beginning with a close examination of the historical past and a close reading of the novels. Menon considers these novels in the context of a meshed socio-religious, political, and historical context. This sort of examination of caste in modern India, simultaneously through various lenses, rarely takes place. A true value of this work is the number of questions it raises and the avenues it opens for future research. For example, Menon's claim of communalism in India as repressed histories of caste adds to the complexity in understanding the caste system in modern India, especially in the Kerala context, and opens avenues for future research. While taking into serious consideration the importance of such a holistic examination of the caste system, Menon certainly points out that the nineteenth-century Malayalam novels move beyond the confines of literary and religious imagination to the public sphere.

Above all, Menon's *The Blindness of Insight* involved in examining caste, colonialism, and communalism is a fascinating and well constructed book that offers a significant analytical view of caste in modern India.