

## REJOINDER TO SHASTRI RAMACHANDRAN'S REVIEW OF V.GEETHA & SV RAJADURAI'S BOOK

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The review by Shastri Ramachandran (November 1998) of V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai's *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium* hardly does justice to a painstaking and able work. Among the critics of the brahminical social order, a considerable amount is known about Ambedkar and to an extent about Phule, but little is known outside Tamil Nadu about Periyar and the modern Tamil tradition of social criticism that preceded him. This Tamil tradition has its own distinctive flavor which is worth studying in detail for a comprehensive understanding of the critique of brahminism by its victims. Geetha and Rajadurai have done an excellent job introducing and analyzing those ideas in the background of their historical unfolding. The work certainly deserved a more careful review, especially in a respected journal like seminar, whether or not the reviewer is in agreement with the ideas of the book.

One cannot dictate what a reviewer must say, but one can legitimately take objection to a wanton trivialization of a book in the name of a review. Ramachandran's review does precisely that. For instance, the reviewer probably thinks that 'unbearable non-brahminness of being' is a clever expression, but it caricatures the subjectivity of the self-respect movement (or today's dalit-bahujan movement) in a most offensive way. So does the general tone of the review that reduces the ideas of the non-brahmin movement to a mockery of reason and logic. It would be a different matter if the reviewer had offered a serious criticism of the deficiencies of the ideas on the score.

It is quite surprising, in view of the revised and extensive discussion of caste and brahminism in the post-Mandal commission phase of the Indian polity, that Shastri Ramachandran finds it possible to facetiously repeat all the simplistic

arguments (Brahmins are 3%, there is oppression in other communities too and so on) with which the critique of brahminism has always been sought to be brushed aside. Of course, overstatement as well as factual and logical fallacies can be found in certain expression of this critique, as in all radicalism, but they do not add up to anything as simplistic as Ramachandran's refutation. Nor can it be supposed that Geetha and Rajadurai are ignorant of, or indifferent to, those deficiencies. Ramachandran is not at all conscious that his refutation is more simplistic than what he seeks to depict as simplistic; that it is an expression precisely of the presumptuous superiority that the critique of brahminism has consistently put in the dock.

If Geetha and Rajadurai are 'suffused with prejudices that are inseparable from passionate engagement,' then the reviewer, for all his light tone, also has a passionate engagement: hide what is distinctive about brahminism behind a general statement that elites will always be elites and their victims will always suffer. He could have gone one step further and said – quite accurately – that the entire problem is in human nature: the human capability for taking pleasure in subjugating other human beings is a universal trait, and unless we can think of some way of overcoming it, all our analysis and our denunciation of a particular form of subjugation remains incomplete.

Whether Ramachandran agrees or not, I do think this is a perfectly sensible statement, and more honest than his closing lines. But we still need to know in detail the particular forms this universal tendency has taken in history, because it is the particular forms that we suffer from and not the universal tendency. Equally because what we should do about this ever present human tendency can only be understood and devised from the values and institutional practices generated by the struggle against its particular forms.