It’s not all about caste

It might sound like a paradox to shift the focus away from caste in order to speak of Dalit (former untouchable) and low-caste women political activists in Lucknow, the capital of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). For decades now, this state has been the epicentre of low-caste politics. The paradox gains strength when adding that the above women are activists within the Bahujan Samaj Party (the major of the people’s party, or BSP), for which Dalit caste-based identity has played a pivotal role. However, as I entered the world of politics through women in the BSP, when my fieldwork began in the mid 2000s, other sociological features such as gender, class, and politics—and their interplay with caste—signalled their importance in capturing women’s identities and activities.

Speaking of agency
Political agency and gender in India offers three interlocking analytical directions for thinking about agency among Dalit and low-caste women activists. The first places attention on elements that women activists in Lucknow share with actors of political participation in the history of women’s activism in India: women were BSP political ideology and praxis with long-standing traditions of activism amongst women in India. In this process, underlying deeper structures of gendered political agency—cutting across time, class and caste were fought among BSP women, while the BSP women have not been separated from the rest of society as a result of their Dalit identity. Thus, Dalit and low-caste women connect to and disconnect from wider historical and contemporary societal trends in India. And their agency sits at the intersection of these movements—that of connecting and disconnecting—rather than at one end or the other.

Second, the ethnographic insights from the study of Dalit and low-caste women constitute a vantage point from which to interrogate the relations between society and politics. The book is a rare account of these women as political participants in post-independent India, it is essential to ask how and why certain gender regimes produce certain kinds of women activists at which historical conjuncture. Further, the book asks to what extent the realm of politics—both discourse and praxis—could be considered as a mirror of gender relations, and whether a society and its gender regimes can be exhaustively gauged through the lens of its political worlds.

Against this backdrop, the third analytical line set up by the book for the study of agency concerns Dalit and low-caste women as subjects of politics in a comparative perspective. Spencer has argued “The ‘universal’ subject of post-Enlightenment political theory [...] is not universal at all.” She is gendered, white, and the appeal to universality conceals the way in which marks of culture, race, gender, class, all work to exclude certain people from power.” A great deal of political theory in India has focused on deconstructing the idea of us and them, but it does not deploy its analytics in the study of women largely believed to be the quintessentially marginal and powerless. This implies more than mere abstraction, and I will return to this later in the essay.

The book does not treat the assertiveness observed among women political activists as a synonym of agency. Likewise, the book holds the analytical overlap of agency with respect equally limiting. The ways in which Dalit women’s differential experiences of caste in the field, the book shows, needs to be interwoven with factors such as marriage, husbands’ profession, and the urban location, among others, the combination of which went to significantly shape women’s choices. While signalling the importance of how these factors were “put to use” in the field of politics, women political activists constitute a snapshot of their political career and biography—a fixed moment—but does not constitute the “process” itself. It is in fact the processual and generational nature of agency, and the transformative effects of politics in women’s lives, which cannot be captured simply by collapsing agency with the assertiveness that women displayed in Lucknow. Rather, assertiveness could be taken as an entry point into a more complex picture.