

Book Review: To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum by Nathaniel Roberts

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Recommended Citation

Biswal, Madhumita () "Book Review: To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum by Nathaniel Roberts," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol94/iss1/16>

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Roberts, Nathaniel. *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. xvi + 288 pages. Paperback, \$29.95.

In making a sustained examination into the lives of Pentecostal Christians in a slum in Chennai, anthropologist Nathaniel Roberts' *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* signals an important contribution to the anthropology of religion.

In the mainstream literature on social stratification, class and caste often get classified as two distinct systems of stratification. Contrary to the mutually exclusive way of understanding caste and class, the book strikingly brings out the convergence between the two. Roberts argues that, at a broader level, the whole caste structure can be reduced to two blocks: the Dalits (or untouchables) and the non-Dalits (or caste people). He explains that the Dalits, who are at the margins of the caste structure, are also at the margins of class hierarchy. They are subjected to systematic exploitation and economic deprivation. In the book, Roberts investigates the struggles of the Dalits in Anbu Nagar, a slum in the northern part of metropolitan Chennai in India. The main focus of the book is to examine how the women assign meanings to their everyday struggles when they convert to Pentecostal Christianity, and simultaneously how they give meaning to religion in the due course of their struggles.

The book has seven thematic chapters. Roberts introduces the book by tracing the etymological meaning of the English word *Pariah*, meaning an outcast or any person that is generally despised or avoided. Drawing from historical sources, the author states that the word is derived from the name of a Dalit caste in South India, called *Paraiyar*. In making this connection, the author sets the tone for the book. The first chapter of the book is titled "Outsiders." In this chapter, Roberts looks critically at the concept of 'outsider' through three separate lenses: firstly in the context of churches accepting foreign funding, secondly with respect to the author's own location as a foreigner doing his field work, and thirdly through the treatment of the slum as an outsider to the city itself. Through these discussions the author articulates that the categories of 'insider' and 'outsider' are not fixed, rather they are constructed, and their meanings change as per context.

In the second and third chapters, Roberts maps the social structural relations within the slum, and between the slum and the world outside. He argues that in urban, middle class narratives, the slum dwellers are often depicted stereotypically as unhygienic, immoral, and criminal, which corresponds to their stereotypical caste status as Dalits. The slum dwellers themselves prefer being identified by class, rather than caste, offering a counter narrative by defining poor as being endowed with the virtues of caring and humanity. Simultaneously, they stereotypically refer to non-Dalits as rich and attributing to them negative qualities such as lacking humanity. Furthermore, Roberts argues that although slum dwellers frame themselves with high moral standards, internal contradictions to such claims prevail. The structural

inequalities within the slum in the form of a gender hierarchy within the family, as well as between money lender and debtor, often place poor, married women in a vulnerable position.

From chapter four to chapter seven, religion becomes the key theme of discussion. The fourth chapter traces the discourses on religious conversion in India including the contexts in which anti-conversion laws have been introduced. Within the nationalist discourse, Roberts investigates the issue of religious conversion of the Dalits. Chapters five to seven discuss the way the people of Anbu Nagar perceive religion. The author points out that the conversions to Pentecostal Christianity began in the early 1990s, and it was mostly women within the slum that converted to Christianity on a large scale. Roberts explains that the social transformative agenda offered by Pentecostal Christianity contributed to its success. Through women's prayer teams, suffering was shared and a space for mutual concern could be developed. In addition, Christianity held the promise of liberating the poor from their suffering. Indeed, the people of Anbu Nagar moved within and across religions, including Christianity and Hinduism, looking for a respite from extreme poverty. In fact, people within the same family may follow different religions. Therefore, within the slum, religion could not be the basis of collective identity formation. Interestingly, it was the subscription to a universal standard of morality by the slum dwellers which served in minimizing the effects of social division on the basis of religion.

To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum has successfully systematically articulated the layers of inequalities and intersections between caste, class, and gender inequalities through its ethnographic depth. However, its depiction of Dalits as a singular community becomes one of the major drawbacks of the book. Overlooking the diversity and internal hierarchies within Dalit caste groups makes the narrative of the Anbu Nagar slum superficial. In spite of this limitation, Roberts' book, through its rich narratives, marks a significant contribution to the anthropology of religion literature.

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