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Book Review Correspondence

To the Editor:

I am grateful to V. Geetha for a careful and generous summary of my book, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present,* in this journal (vol. 74, no. 2 [2015]: 510–11). I must however take issue with some of her concluding comments since they may mislead readers of her review as to the fundamental orientation of my book. She writes that I did "not acknowledge or account for the fact that the civic politics of caste is always and everywhere writ large on the human body" (p. 511). I assume that V. Geetha has not relapsed into the racial anthropology of the nineteenth century, in which "caste" or "race" could be read from the width of the nose or shape of the skull. Taking that for granted, I must assume that she is saying that caste was manifested in socially constructed markers, such as dialect, posture, costume, residence, etc., and that I have not addressed these features of it. But I have in fact described exactly this on pp. 13–15 of my book. I added that where such markers exist, a dominant group exercises the power to require others to conform, and I cite Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to show instances of how this happened (on pp. 84–85, 105 n.82, for example). As regards "the scale of reverence and contempt" of which Ambedkar spoke, he was never under the delusion that feelings were the *basis* of the hierarchy. Even by the 1920s, a half-century of the Satyashodhak Samaj's struggles in Western India had undermined the "reverence." But Ambedkar knew that real political and socioeconomic change was needed for feelings of contempt to be driven from the civic sphere. He declared that the problem of the Depressed Classes would not be solved "unless they get political power in their own hands…."[1] That was because he knew that coercion was the ultimate sanction against Dalit claims. His writings give many examples of force being used against them. V. Geetha's formulation that "the civic politics of caste is always and everywhere writ" (p. 511) avoids the question: whose writ is it that runs in a society? How is it enforced? How is it resisted? It is precisely such questions that my book addressed and tried to answer.

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[1]Cited in Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 256.

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