Abstract

Kunti, a dalit (“untouchable” caste) woman, became the poster child for the nation-wide movement in India against the abolition of the system of indentured labour in 1917. The system, managed by the colonial government in India, had supplied approximately 1.3 million workers from India to plantations overseas in the aftermath of the abolition of Atlantic slavery in the 1830s. This paper explores how a woman at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy in India became the face for an empire-wide change. It will argue that Kunti’s role in the movement illustrates an important dimension of the abolitionist movement: the construction of the “people” (or the *demos*) as the subject of a new kind of politics in late colonial India. The question that animates the presentation is precisely this: what is a people? The question has acquired particular urgency in our times with the resurgence, both globally and in India, of a politics in the name of the people (often referred to pejoratively as “populism”). What might the politics of the people in Indian abolitionism have to offer to our times?

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