Balmurli Natrajan's book is an important addition to the study of the caste system in India. It deals primarily with the status of caste as an independent political entity in an age of modernity, democracy and capitalism and explores issues of identity and inequality in a multicultural context. The book interrogates how the progressive shift from *jati* (caste as fetishised blood) to *samaj* (caste as fetishised culture) reproduces casteism and prepares fertile conditions for a perpetual monopolisation of social and cultural capital by particular castes. In particular, Balmurli’s research engages with artisan-state-capital relations and looks at the process of culturalisation of caste vis-à-vis a “low caste” group of traditional artisans or potters i.e. the *Kumhars* in three districts of Chattisgarh in Central India. The author seems to be dissatisfied with the current slew of dominant scholarly, official and popular discourses about caste that often leave the content of the term unexplored and yet claim to be anti-casteist. This, according to him, rather than being a cause for concern, either gives an impression of caste’s demise or else legitimises and celebrates caste as a form of cultural diversity, presenting it in the garb of multiculturalism and appearing to condone the institution’s continued existence.

The author notes five major tendencies in thinking about caste within the discourse of anti-casteism. According to him, these tendencies “embraced by the ‘new Right’” (p. xv) are “‘liberal and bourgeois’ and have a major negative impact by forcing a critical left anti-casteist discourse to retreat into complacency and diffidence about its own historical necessity.” (p. xiv) Firstly, there is the political trope of *democratised* or *modernised caste* where caste groups are presented as modern interest groups in political competition adding to the vibrancy of civil society in India’s version of democracy. Secondly, the economic trope of *capitalised* or *productive caste* sees caste as valorised social capital that enables caste groups to engage productively and with less “risk” to aid the development of capitalism in an underdeveloped context such as India. Thirdly, the cultural trope of *substantialised* or *ethnicised caste* advances a view of caste groups as communities of identity, seeking recognition for their cultural differences in a multicultural society. This encourages “mixophobia” that focuses our attention on cultural distinctions and reproduces caste via *samaj* or the caste community that is invoked by caste associations for the globalised economy. Fourthly, the *benign-normal caste* speaks of caste as existing in domesticated form as a benign privatised practice signalled by the persistence of caste-endogamous marriages. Finally, the theme of *brutal-abnormal caste* locates
casteism as an abominable aberration or in other words as “caste atrocity”. However, it is the culturalisation or paracommunities of caste that encompasses Sanskritisation and ethnicisation and which also ensures the reproduction and stability of caste in the form of “ethnicities”. It is this culturalisation of caste that is also referred to by the author as differentialist casteism or “caste as culture” that, according to the author, leads to a de-politicised view of caste and which he has decided to elaborate upon in this book.

Balmurli undertakes a cultural analysis of caste through his ethnographic research on the *kumhars* of Durg, Rajnandgaon and Raipur, the three districts of Chattisgarh in Central India, in order to substantiate his notion of the “culturalisation” of caste. His research attempts to show how casteism viewed as a set of monopolistic and oppressive practice operates similar to a strong yearning for maintaining cultural difference along caste lines. During interviews and conversations with the *kumhars*, Balmurli ascertains that there are differences within the *phirke* or *samaj* (or community) affecting commensal and connubial relations among them. These differences accrue on many counts like different regional backgrounds, professional affiliation, gender relations, dietary habits, ways of using the potter’s wheel, lineage, etc. A marked or subtle variation in any of these, results in the formation of hierarchies within the *phirke*, as well as a de-politicisation of caste and its durability.

Balmurli, in his interactions with the members of the caste association or *sabha* of the caste cluster of Jhariya Kumhars, the *Chhatisgarh Kumbhkar Samaj* (henceforth CKS) in these three districts, is informed that the CKS performs the cultural-ideological work of “making *samaj*” or community-making. Samaj signals the many ways in which caste elites seek to steer away from a notion of caste as “blood loyalty” toward a notion of “cultural community.” (p. 90) The CKS focuses on the reconstruction of the caste group as a community, while aiding in the production of Kumhar identity and interests. Besides its avowed aim of “reforms” of Kumhar customs and it’s attempt at producing a “modern” Kumhar, the CKS regulates Kumhar practices, either by making them “standardized” or by banning (*bandh* or *sampat*) some of the ritualistic practices. These include certain marriage rituals and practices like gambling, drinking, raising chicken or pigs and causing a public nuisance; behaviours which the CKS considers “backward.” This regulation is achieved through a discursive construction of a “Kumhar culture” inscribed within a community rule-book, the *niyamawali*. The *niyamawali* is a condensed site of ideological exhortations and prescribed cultural practices for an *adarsh* or “ideal” type Kumhar and contains many subsections. These include “fine regulations”, which acts as what Foucault calls a “semio-technique of punishment” and an ideological form of power (p. 77), as well as “political regulations”, “justice regulations” and “finan-