

## How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?

*Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras.*

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The recent debate involving some sensitive scholars in the pages of *EPW* has drawn attention to the problems that surround the social science discipline in the country. These interventions cover various dimensions of the social science malady. For example, Ramchandra Guha underscores absent liberals in the social sciences, while Partha Chatterjee underlines the colonisation of social science by certain metropolitan centres in the country. These claims, particularly Guha's, have been contested on nuanced grounds by scholars [e.g., Peter de Souza]. The present paper argues that the introduction of the egalitarian principle into the debate seeks to extend and not undermine Guha's, De Souza's and Chatterjee's criticisms of social science practice in India.<sup>1</sup> The principle of egalitarianism, as we shall spell out in greater detail in the following, becomes relevant in the context where the social sciences are divided into inferiorised empirical social sciences and the privileged abstract social sciences. As 50 years' experience shows, social science practice has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into the vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and the privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a more familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras. This pernicious

dichotomy indicates the lack of egalitarian conditions in social science practice in the country.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the justification of the import of the egalitarian principle for critiquing the practice of social science.<sup>2</sup> This would of course include a critique of the cultural hierarchies that operate through certain academic and institutional structures. In the second section an attempt is made to discuss the conditions that seem to adversely affect the growth of reflective capacity within the intellectually deprived groups such as dalits, tribals and even OBCs. This section addresses the question why certain groups lack this reflective capacity as the primary condition for doing social science at a more abstract theoretical level. This would include analysis of factors that have a bearing on reflective capacity. In the third section the argument is built around moral stamina as the necessary condition for doing theory. In the final section, an attempt is made to critique the theoretical claims that have been made on behalf of dalits by non-dalits. In other words, a moral critique of the intellectual representation of dalit issues in social science is attempted.

### I Egalitarian Principle and Social Science Practice

It is argued here that the egalitarian principle provides the moral opportunity and also the capacity to interrogate the

exclusionary ('agrahara') nature of social science practice in the country. Secondly, it also provides normative direction to suggest alternative modes of reorganising the boundaries of social science so as to make them more inclusive. The egalitarian principle is both interrogatory and suggestive for the following reasons. First, the egalitarian principle has a capacity to bring out within the practitioner of social sciences a sense of moral responsibility which would force the latter to offer a justification as to why she/he is talking in a particular social science language, say, of only theory. Thus egalitarianism would interrogate all kinds of intellectual mores for their arbitrariness. For example, the egalitarian principle in social science would not accept the following explanations: 'one has an innate ability to do only theory', 'doing theory is a part of the natural order', 'one is privileged to do only theory because one has been born from the thinking head (import from Manu) of pure bodies'. Third, the egalitarian import therefore basically interrogates the hierarchical division which suggests that some are born with a theoretical spoon in their mouth and the vast majority with the empirical pot around their neck. The egalitarian principle would also interrogate the epistemological imperialism that empowers non-dalits/tribals to launch intellectual expeditions to conquer newer epistemological territories that belong to the dalit/advasi intellectual universe. The egalitarian principle would puncture this modernist (over)confidence by questioning on moral ground the competitive element which renders every field of knowledge as a free zone of investigation that can be taken over by anyone who follows the ground rules, procedures and protocols that are devised by the gatekeepers of social sciences. Thus the egalitarian principle undermines the competitive model of doing social sciences. It would put moral pressure on the modernist to keep off some fields of knowledge that might get better intellectual treatment from others. The interrogatory dimension also has a bearing on the suggestive dimension of the egalitarian principle. The interrogatory character of the principle fundamentally opposes all forms and contexts

of formal exclusion from the field of intellectual inquiry.

The second aspect of egalitarian import into understanding social science practice in India is suggestive for the following reasons. First, it would not approve of arguments like 'one cannot demand equal treatment in all fields of intellectual pursuit'. Similarly, it would not approve of the intellectual position that some fields of inquiry must be left free for the specialists. Secondly, the egalitarian principle would not approve of those rigid kinds of ground rules, procedures and protocols which are restrictive in nature. Further, the egalitarian principle, at least at the theoretical level, offers a promise to those cultural groups whose entry into the intellectual field has been historically prohibited by social forces in India. For example, one of its epistemological variants can render the field of knowledge (both theoretical and practical, as epistemology of social action) communicable across cultural borders with persons of any cultural background in principle capable of utilising it.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, this kind of egalitarianism presupposes a possibility of a common stock of concepts and categories which are equally available for use and even misuse by a person from any caste or social origin. It only suggests that the epistemological field in itself does not establish a copyright of certain cultural groups to control categories. On the contrary, it would question the politics of naming categories or assigning boundaries to intellectual practice in an arbitrary manner. It is in this sense that the egalitarian principle promises to undermine the dominant epistemological practices which are not only exclusionary but also authoritarian in their intention and tend to become a force that seeks to discipline, denigrate and even deny epistemic status to certain concepts and categories that do not fall in line with the intellectual discourse which feeds on cultural hierarchy as a hegemonic necessity. In other words, without the egalitarian principle, hegemonic social science practice might make a lot of negative difference to cultural groups like dalits and adivasis. As an intellectual force this kind of hegemonic practice would lead to caricaturing of the dalit/bahujans as epistemologically dumb, push them into empirical ghettos or confine their intellectual/theoretical ambitions to the dominant methodological modes to a significant degree. Thus the lack of a genuine

egalitarian principle within mainstream social science practice, as we shall argue later, would crush the confidence of the marginalised (dalits/adivasis), lower their self-esteem and humiliate them through epistemological patronage or charity. In this context it is necessary to ask the question whether we have followed the egalitarian principle in the practice of the social sciences. The answer to this question cannot be given in the affirmative. One would give a very mixed answer.

Scholars have failed to address this question squarely. Instead they have lamented the falling standards of social science practice, particularly its theoretical components.<sup>4</sup> Thus it is suggested that there is poverty of political theory in India. While these are valid observations, they do not comment on the authoritative and intimidating character of social science practice in the country. What is ironical is that the lamentation has been about the shrinking social base of political theory in India, not so much about the content and form of theory. The authoritarian character did not attract scholarly attention even in the recent report on social science research in India. This paper argues that social science practice in India is still terribly exclusive, if not brahminical, and undemocratic in character. It is self-serving and self-satisfying as well. It lacks a genuine egalitarian character.

Social science discourse in India is being closely disciplined by self-appointed juries who sit in the apex court and decide what is the correct practice according to the canons. These juries decide what is theory and what is trash. It is a different matter that these canons lack authenticity as they are borrowed from the west unreservedly. The apex court in social science with its full bench in Delhi keeps ruling out subaltern objections as absurd and idiosyncratic at worst and emotional, descriptive-empirical and polemical at best. Among other things, 'bridgehead' methodology is deployed by the juries to silence dissenting voices which are questioning this cultural hierarchy and are threatening to offer alternative ideas of social science.<sup>5</sup> Most dalit/bahujans have developed only stunted ambitions that are historically and socially structured. In other words, dalits have not been able to develop the ambition for ideas and theory because of certain structural and socio-historical reasons that have

provided an unprecedented advantage to the twice-born in this country.

## II Social Context of Intellectual Hierarchies

Any discourse, including the social sciences, emerges within a specific material and social context. In other words, it is the material context with appropriate conditions that shapes reflective abilities among individuals or groups. What was the material context that would have prompted dalits to go for experiment, innovation and imagination? Skilled occupations do facilitate a certain degree of the innovative element among their members. Generation of knowledge takes place basically in the labour process.<sup>6</sup> It is the labour process that creates the concrete possibilities for such epistemological abilities. But reflective abilities develop only in certain kinds of labour processes. For example, if the labour processes are imaginative, innovative and interesting then they provide sufficient scope for the agent to reflect continuously on the tools of production. The progressively transforming labour process unfolds umpteen opportunities for reflective capacities. The intellectual history of the west is proof enough in this regard. In India social groups, particularly the artisan castes, who were forced if not privileged to handle labour processes with innovation could produce innovative knowledge systems. But certain groups like the dalits who did not form part of the organic labour process ultimately failed to develop an intellectual capacity to reflect. By and large they were always kept out of such a social context. Generation after generation, they were pushed into occupations that were completely devoid of any possibility of innovation and imagination and hence were not impregnated with any possibility of knowledge. For example, they were pushed regularly into occupations like scavenging, sanitation and other types of manual labour which had inherent limitations in prompting them to do anything extraordinary in terms of creating knowledge. Until the arrival of modernity in India, particularly with independence, dalits were not included in the differentiated spheres of production that offer the context for imagination. In other words, ghettoisation into inferiorised manual spheres, reflecting the closed character of society, resulted in loss of the confidence that is so important in

developing the theoretical potential in the social sciences.<sup>7</sup> In the Indian context these occupations were more alienating and humiliating and stalled any possibility of imagination or innovation within the dalit communities. Thus before independence, the dalits lacked both the context and the conditions. But after independence labour processes did offer differentiated spheres for the dalits but they did not create sufficient conditions that make reflectivity possible. We shall discuss this point in greater detail later. Suffice it to say that lack of conditions stalled the growth of any reflective faculty among dalits. Dalits who may have had reflective capacities could not develop them. They were denied the conditions that are necessary for the development of reflective faculties. One of the crucial conditions of reflectivity is the availability of freedom. Freedom from the immediate context that can become quite constraining is absolutely necessary for making sense of the immediate at an abstract general level. It is necessary in order to make connections through the vast number of details that are embedded into the immediate.

Freedom is also necessary to seek detachment from the immediate for illumination at the general level. If one does not enjoy that freedom and is completely trapped in the ceaseless struggle for survival, one is completely handicapped in developing any reflectivity. Ultimately it is those with economic security who can pursue philosophy and theory in the formal sense of the terms. The rest are forced to do only the empirical side of social science. Ambedkar himself had realised the need for such freedom and took time off to detach himself from the immediate 'chawl' life in Bombay and went to different places of high learning abroad. But he was not as fortunate as others to enjoy steady support from the intellectual circles that existed during his time. His reflectivity flourished almost like Ekalavya's. What are necessary are feedback from liberal interlocutors, support from institutions with strong traditions of solid theoretical research and financial support that would help the scholar to pursue the academic agenda at a more abstract level and on more meaningful and dignified terms. Scholarship programmes are not enough to provide material security for dalits for two reasons. First, they are so meagre and, second, they do not guarantee the jobs that are so crucial for any reflectivity. Along with these conditions, the resources of the

community with historically accumulated intellectual resources assure a congenial cultural context, making one's choice of theoretical research look natural. Members of the twice-born communities are fortunate to enjoy these conditions both in India and abroad. The dalits lack these community resources. The Ford Foundation deserves credit for coming forward to create some enabling conditions for dalit reflectivity.

### III Hierarchical Past Survives in the Cultural Present

There are historical reasons that gave a structural advantage to the top of the twice born (TTB) in consolidating its privileged position in doing theory. Historically accumulated cultural inequalities seem to have reinforced dalit epistemological closure. This in effect left the realm of reflectivity entirely free for the TTB. Such closure has its sanction in Manu's thinking. The shudras are born from the leg and hence are deficient in terms of the capacity to think. Manu's code denied dalits and women access to formal education, which is necessary to achieve the capacity to speak in an abstract universal language. This division with religious sanction behind it was conveniently naturalised within folk consciousness, as is evident in the Marathi ditty:

*Brahmanchy ghari lihina* (at the brahmin's you write and learn)

*Kunbay ghari dana* (at the tiller's you thrash)

*Mahara ghari gana* (at the dalit's you sing)<sup>8</sup>

The privileged location of the TTB was further legitimised through the writing of both Indian and foreign scholars, Prominent among them are P V Kane who argued that brahmins were the founders of Indian philosophy.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Louis Dumont also mentions (with reservations) that brahmins as the renouncers were the creators of value and of different branches of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> It has been also argued by some scholars that brahmins have always pursued theoretical/pure reason with the help of intricate arguments, while Buddha was always following practical reason in order to tackle practical problems like maintaining peace in society. However, people like Bhandarkar and Phule, Ambedkar and Sharad Patil may not accept this claim and would argue that the Buddhist philosophical tradition is the

thinking tradition based on the dialogical mode which was much more democratic than the brahminical mode. Members of the TTB have consolidated cumulative advantage over dalit/bahujans for the following reasons. First, the TTB were fortunate to receive modern education from the imperialists. Many of them did not mind migrating to western countries even though that went against the spirit of their religion. They were also the recipients of different kinds of fellowships that were showered on them by both several princely states and the colonial state. Even after independence they received the attention and appreciation of the rulers. For example, a member of the TTB served as adviser to the Maratha chief minister in Maharashtra. Many prominent brahmins led intellectual-cultural bodies in the state. They have been the major beneficiaries of intellectual opportunities that are available in India and abroad. They do not mind migrating abroad, leaving the dalit/bahujan to take over the empire of empirical research. Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard and several other universities abroad and privileged institutions and premier universities at home are monopolised by the TTB. The doors of certain premier institutions in the country like NMML in Delhi, and Institute of Advance Studies in Shimla were completely closed to the dalits. It is only in recent years that dalits are accommodated in these institutions, of course at the lower levels of the fellowship programmes. As far as Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford are concerned, it will take ages for the dalits to enter these educational institutions which are known for their theoretical orientation. There is no doubt that these institutes, including the Indian ones mentioned above, have promoted quality research. But these institutions' obsession with modernity undermined the egalitarian principle which, as seen earlier, requires equal access to intellectual resources. Many urban-based scholars hold fellowships simultaneously at different places in India and abroad, seriously violating the Rawlsian justice principle that would not allow such monopoly that leads to the exclusion of a number of persons qualified for these positions. In any case dalits are the latecomers to such opportunities. They were excluded from the benefits as they could not pass the modernist test. When they are ready to compete for entry, the rules of entry have been changed from the modern to the traditional and the parochial at the

NMML and more prominently at the Shimla institute.

Dalits are thus denied the intellectual conditions that are necessary for developing more reflective capacities. It is frustrating, if not tragic, for dalits to languish in raw empiricism. In the absence of such opportunities, the only alternative that is available to dalits, adivasis and OBCs is to approach central bodies like the UGC and the ICSSR for help. It would be interesting to know how many tribals and dalits have been the beneficiaries of various national and international fellowship programmes that are offered by these bodies. In the absence of reliable evidence, one can hazard a guess and say that dalits and tribals are by and large out of the fellowship programmes. One of the primary reasons that can explain this exclusion from the opportunity structure is that there is active discouragement at both ends of the opportunity structure. Dalits find the UGC and ICSSR functioning more bureaucratic and hence intimidating and actively discouraging. We have several examples that show that dalit students were forced to give up more attractive UGC fellowships in favour of less attractive ICSSR ones.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, there is a constant flow of opportunities to the TTB. The Shudras have been, as remarked earlier, left with the earthen pot full of empirical details that are thoroughly despised by the TTB as inferior. The pot overflows in seminars and in magazines and government offices as and when it is required to overflow. (The earthen pot imagery has a grim history. During Peshwa rule in Pune the TTB forced dalits to hang earthen pots around their necks so that they could spit in it so as to avoid pollution.)

Apart from the monopolisation of institutions to maintain the historical lead in epistemological status, the TTB deployed different strategies like canonising the discourse with the help of well-defined ground rules and procedures and protocols and compartmentalisation of institutions around chosen themes. For example, the high priest in theory seeks to canonise the social science discourse around ground rules that are often inhibiting, protocols that are discouraging, language that is definitely frightening and procedures that cause anxiety among those who want to move away from the empirical to the theoretical. This kind of TTB professionalism strikes fear among the dalits/bahujans who then do not dare to enter the theoretical 'agrahara'. The failure to elevate

the discourse to higher levels of complexity and formulation and approximation of experience results in displeasure displayed by these gatekeepers of social science against the dalits, tribals and OBCs.

The creation of language becomes another effective weapon to restrict the entry of dalits into academic circles which are based on a particular syntax, mostly Anglo-American. Some of the more nasty guards of these circles would point out the grammatical mistakes of the dalits publicly, not just for crushing the intellectual confidence of the dalits through humiliation but also for hiding behind the language game. This restricted exchange ultimately leads to the creation of mutual admiration societies (Delhi is full of such societies). Such societies certainly achieve a certain kind of height but hardly any depth in the social sciences. Due to their shared habitus<sup>12</sup> they lack imagination to invent new conceptual instruments. Thus they keep producing more of the same. We will deal with this a little later. Such societies cause the epistemological isolation to the dalits. The strict observance of a language code, protocols, body language and ground rules effectively converts seminar halls into a hostile structure that very often inflict humiliation on the dalits who then feel nervous or intimidated to enter such structures. Ultimately, dalits are denied access to knowledge and its articulation. They are also denied the critical faculty to interrogate the dominant mode of thinking. For example, the dalit may have a genuinely insightful point that might challenge the big boss in social science, but the moment the dalit questions the premise of the big boss, immediately loud laughter full of crushing derision is collectively produced in such gatherings. Does not this kind of institutionalised exclusion show the dent in social science confidence? Let us look at another example, one that involves the humiliating exclusion of dalits from the established discourse in social science. If some dalits were speaking about Gramsci, suddenly the champions of Gramsci would raise objection. '*Ajkal koi bhi aira gaira nathu khaira Gramschi ke bare me bol raha hai*. Poor Gramsci must be turning in his grave'.<sup>13</sup> In fact Gramsci would rest in peace in his grave seeing his thought being resurrected by the right kind of subaltern who is ridiculed as *aira gaira* by the defenders of Gramsci. The so-called defenders of Gramsci are actually offending Gramsci and holding social science hostage to their intellectual fanaticism.

However, the high priests of theory do not mind dalits doing empirical studies. Some of them base their theoretical premises on data collected by dalits. Social science practice therefore lacks moral standing. Theory does not attract the dalit also because the latter lack internal moral reasoning based on the notion of sacrifice and endurance. Doing theory is a moral responsibility based on sacrifice that the dalit have to make in terms of pursuing spiritual rather than temporal power. It requires that one be not moved by immediate success or solution or glamour or charm. Let us see how this affects the doing capacity of reflectivity.

#### IV Moral Conditions of Reflective Capacities

Doing theory demands enduring moral stamina for successfully resisting the temptation for temporal gains that have the capacity to de-motivate a person from pursuing the spiritual. Doing serious theory also demands that one should overcome the sense of anxiety that involves an element of compulsion to perform. Performance, whether on the stage or in seminar rooms, is aimed at getting immediate recognition from the audience. In such performances what become important is body language, speech and sound and speed of words and not so much the careful arrangement of the content. Doing theory requires discipline, patience and endurance that go into making a theoretical statement that is made carefully and not superficially or polemically. Doing theory does not therefore bring you immediate recognition. Ambedkar's sociological, economic and jurisprudence work took a long time and Rawls spent 20 years on his theory of justice. Against this, the temporal fetches immediate here and now recognition.

Most dalits are vulnerable to the attraction of temporal power that does not flow from theoretical practice but from what are considered to be the more glamorous and easy spheres of mobility. This might include formal politics and networking with institutions that demand that intellectuals always be ready with data. When ambitions for the temporal grow out of proportion to the theoretical consciousness, then theoretical concerns get completely driven out from the cognitive map of the dalits. Practical reason takes precedence over theoretical reason. Along with the state,

dalit politicians from both the NGO sector and formal politics promote such practical reasons because in the case of the former the empirical details come in handy to impress donor agencies, while in the case of latter the data help in constructing the self-serving rhetoric that serves very well the everyday forms of dalit petty politics. Like the figures of atrocities are converted into such rhetoric and later are parroted by dalits in national and international forums. One can mix some emotion to make the details more interesting.

In such an intellectual atmosphere, promoting theory requires transcending emotions to rationality and is considered a big danger and anybody offering theory looks like a stranger to this brand of dalits who have a stake in maintaining the collective theoretical inability. The logic of the temporal dominates the academic agenda of the dalits. Thus many of them go in for soft options rather than tough courses like philosophy and theory that do not promise temporal power. It is this professionalisation of dalit interest that makes them more individualistic in their attitude and is responsible for their casualness if not callousness towards doing theory. Dalits try to compensate for theoretical deficiency by doing brilliant poetry. It is this sense of compensation that has led to the creation of brilliant poetry in Maharashtra from this class. In this regards it is really interesting to note what a dalit poet has to say about intellectual relations reversing the traditional positions of the dalits and the TTB. The poet says,

When we were tearing you were tearing us  
Now we tear you while you tear.<sup>14</sup>

This particular ditty suggests that while the dalits were skinning dead cattle the TTB were tearing off the personality of the former through humiliation and intellectual exclusion. Now the TTB skin hides, maybe in sophisticated tanneries, and the dalits are deploying knowledge to tear the TTB through social auditing and intellectual intervention at various levels.

But poetry cannot be a substitute for theory. Most poetry, including dalit poetry, is based on aesthetics and metaphors and this no doubt makes things interesting. It is true that dalits have developed a good sense of aesthetics but it by definition belongs to the particular, though it is based on rich experience and therefore has the potential to become the guiding standard for the universal. Besides, it also generates inwardness and

tends to keep some things hidden from the public imagination. But poetry has no conceptual capacity to universalise the particular and particularise the universal. It does not have that dialectical power. By contrast, theory demands clarity of concept and principles and the open examination of one's own action to see whether it is justified. Poetry helps the dalit in making connections through metaphors, but not through concepts. It is theory that is supposed to do that. It makes connections through concepts and also helps in illuminating the meaning that is embedded in complex reality. However, Gadamer would ask the question "is it right to reserve the concept of truth for conceptual knowledge? Must we not also admit that the work of art possesses truth?" This is a serious question.

However it is not entirely true that dalits turn towards either poetry or empirical research out of compulsion. On closer observation it is found that they also make a very conscious choice for doing empirical research for the following reasons. They would argue that their lived experience is rich enough and can stand on its own authentic terms so that it does not require any theoretical representation. Experience for them is a sufficient condition for organising their thought and action and for ignition of everyday experience into resistance. Second, dalits argue that since they have privileged access to reality they can capture it with a full view without any theoretical representation. This claim is obviously based on ontological blindness. The assumption in such a claim is that non-dalits have an innate inability to comprehend dalit reality because of their different social location. Thus though dalits do not generate any theory, their research can always contain some valuable theoretical insights, their experience alone can illuminate aspects of human relations. Third, in defence of empiricism some of the dalits still argue that doing theory is undesirable because it makes a person intellectually arrogant, egoistic and socially alienated if not irrelevant. In this regard it is interesting to note that the critique of abstract thinking goes back to the 14th century in Maharashtra. The forerunner of the non-brahmin tradition, Sant Tukaram, criticises this intellectual tradition for its egoistic implication in the following 'abhanga' (form of folk or devotional poetry):

It is all to the good! O God! That you made me kunbi

Otherwise I would have been done to death through Brahminical cant and hypocrisy. As a Brahmin. I would have floated full of arrogance and ego And would have been led to the lowest of the lowest Naraka (hell).<sup>15</sup>

This particular reaction of Tukaram is too self-explanatory to require any further elaboration.

These are some of the reasons that are advanced by the dalits to defend their empiricism. The question that still remains to be answered is should the dalits, tribals and the OBCs be forever lost in their unique experience? Should they not look at theory as a moral responsibility to accord respectability to their experience that otherwise is caricatured by both the snobbish theorist and politicians from TTB? Should they not move from the immediate to the abstract and restore subjectivity? Should they not stop making guest appearances in somebody else's formulations and restore to themselves the agency to reflect organically on their own experience? Thus doing theory becomes a social necessity for the dalits.

## V Dalits Need Theory as a Social Necessity

It is argued here that moving away from the empirical mode to the theoretical one has become a social necessity for dalits, tribals and OBCs. It has become a social necessity for the following reasons. First, they need theory as a social necessity to confront the reverse orientalism that treats dalits, tribals and OBCs as the inferior empirical self and the TTB as the superior theoretical self. The descriptive mode is often deployed by the TTB in order to wrap insult and derision that is inflicted on the dalits. Thus description of the body language of the dalits and the OBCs becomes an erotic need for the cultural and political satisfaction of the TTB. It is due to this reason that the TTB did not find it necessary to offer theoretical treatment to the theatrical language of the OBC chief minister from Bihar or the dalit CM from UP. The theory of theatrical language offers a unique opportunity for dalit/bahujan scholars to fight this derisive description of cultural symbols. It is in this sense that doing theory becomes a social necessity in order to fight reverse orientalism. This should become a social necessity in order to become the subject of their own thinking rather than becoming the object of

somebody else's thinking. To put it more crudely, the asymmetrical relationship that characterises reverse orientalism seeks to caricature dalits, tribals and OBCs as amusing objects. Dalits have been portrayed as amusing objects in several studies that were initiated by UGC and ICSSR on dalits and tribals and now women through separate study centres. These studies of dalit and tribal communities seek to museumise the latter as amusing objects. Anthropology and to some extent sociology have taken the lead in caricaturing dalits and adivasis. Huge funds are provided by ICSSR and UGC for promoting this. This kind of social science practice raises the issue whether social science in India is not reproducing the same tormenting forms of orientalism against which it had fought in the first instance? In what way are the practitioners of social sciences morally superior to the orientalists?

In view of the complete lack of theoretical intervention from dalit/bahujan scholars, some non-dalits messiahs have offered to represent dalit/bahujans theoretically. Their claim to fight this reverse orientalism on behalf of dalits looks attractive. It is argued by the TTB that they need to in-

tervene in the dalit situation at the theoretical level only to restore voice and visibility to dalits and ultimately advance the dalit epistemological cause. But this also ends up producing reverse orientalism in a very subtle way. The claim to offer epistemological empowerment to dalits involves a charity element which by definition is condescending. This epistemological charity has several implications for dalits. First, speaking for the dalits or anybody constitutes a jajmani relationship, structurally involving the patron and the client. In the present case, the 'muknayak' becomes the patron and the 'dumb' becomes the client to define the patron. The patron, in a very ironical sense, tends to reproduce the brahminical mechanism of first controlling knowledge resources and then pouring them into the empty cupped palms of dalits. It happens in the same humiliating way – the TTB still pour water into the hands of the thirsty dalits. This relationship makes the 'muknayak' intellectually indispensable and the dumb almost crawl before such messiahs for rhetorical appreciation and designated empowerment rather than real theoretical elevation. We come across umpteen num-

ber of cases of such designated empowerment when dalits publicly bask in the intellectual glory of their 'muknayaks'. This structured relationship creates legitimacy for the patrons' existence in both the dalit soul and dalit society. As a result the patron does not find it necessary to exit from the epistemological fields that are specific to the dalit and bahujan situation.

This jajmani relationship also has a third implication for the dalits. This representation tends to undervalue or underplay the discursive capacity of such groups who in favourable hermeneutic conditions can develop an epistemic stamina. But the 'muknayaks' make a very smart move, prompting the dumb to throw up more interesting details so that the former can use these details for either grand formulation in a liberal mode or its post-modernist deconstruction. This by implication contains the dalits to the empirical and pushes them into the frozen essentialist trap. This postmodernist construction of dalits remains blind to the hegemonic politics that would feel happy to celebrate such a construction as it replaces the need to make connections between several local experiences that belong to the same

logical class of collective suffering and exploitation.

Finally, this epistemological enthusiasm of the non-dalits also suffers from another and rather serious malady. This intellectual representation remains epistemologically posterior. That is to say, the discovery of the dalit epistemological standpoint fails to explain who has arrived – whether the object (dalits) or the subject ('muknays'). This question becomes absolutely important because such claims have been sustained on the basis of throwing up completely new conceptual landscapes from the dalit experience. This inability to either recover or throw up an alternative concept happens because these scholars choose to theorise dalit experience standing outside the dalit experience. This representation thus remains epistemologically posterior. In view of this posterior epistemology, its standpoint remains a mere assertion which feeds on the critique of the mainstream marxist or feminist framework. This externality hardly enables the dalits to secure theoretical advance for their revolutionary understanding and politics. To put it more crudely, such epistemological enthusiasms may turn dalit epistemology into an exegetical horizon of difference that may radically undermine any possibility of the fusion of epistemologies that are egalitarian in nature. It is in this sense that the patronising or posterior epistemology fails to belong to the realm of social necessity. It comes up as a choice to transcend the personal intellectual frustration of those middle class ex-radicals for whom the old frameworks have ceased to be charming options.

It is true that the old liberal or marxist discourses tried to tighten the conceptual boundaries of social sciences in India, almost pushing the social science discipline into a state of suffocation. But these discourses did compete with one another, like the caste discourse vs class discourse for deciding protocols, procedure and ground rules for the social sciences. In the process these discourse took over the theoretical task of discovering concepts and categories for dalits, adivasis and OBCs and women. For example, the marxist discourse introduced concepts like class, exploitation, proletariat, labour and alienation for everybody including dalits. In the liberal discourse caste, nationalism, citizenship and rights and multiculturalism are the potent categories for everybody. This by implication suggests the dalit failure of historical imagination to do theory. Although such rendering does pose a huge

theoretical challenge to provide alternative sets of categories, this is a challenge that is worth taking. Dalit theory in order to become a social necessity has to be vertically critical of the limitations of marxist and liberal methods and horizontally be sensitive towards those dalit/bahujan critical impulses which may be still present in the methods as mentioned above. Thus it would be unfair to dispense with everything from marxism or liberalism for their epistemological deficiencies. In fact doing theory is also an inner necessity for the dalits.

## VI Dalits Need Theory as Inner Necessity

There seem to be different factors that become the preconditions for the realisation of this inner necessity. These are the moral conditions. For dalits to realise doing theory as an inner moral necessity, they must make a conscious moral choice to use their sense of freedom for understanding and reflecting on the dalit experience. They should treat this freedom to walk out from the dalit experience as the initial condition for achieving theoretical heights in their reflections. They may go to Oxford and Cambridge for achieving height to their experience, they should also make a moral choice to walk back into the dalit experience in order to accord depth to their reflections. The becomes an essential condition for doing theory. Thus the modernist theorist who is driven by individualised intellectual triumphalism of conquering newer epistemological territories becomes a morally undesirable option for the dalits. This kind of epistemological imperialism is one-sided as it shows commitment to scholarship and not to the cause. For dalits theory comes as a double commitment both to scholarship and also to the social cause. As a part of this moral commitment the dalits should avoid walking into pure empiricism or experientialism which come as alternatives in the competitive forms of tokenism in the realms of both academics and politics. Thus for dalits theory should not begin and end with Oxford or Cambridge or the Shimla institute or the NMML. Their theory should not be caught in the self-serving professionalism and stupefaction adopted by the TTB in the country. Dalits should test the tenacity of their theory not with the certification of juries of social sciences, howsoever attractive that may be, but on the basis of

how much influence these theoretical formulations enjoy in the popular mentality.

It is a Gramscian project that demands impeccable commitment on the part of the theorist to translate technical content into an ordinary idiom and common speech so that it becomes accessible to the common people and does not remain confined to seminar rooms only. In fact it should be practised from the Red fort in Delhi. That would, by the way, resignify the fort by dispelling the deceitful rhetoric of interested parties ritually on every 15th of August. Dalits are expected to take the initiative in giving moral lead to doing theory in the country. This orientation would thus remove the cultural hierarchies that tend to divide social science practice into theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras. Ultimately social science in India would fulfill the fondest hopes by expanding the social base of its conceptual landscape. **EW**

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## Notes

[This paper is the revised version of an inaugural lecture that was delivered on the March 15, 2002 at the University of Delhi. I thank the committee for permitting me to publish the lecture in *EPW*.]

- 1 Ramchandra Guha, 'Absent Liberals: Politics and Intellectual Life in India', *EPW*, December, 15, 2001; Peter de Souza, 'Intellectuals and Their Domain', *EPW*, March 2, 2002; Partha Chatterjee, 'Institutional Context of Social Science Research in South Asia', *EPW*, August 31, 2002.
- 2 Isaiah Berlin, *Concept and Categories*, edited by Henry Hardy, Hogarth Press, London, 1978, pp 87 and 102.
- 3 Dhruv Raina, 'The Present in the Past' in Romila Thapar (ed), *India: New Millennium*, Penguin, Delhi, 2000, p 25.
- 4 Many political theorists share this lamentation. More particularly, Bhiku Parekh has written about the poverty of political theory in India.
- 5 This is the forum called Dalit Intellectuals' Collective based in Mumbai.
- 6 Sharad Patil, *Satyashodhak Marxwadi* (Marathi), Vol 5, July 1982, p 17.
- 7 Ernest Gellnar, 'Relativism and Universalism' in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism*, Basil Blackwell, London, p 182.
- 8 This saying is very common in Maharashtra's cultural life.
- 9 Sharad Patil, op cit.
- 10 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Oxford, 1980, p 275.
- 11 This is the story of a dalit who is doing PhD in social work in Chennai.
- 12 This is a cue from Bourdieu.
- 13 This is from a collection of poems by P I Sonkamble from Aurangabad in Maharashtra.
- 14 H G Gadamar, *Truth and Method*, Sage Books, London, 1987, p 39.
- 15 Sadanand More, *Collection of Writings of Tukaram*, Philosophy Department, Pune University.