

Dalit Experience and Theory

Do those with no lived in experience have the right to theorise? Analysing the elements that constitute lived in experience, this essay brings out the views of Gopal Guru and Habermas – two opposite approaches to the relation between theory and experience.

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Some years ago, Gopal Guru (2002) made some important observations about the nature of social sciences in India. The most important one, in my view, is the one about the right to theorise – in Guru's terms, a moral right that is needed before theorising is possible. This is an issue that is not limited to Guru's concern about the "theoretical exploitation" of dalits. Rather this is an issue that has occurred in almost all areas of discourse, especially in recent times. Perhaps reflecting the consumer age, individuals and communities now want copyright and patent over theories about themselves or their communities. The most common way of legitimising this demand for copyright or for a moral right to theorise is by taking recourse to the notion of lived experience, as indeed Guru does. But what is lived experience? What are the elements that constitute lived experience? And most important for this copyright view of theory making, what is the relation between lived experience and theories about this experience?

Who Has the Right to Theorise?

In recent times, the notions of authority and authenticity have become dominant to the concerns of theorising. Guru's argument that the lived experience of dalits constitutes the only valid and authentic experience, and moreover theorising this experience should be limited only to the dalits is yet another voice in this trend.

The question that is at the foundation of many of these views is basically this: who really has the right to theorise in social sciences? This is a problem that has affected many of us, both in academics and outside. Consider the theorisation of Indian culture – its many aspects such as

religion, society, psyche, films, music and so on. While there are some eminent theorists based in India, there are more who are outside India. The theories about the Indian experience – as experience by those who live in India now – are largely derived from "outsiders", who, at the most, may visit India during breaks in their universities and institutes. Because of their position, both as competent thinkers and as being part of cultures which are connected with publishing, much of what is written about India and accepted by the world arise from such outsiders, whether they be of Indian origin or not. Unfortunately, the idea of "participant observation" legitimises fieldwork by outsiders who can sample the Indian experience for a few weeks in order to theorise about its many components. This can, at times, be frustrating. As much as it is frustrating for Guru when he sees non-dalits taking over the dalit experience in order to theorise about it. But being frustrated is not enough. What is important is to find arguments that can help us establish the validity or otherwise of this position.

An important subtext in Guru's article is the anger, sometimes justifiable, about non-dalits theorising dalit experience. This anger is common to many if not all communities which exhibit a strong dislike to being objects of study by those who do not belong to that community. We routinely hear this when non-Indians make observations about Indian society, culture or its people. We routinely hear this from scientists when non-scientists write about science, especially on the problematical issues of science. Is this anger towards the outsider justifiable? Or can an outsider be in a position to make meaningful comments about a community s/he does not belong to? And who really is the outsider?

Almost every activity has generated this problem. Artists have questioned critics of art along the same line: if you are not an artist yourself what gives you the competence – and the right – to talk about a piece of art? Scientists and technocrats have often responded to writings about science or technology in exactly similar fashion. In fact, it has become fashionable for scientists now to be vocal in their attack on philosophers or sociologists of science. The Nobel prize winner Weinberg says philosophy of science is a gloss on science; Hawking says something similar and a few years back Sokal and Bricmont (1998) launched a frontal attack on post-modernists for "abusing" scientific terms. Technocrats often believe that philosophers and sociologists of technology are actually anti-technological. But the point is that while it is useful for philosophers of science to understand science, it is also evident that in many cases philosophy of science draws upon philosophy more than science. It uses philosophy to reflect on the practice and discourse of science. As philosophy, it is indeed an outsider to science. Yet, its observations on science are very profound and many times illuminate the nature of science far better than the practice of science does.

Similar concerns are true of religious communities, where at various times the community members react to any writing about either their religion or community by saying that unless one believes (or shares a lived experience of that particular religious belief) she has no right to criticise that experience. Consider another illustrative example: vernacular language writers, especially after Indian English writing became newsworthy, have taken the position that Indian writers who write in English cannot claim to speak for the Indian society since a large number of Indians are not English speakers. Here language and narratives written in that language are inauthentic since lived experience is equated to "lived language".

However, there are also many human activities in which a theorist cannot – in principle – have lived experience. Should political theory be written only by politicians? History, for instance, cannot live up to this demand for, according to this, unless a person has had lived experience

of an historical event, any written history about that event is inauthentic. We cannot theorise about religious fundamentalism unless we are part of fundamentalist organisations. And so on. When we talk about empathy with a suffering person we are able to project something of the other's experience into ourselves although we do not in any sense have a lived experience of the suffering of the other. When we claim that untouchability is a crime, we do not have to have been an untouchable. When we ask for equality of citizens, including women, we do not have to be a woman or dalit to say that. That is, there are experiences which allow us to theorise based on other principles, for example, principles of human freedom and liberty.

But there is a crucial difference in all these claims for authenticity and Guru's arguments. In many of these cases the recourse to authenticity and lived experience comes primarily when something unfavourable is written about the community or experience. When an outsider writes what the community perceives as good, the outsider is not only accepted but also valorised. For example, the scientists have rarely reacted to outsiders writing about the greatness of science or when these writers have helped in creating a legendary status to some scientists. It is largely when science comes under criticism that scientists attack non-scientists writing on science as not having any authentic experience or understanding of science. So also the case with writing on Indian culture, religion and society. When outsiders write about contemporary or ancient India in a flattering manner the outsider status is conveniently forgotten or is sometimes referred to show how even outsiders can recognise the greatness of these societies. But the moment there is some form of criticism the outsider status is invoked to debunk the criticism. Most often, the problem of the outsider status is situated within the absence of a lived experience.

At the outset, it may seem that Guru is doing the same thing when he claims that non-dalits should not theorise about dalits. That is not really the case. Guru does not take the position that it is impossible for theorists to write about a community they do not belong to. As he rightly notes, that would involve his inability to theorise about non-dalits. For Guru, theory has a particular role to play and that role has to be based on experience and universal

reason. As he suggests, the route is from the initial to the essential.¹ But what is important is that this is a position he takes prior to any value attached to what non-dalits write about dalit experience. That is, he is not interested if the writing of the non-dalits is complimentary or derogatory about dalits. It is just that non-dalits have no moral right to theorise about dalits. This is a much more stronger view than that discussed earlier and needs a critical analysis to see if it is tenable. The basic difference in the other view is that it reacts to epistemological claims about something, basically choosing to call somebody an outsider based on a judgment on what the outsider writes whereas Guru's position is ethical and normative, and has no place for the theoretical outsider. To understand the complexity in these claims, we need to look more carefully at the notion of lived experience.

Dialectic of Choice and Necessity

Lived experience is a catchy term popular among phenomenologists. In the debate about experience and theory the notion of lived experience also plays an important role, as it indeed does for Guru's arguments. But what exactly is the nature of lived experience? What makes lived experience unique only to the community or individual who lives it?

Experience consists of many elements – the subject who experiences, the structure and content of the experience itself. The impetus to experience may be internal or external to the subject. Having the experience of burning my hand, for example, has an external event that causes a particular experience in me. But one may also have entirely internal experiences such as feeling hunger, joy or angst.

What does the word "lived" add to "experience"? Experience is often confused with the cause of the experience. This allows us to objectify the notion of experience and transport it everywhere to generate similar experiences, leading us to believe that there is a materiality to the whole complex of experience. This materiality, seen as the cause, is taken to be independent of the experiencer. Consider this illustrative example. There are now restaurants whose theme is rural ambience. This experience, which is now accessible to a customer of such a restaurant, is presumed to be similar to the experience

of a rural person. The kind of food, the earthiness of the surroundings, lack of what is seen as urban sophistication, etc, are supposed to re-create the experience of eating in rural places. Let us say I go to such a place and eat ragi balls, a staple rural food in Karnataka. What is it that I am experiencing? What is it that I am supposed to experience? And what is the relation between this experience and the authentic experience of a rural person who eats ragi balls?

The first point to note is that a naïve view of experience is based on the belief that an experience can be replicated – not the experience of the subject but the materiality that constitutes the experience, that which is thought to be disassociated from the total experience. Thus, in principle, we usually believe that we can simulate all and any experience. The possibility of simulating all and any experience is based on the belief that there is no necessary connection between the experiencer and the experience. For example, I do not have to travel to the moon but I can, if I train to be an astronaut, get the experience of walking on the moon in gravitationless chambers. Almost any experience can be duplicated in some sense. Any experience that is commodifiable can be replicated. What this view of experience does is to remove the subject as an essential component of experience. All experience is similar to the experience of funfairs and anybody who pays can participate in the experience. Thus what is experienced is seen to be independent of the subject who experiences. Such a view of experience influences our common beliefs about the nature of the experience. But can experience really be materialised, commodified and transferred without taking the subject of experience into account?

Now we can understand the importance of the idea of lived experience. The most useful way to thematise lived experience is to recognise that there is no element of choice or freedom associated with it. In general, we find ourselves placed in a situation and we have to live with what we are given. When a rich man partakes the experience of the food of the poor, he has a choice and he is asserting that choice. This also implies that he has a choice of not participating in that experience. It is the subject's will that decides on whether a particular experience is experienced or not. Experience of this kind, often referred to as vicarious

experience, always comes with three important characteristics: one, the freedom to be a part of an experience; two, the freedom to leave any time if the experience is not satisfactory; and three, if necessary, to modify the experience to suit one's needs.

Lived experience exhibits, in general, none of these three characteristics. Lived experience is not just about living any experience in the sense that we participate in an experience. If lived experience has to play an ethical and epistemological role, if it has to be the adjudicator of some notion of authenticity, then lived experience should be used only for those experiences which are seen as necessary, experiences over which the subject has no choice whether to experience it or not. If the experience is unpleasant there is no choice that allows the subject to leave or even modify the experience. The experienter comes to the experience not as a subject who has some control over that experience but as one who will have to live with that experience. (This necessary experience may have some choice in its genesis – that is, I may choose to put myself in a situation over which I have no control.) All this makes lived experience qualitatively different from mere experience. Consider this example. I am bouncing around in a gravitationless room, simulating the experience of walking on the moon, and suddenly the oxygen runs out. As long as I have control over the experience, there is really no serious problem because I can get out of the simulated experience. I can go as close to the experience of dying and that is an experience that can be savoured because I know that at the end of it I can get out of the situation. Contrast this with the (lived) experience of the person who is on the moon and who doesn't have an escape valve. The panic engendered in this person, the will to survive, the understanding that is generated in being in such a situation are indeed quite different from simulated experiences where there is always a choice to get out or modify the experience to suit our needs. In the example of the urban restaurant with a rural theme, suppose I go to eat ragi balls and I find that I do not like the taste. If so, I eat something else or go to some other restaurant. If the Ferris wheel is making me sick, I just get off it. But lived experience offers no such easy choice: if living your experience makes you feel sick, then too bad!

What this means is that the structure of lived experience is one that acknowledges the essential unbreakable relation between the subject who experiences and the context and content of experience. This unbreakable relation is the relation of necessity and creates the absence of choice. Thus, while experience can be duplicated and simulated, lived experience cannot be opened out for experience by any subject.

To take Guru's arguments seriously, we have to understand lived experience in this manner. For his arguments to hold, lived experience should be seen as the experience of being a subject and not an experience by a subject or about a subject. That is, the first prerequisite for an experience to be considered as lived experience is that there is an experience of what it means to be the subject who experiences. This automatically places an element of no choice – there is indeed no choice in whether I want to be the subject of experience, although I may have choice about particular aspects of what I experience. You cannot have a dalit experience unless you are a dalit yourself or at least experience what it means to be a dalit subject with no choice to be otherwise. Thus, participant observation would also not constitute lived experience as long as the observer, who may otherwise live in and like the community, has a choice to leave when the going gets tough or when the observer decides to leave. Suppose we say that to be a dalit subject is to be oppressed with no choice of escaping this oppression. Then the lived experience of dalits is not about sharing their lifestyles, living with them and being like them, but being them in the sense that you cannot be anything else. Or, in other words – to be a dalit is not to share all that they have but to share that what they cannot have. Lived experience is not about what there is but is about what there is not. *Lived experience is not about freedom of experience but about the lack of freedom in an experience.*

It is this sense of lived experience that allows us to understand why lived experience is in fact factored into an essential ethical principle that expects the experienter to become the subject of experience. But Guru goes a step further. He wants lived experience to justify an ethical principle to do theory. That means that it is not enough to use lived experience as a validation but it is asked to do more, to become the ground for social

theory. Can it live up to what Guru demands of it?

Guru's notion of lived experience as essentially related to theory is only one part of the theoretical element of an experience. This is the experience of being a subject and not experience about the subject. Being a subject is one part of the experience, an essential part no doubt but it does not encompass the complete experience. If one follows Guru's prescriptions, then we will have to acknowledge the possibility of expanding what we define as theory and knowledge. If lived experience is to be final validation for theory then we will have to look at autobiographies as epistemologically legitimate in a fundamental sense. Interestingly, this is a view that has been expounded in the pages of *EPW* some years ago by M N Srinivas (1996). He believed that autobiography could be a legitimate tool to understand societies. His argument is based on the idea of learning to trust subjective experience and subjective description as being true to the subject who has experienced it or who speaks it. We can extend this argument further, as I had indeed done, to claim that fiction based on lived experiences should actually be seen as a legitimate mode of theorising [Sarukkai 1997:1406-09]. But this mode of autobiography or fiction runs counter to the traditional, modernist view that depends on the empirical-theoretical dichotomy to generate objective knowledge. If Guru wants to hold onto this structure of empirical and theoretical then he should reconsider his emphasis on lived experience. Or if he wants to place lived experience at the centre then he should modify his view of theories, especially his understanding of the empirical. One of the ways of doing this is to demand that ethics be integral to the act of theorising – if so, then lived experience becomes the ground for such ethical intertwinement with theory.

Theory and Experience: Ownership or Authorship?

One way to distinguish the nature of experience and theoretical reflection about that experience is through the notion of authority. Is an individual an author of her experience? What is the relation of authorship between an individual and the theory she constructs?

Authorship is an important criterion in distinguishing experience and theory.

A person who experiences is not an author of that experience like a person who theorises about that experience. We are not authors of our experience in the sense that we do not create that experience within us. It is part of our nature to have such experiences and there is no extra agency needed to initiate such a feeling within us. The experiences that we have can be broadly classified into two types: one arising from being in situations not of our making and the other arising from situations we consciously put ourselves in. For example, the experience of being a dalit belongs to the former type and experiencing the feeling of being drunk may be a consequence of a conscious act. In the first case we are definitely not authors in any sense. We are neither authors of the events in which we find ourselves in nor authors of the experience that is caused by such events. But it could be argued that we are authors of our experience in the second type: we simulate the experience of being drunk because individuals choose to drink in order to have that experience. However, even in such cases, we are not necessarily authors of our experience although we may be “authors” of that which causes certain experiences, such as being the agent who decides to drink.

If we are not authors of our experiences then how are we related to our own experiences? We are related to our experiences as owners – we own our experiences but do not author them. It is perhaps similar to the way we own books which we do not author. Ownership confers a set of rights over what we own and authorship confers a different set of rights over what we author. In the historical trajectory of these ideas, we can see a sense of private and public playing out in these terms. (Authors have copyrights and owners have certain other rights.) For the purpose of the discussion related to the rights of theorising our experiences, I suggest that it is the dichotomy of ownership and authorship that is most illuminating.

Once we make this move, Guru’s claim can be rephrased in the following manner: an owner has a stake as an author. The extreme case of claiming that only those who experience can theorise implies only an owner can be an author. Is this a tenable position?

To understand this, we need to look at the notion of the owner in greater detail. What does an owner actually own? The owner of a book owns something of that book – in this case, only the materiality

of a particular book. The owner has no rights over that book. She cannot print it and distribute it, for example. She cannot, in principle, change a few lines here and there and publish it as her own. Actually, there is very little an owner can do with a book other than buy it and perhaps read it! The owner owns that particular book meaning thereby there are specific acts that are allowed under that ownership – for example, getting rid of it if she does not like that book. Experience is like this: we own our experience meaning thereby that there is only little we have control of in that experience. Most often we do not have control over what causes that experience; we do not have any say in how the experience should be; we have nothing at all to add consciously to that experience, that is, we cannot either delete unpleasant elements or add pleasant elements to a given experience.

Here is why experience enters into a problematical relation with theory. To theorise is to have a say, it is to be able to say. To theorise about a particular experience is to have a say about that experience. And who can really have a say in having a say about an experience? Guru’s position would mean that it is the owner who has the final say in saying anything about that experience. However, we can only partially accept this view because there are many elements of that experience which the owner is not really an owner of. We own our experience only in a particular meaning of that term and we may have control over only some elements of that experience.

Ethics of Theorising

In principle, we can theorise about another person’s experience because there is a space within that experience which is not related to the experiencer. For example, consider the element of oppression which a dalit experiences. The dalit who experiences oppression legitimately owns that experience of oppression. However the experience of oppression also involves an oppressor, either as an individual or a system, and the dalit has no control or ownership over this oppressor. So, how much of the experience of oppression can be owned by a dalit who experiences oppression in a particular act? Moreover, does a person who experiences oppression own that particular experience or larger categories that describe that experience? Is there a difference

between a person who experiences oppression once as against somebody who experiences it repeatedly? Who has a greater ownership claim to the idea of oppression?

This question is relevant because theory does this job of moving away from the particular. One’s experience may not be enough to validate our right to have a say about the conceptual world which describes that experience. On the other hand, not having any experience but theorising about it also seems intrinsically problematical. It is this tension about theorising that is manifested in two radically different approaches by two thinkers. At one end, we have Gopal Guru and his argument that only the people who own an experience can theorise about it. At the other end, we have Habermas whose theoretical impulse arises in response to an experience but does not expect the theoretician to have anything to do with the experience.

There are different ways of understanding these opposites. One such way is through the binary of emotion and reason. Experience is often placed under the idea of emotion and related terms whereas theory is something that arises under the action of reason. To hold Habermas’ position is to give into this absolute dichotomy between emotion and reason or experience and reason. There are many pointers to why such a dichotomy seems to make apparent sense. Experience is first person; reason overcomes individual capacity. Experience is local specific and context specific. Reason attempts to establish the universal present in local specificities. But these two terms also share similarities. Both of them seem to be outside wilful and conscious behaviour of individuals. We have experiences just as we have reason. We make mistakes about deploying both our reason and our experience but the fact is that we have an innate capacity for both.

Guru’s position, in contrast to Habermas, is to merge this distinction and construct an essential relation between them. Asking for theory to be essentially related to experience is asking for reason to be essentially yoked to feeling, emotions and such terms. This yoking is not at the level of legitimacy; that is, Guru is not claiming that it is epistemologically illegitimate to not relate reason to emotion. He would like to claim that experience and reason are in some sense ontologically related; that is, they are related as facts of the matter. That is the reason why he finds an ethical component

in this relation – it is ethically wrong to theorise about experience when one has not experienced the same oneself.

The Habermasian approach is actually one that tells us what the role of theory is. In phrasing his approach in this manner, we can see a clear distinction between what he does and Guru's demands on theory. Habermas' approach should be seen against the background of his support for modernity in general. It should also be placed against a historical trajectory and in particular to his response to German fascism.

Theory as Distributing Guilt

The German role in the second world war (and related horrific consequences such as the Holocaust) has inspired important theories. To give two well known examples, particularly of relevance to this paper, consider the responses to this event by two thinkers, Habermas and Levinas.

One of the influential ideas inspired by Habermas is that of the public sphere. The idea of public sphere has been so much appropriated that in a seminar on the public sphere there were attempts to use Habermas to make sense of how ordinary people watch Hindi movies in Mumbai! Whether these ideas can be universalised as easily as some do is another question altogether. The point that interests me is how is it that we come to believe – most times very effortlessly – that categories defining another society, another experiential space, are easily appropriated to describe a different set of experiences. One obvious way is through the action of universality of concepts that become part of social theory. The use of such concepts seemingly transcends particular societies and cultures.

This idea of universality is indeed strongly present in Habermas' theorisation of the public sphere and principles of communicative praxis. Habermas' support for the larger project of modernity is in consonance with specific ideas related to his theorisation of the public sphere. He is also responding to his and his country's historical journey and engagement with fascism. Shocked at the depravity of the Nazi period, Habermas wants to find a theoretical way to engage with what happened. Engaging theoretically also means a way of absolving oneself from the sin of somehow even being related to these atrocities. Rational communication is potentially one way to stop such acts from happening.

Pensky (1995) notes that the historical trajectory of the German land including the pre-war era, dominance in middle Europe, the Nazi years, partition and reunification – all these define the relation of the universal and particular in Habermas. Given this historical experience, the only way out for Germany was to be a democratic society with liberal principles and it is these principles that Habermas wants to universalise.

Universalism for Habermas is a collectively shared mentality, "a sense of solidarity inhabiting a public space that is distinct from political or economic institutions" [Pensky 1995: 69]. Pensky understands mentality as referring to a "mode of conduct with its accompanying capacities for self-deliberation, for self-examination and self-criticism" (ibid: 71). Although distinguished from the particular forms of life it has to be rooted in some such culture. For Habermas the real force of universalism is in the moral domain, manifested, for example, as plurality and the response to a different other. Habermas' writing on the nature of German state, its relation with the past, its problems after reunification all point to his attempts to construct a philosophy that is essentially beholden to the German experience.

However, remember that Habermas' concerns are nothing new; they are part of the articulations of a collective German guilt. Karl Jaspers already wrote this in 1945 – "Germany cannot come to [regain consciousness] unless we Germans find the way to communicate with each other... we want to learn to talk to each other... we do not just want to assert but to reflect connectedly, listen to reasons, remain prepared for a new insight" (ibid: 90).

Strong and Sposito (1995) argue this case of an indebtedness of theories to their social origins much more strongly. They begin by noting that "the theory of communicative action makes the case that rationality is a relevant moral social concept" (ibid: 263). Speaking to each other places us in a moral position. The authors point out that Habermas believes that the resources needed for the "ethicopolitical democratic" project are available in the Anglo-American and European traditions. Habermas tries to rehabilitate western thought not as western thought alone but as something universal. The specific western thought that he privileges is that associated with the Enlightenment. Universalisation displaces Enlightenment thought from its specific European origin

and becomes a model for other cultures and societies displaced both spatially and temporally from Europe.

But why is it important to preserve and continue Enlightenment? Strong and Sposito (1995) suggest that it is largely because of the politics of Europe, which included the specific German experience with fascism. The authors note that although the early Habermas does not view even a thinker like Nietzsche as dangerous, in later works he attacks Nietzsche, Derrida and Heidegger as being "politically dangerous" (ibid: 264). An important reason for such a shift is the growth of neo-Nazism in Germany. His attack on the post-moderns is fuelled by his reaction to the Nazi rule. The Nazi experience "makes it not only possible but necessary to think in universalist terms" (ibid: 266). Thus, for Habermas, the fact of Nazism means that we "must think in universalistic ethicopolitical terms as long as we remember the fact of Nazism" (ibid: 266). Habermas writes in terms of the "we" and "our" but who is this we? Strong and Sposito suggest that in the use of the "we" Habermas is suggesting that "because of their historical experiences Germans now carry the world historical burden of the universal" (ibid: 267).

What is the relation of theorising and the creation of such universalities to the specific German experience? Under what conditions can those in a different society accept such universal categories which arise from specific experiences? What exactly is Habermas doing in creating theories as response to certain social events?

I suggest that what he is doing is using theory as an agent to distribute guilt. Theory does this very effectively in many ways: depersonalising traumatic events, creating new categories to place these events in, creating explanatory structures as part of its structure, abstracting concepts and ideas that then simulate universality and so on. Habermas could have responded to the Nazi experience in many different ways but as far as he uses theory to respond to it he is deploying theory for a particular purpose, that of distributing his guilt among others. His guilt is phrased in terms such as abhorrence of the Nazi experience, fear that neo-Nazism is rising and so on but in effect theory, in the way he construes it, functions as a distributor of guilt. Just as much as the Germans "now carry the world historical burden of the universal" it is theory that carries the guilt of inhuman acts of a culture. When others participate

in such a theory they dilute individual sense of guilt for those somehow associated to a guilt-inducing action; universalisation is the ultimate dilution of guilt.

There is a precondition for theory to do this job – establishing the distance between theory and experience. Habermas' support to modernity or his thematisation of the public sphere with its concomitant ideas of rational communicative praxis are not theoretical moves that arise from lived experience as formulated by Guru. In fact, the crucial point here is that experience cannot dictate authorship. Habermas' theory is for us – namely, those who have not participated in that experience. It is we, who are outside this experience in all sorts of ways, who can build upon this theorisation. It is we, as complete outsiders to this experience, who will carry on and pass on this universal guilt – that is, it is we as outsiders who will theorise about this experience which is receding further and farther away from us.

For Habermas then theory is legitimated by its distance from experience. If he accepts Guru's position, then he would have to say that only those who

have suffered under the Nazi rule should theorise about it. So both Guru and Habermas stand for two opposite views in their approach to the relation between theory and experience. However, Habermas' approach can be usefully contrasted with the Levinasian attempt to theorise about the Holocaust. Levinas' theory arises from lived experience; a lived experience of Nazism which he and his family had to endure. His construction of an ethical theory is directly mediated not just by an experience but by a lived experience in which the idea of necessity (as described earlier) is strongly encoded. Guru's approach to theorising about the dalits is a Levinasian approach in contrast to a Habermasian one. For both Levinas and Gopal Guru, guilt is not to be distributed and shared among non-experiencers through the guise of theory. Theory is to be felt, is to embody suffering and pain, is to relate the epistemological with the emotional, that is, is to bring together reason and emotion. That is really the challenge that Guru forces on the practice of social science in India. **EPW**

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Note

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1 Personal communication.

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