

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Week-10

Lecture-46

Dalit Sociology and Indian Sociology: On Ambedkar's Sociology of Caste

Welcome back to the class. We are moving to the tenth week and in this week we are looking into Dalit Sociology and Indian Sociology, the influence that the Dalit studies had have had on Indian Sociology and the questions that they raised and how the mainstream Sociology responded to that and what are the critical epistemological and methodological questions that Dalit Sociology raises in the Indian Sociology. Caste system and its discrimination and practice of untouchability have caught the attentions of scholars and administrators ever since the very beginning of colonialism. And about the history of colonial intervention in many of these practices, You also know a series of social movements that have sprung up in every major places in India, basically to fight the social atrocities, social injustices and discriminations.

At the same time, The initial or the most predominant theoretical frameworks emerge in India, whether it is , Indological approach or structural functionalism and even structuralism to a large extent, glows over the issues of discrimination, exploitation and injustice. This is a very important one because when you talk about Indologists or the scholars who use this book view their preoccupation was about how Hindu social system offered you specific values and institutions and structures that provided a sense of coherence to society and even structural functionalism to a large extent as represented by say Srinivas and others. Of course, they mentioned about the caste system and the way in which it works. They mentioned about Dalits,

but did not think that the Dalits deserve more attention because of the very fact that for the past several centuries, these categories have been at the receiving end of caste

system. They have been facing various forms of discrimination, exploitation and injustice. because of that very social very subordinated position they occupy, their experiences and their stories will have something more insightful to contribute to Sociology was never accepted. And it was as typical of any other discipline, the initial phases of Indian Sociology was dominated by upper caste and class. And that very well gets reflected in their works as well.

Brahmins as a social class or as a caste group were the first to make use of these new opportunities. That got reflected in their priority areas, in the work that they conducted. And that has been the story of Indian Sociology, which came under very serious criticism by later scholars who pointed out this particular lacuna. And let me also remind you, this is not only something concerning with Sociology alone, but this is true with every social science, not only in India, but elsewhere as well. The dominant group of any society who makes use of these opportunities, who enters into the portals of higher education and knowledge production, obviously will have their own biases and then prejudices either knowingly or unknowingly.

It requires a lot of reflection, a lot of critical thinking, a lot of intervention from outside to bring in new perspectives and other things. That is something very important. So, it is not that natural that men sociologists would naturally be interested in women's issues and then produce scholarship. It never works in that way or it hardly works in that way. So, then you have the rise of Dalit studies, new generation of scholars and scholarships in the last maybe 20, 30 years played a major role. That has really brought in a lot of new energy, new vitality to the discipline and the discipline was forced to move away from its traditional comfort zone and then address a lot of questions that are raised by these Dalit scholars and Dalit scholarship. Also an interesting or important point is that these changes happen not because some churning happened within Sociology, but also in the literary field. Indian society began to witness a surge of Dalit literature.

Dalit poets and Dalit short story writers, novelists began publishing their genre of literature in different regional languages and these were translated and they were amazingly sociological. They had amazing sociological insights into that, thereby

forcing many of the sociologists to take cognizance of the different worldview and epistemological positions that these experiences and stories tell. And that had a very significant impact on the mainstream Sociology as well. And of course, any discussion that we begin on Dalit has to begin with Ambedkar and I do not need to elaborate the centrality of Ambedkar in in the Dalit scholarship. An iconic man, a man who very rightly revered and respected and celebrated across the nook and corner of the country.

There is hardly any any place in India which is not dotted by a statue of Ambedkar, highly respected and revered by the Dalits and a person who fought single-handedly for the Dalit group with unimaginable courage and conviction. We need to begin with this discussion with Ambedkar, focusing on two of his works.

B. R. Ambedkar, 1891-1956, a revolutionary political figure and the leader of the Dalit movement in India. these are all known facts; He fought for the liberation of oppressed communities in India and studied at distinguished institutions like Columbia University, the London School of Economics and the University of London. He was the most educated person from the Mahar caste, the untouchable caste. He had to face harassment, discrimination at the hands of upper caste but uneducated people, and that turned him into a real revolutionary.

A person with uncompromising, unflinching conviction about certain things. A very courageous person who was maybe defeated only by Mahatma Gandhi through very controversial mechanisms. I am referring to the Poona Pact and the issues associated with it. Gandhiji went on an indefinite strike when Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate. Ambedkar had to finally give in because it is a very unethical way of political engagement.

Somebody is going on an indefinite fast to demand the withdrawal of a particular political demand put forwarded by Ambedkar. That has been extremely controversial that Gandhiji, as a great leader, had to resort to this, which led to the changes we have seen earlier. Ambedkar was the founder of the Independent Labour Party and Scheduled Caste Federation, Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, and served as a Minister of the Law in the first Jawaharlal Nehru Ministry. So, Ambedkar was an administrator, a

politician, an orator, and a writer, and he wrote extensively and was also a scholar. He was trained as an economist and a historian; he has written extensively on caste and almost every social dimension associated with the Dalits.

A very multifaceted person. So, these are the important works, Caste in India: Their Mechanisms, Genesis and Development, Annihilation of Caste. So, in this class, we are just looking at these two essays. Then Pakistan on the Partition of India, Who Were the Shudras, the Buddha and his Dhamma, Buddha or Karl Marx, Riddles in Hinduism, these are some of the published works of Ambedkar. Ambedkar offered a multilayered counter-hegemonic reading of caste that has not received serious scholarly attention from at least three generations of sociologists in India.

This is a very damning statement because sociologists did not take Ambedkar very seriously. They might have felt that he was not methodical, he is not sophisticated enough, and did not follow the contours of the discipline, but they were all highly erroneous assumptions because the scholarship and the political vision that Ambedkar expressed had a huge resonance with millions of Dalits in India. That is why he is respected and revered and celebrated even today. He challenged the Brahminical production of knowledge in India that privileged the Hindu worldview where Brahmin was at the centre and offered an emancipatory perspective that addressed the hierarchies and inequalities in Indian society.

He was undisguised in his attack against Brahminism in particular and to Hinduism in general. That is the most provocative aspect of Ambedkar that many people found difficult to accept because he believed that Dalits have no future in India as long as they continue to live as Hindus, as he understood or argued that Hinduism without casteism will not survive. Every attempt to reform Hinduism from within is meaningless. It is futile and that is why he declared that , even though I was born as a Dalit, I will not die as a Dalit and then he converted into Buddhism. And that again inspired a lot of people to take followers and there is a large scale conversions into Buddhism from the scheduled caste population.

So, Ambedkar was a stringent critic of Hinduism. He burnt Manusmriti a very

controversial and very daring act. He burnt Manusmriti in public because he was fighting the Brahminical dominance. He understood and then argued that the central ideological founding head of casteism is Brahminism, which provides the theoretical, ideological and moral legitimacy to the caste system.

Even though the violence and other things can come from every other caste, the ideological underpinnings, the religious explanations, the religious justification for purity and pollution and discrimination, they are all extremely Brahminical whether written by Brahmins or by non-Brahmins, they are all Brahminical. So, Ambedkar's end-day fight was targeted at that. He offered a theory of caste focusing on its genesis, development and mechanisms as well as the manifesto for the annihilation of caste. And this is again a very, important thing. The annihilation of caste was his agenda. He was not happy with the reforms. He was fed up with reformist promises and hollow promises. He wanted the annihilation of caste. Now, we will just briefly go through these two works.

One is Caste in India, their Mechanisms, Genesis and Development written in the 1917. This is a paper presented by Ambedkar in an anthropological seminar in New York in 1916 and later published in the journal Indian Antiquary. In this work, he examined the origin, development and working mechanisms of caste in India. He maintained that caste has a cultural unity that emerged through constant contact and mutual intercourse of different cultures. So, he was somebody who argued that the rules and regulations evolved as a result of constant contact and mutual intercourse of different cultures.

The cultural unity is the basis of homogeneity in India, and caste is the parcelling of this homogeneous unit. So, he explains how caste provides the basis for this homogeneous cultural articulation. Ambedkar begins his paper by examining the works of Senart, Nesfield, H.

S. Risley, Ibbetson and Dr. Ketkar on caste and their limitations. So, these are all the anthropologists and then Indologists who put forward different theories on the genesis, emergence and later development of Sociology. The Western scholarship identified five nuclei around which castes formed. One is occupation, survival of tribal organisations,

rise of new beliefs, crossbreeding and migration. However, Ambedkar finds these as secondary or derivative in character, not something that constitutive of the central dynamics of caste. Ambedkar found Ketkar's analysis of the caste much more nuanced. Ketkar defined caste in its relation to a system of caste and has concentrated his attention only on those characteristics absolutely necessary for the existence of caste as a system and that is prohibition of intermarriage and membership by autogeny. It is a commonsensical knowledge that the central, the most important pillar that sustains the edifice of the caste system is the prohibition of intermarriage. Even now, the proportion of intercaste marriages in India is around 5 per cent, maybe 5 to 6 per cent.

It is as low as that, at least for the past 2000 years, endogamy has been the most important cornerstone of the caste system. So, Ketkar identified prohibition of intermarriage and membership by autogeny. You need to take birth into a caste. You cannot get a membership into a caste. You can get converted into a religion but you can never get membership into a caste unless you are born into that.

However, Ambedkar argued that the two primary characteristics of caste offered by Dr. Ketkar, in reality, are the two sides of the same coin. Because if you prohibit intermarriages, the result is that you limit membership to those born within the group. Isn't it? In the absence of intercaste marriage, the membership is only through autogeny. You have to be born into the same caste and your parents must belong to the same caste.

There is no possibility of intercaste marriages. Thus, Ambedkar concluded that endogamy is the only characteristic peculiar to caste. Exploring how endogamy is introduced and maintained, Ambedkar later illustrated the genesis and the mechanisms of caste in India. He argued that caste did not have a religious origin and that Hindu lawgivers like Manu had merely codified and preached existing caste practices. So, he rejects the religious argument that the Hindu caste system has a religious origin and the like.

The origin of caste, according to Ambedkar, is the origin of the mechanism of

endogamy. Indian society was characterised by the custom of exogamy that prohibits marriages between sapinda, the blood kin as well as sagotra of the same class. Sagotra is a particular lineage group. You identify yourself as the progenies of a particular person. All the people who belong to that particular group are seen as belonging to the same gotra, and so sagotra endogamy is something not permitted in many groups.

So, over this exogamous society, the principle of endogamy was introduced and this superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste. Again this particular argument has been contested and questioned by many other scholars. But Ambedkar's argument is very clear. On the one hand, he says there is no religious origin to the caste system. And secondly, the central arrangement of caste is nothing but the the emphasis and importance given to endogamy.

However, it was difficult to reconcile the endogamy principle in a society where exogamy was the custom. This has taken place through complex rules of marriage that take account of the difficulties in maintaining an even sex ratio among persons of marriageable age from marriageable groups within a caste. The problem of caste then ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of two sexes within that. So, once you impose the rule of endogamy into a society which follows exogamy, then naturally, questions of some people getting a sufficient number of brides and another group not getting that arise.

Ambedkar was quoted in Kannabiran in 2009. Imbalances in the sex ratio arising from the death of a spouse from within the caste, surplus women and surplus men, then are dealt with in one of the three ways. A surplus woman may be burnt on her husband's funeral pyre, which is known as Sati, enforced widowhood and imposed celibacy. Again, these are two very dominant features of Hinduism, the practice of Sati and the prohibition of widow remarriage. I do not need to elaborate it further, and it was through sustained legal interventions and social reform movements that these practices were controlled. And a surplus man would take a wife from a girl below marriageable age so that the balance in the marriageable age cohort is not disturbed.

So this is how he elaborates the genesis of caste. Sati, enforced widowhood, and girl marriage are the three mechanisms through which endogamy and, by extension, caste are preserved and persecuted, perpetuated. This closed-door system of endogamy was originated from the Brahmin caste and later imitated by all non-Brahmin subdivisions or classes, who in turn became endogamous castes. Those castes that are nearest to Brahmin have imitated all the three customs and insist on the strict observance thereof. Those that are less near have imitated enforced widowhood and girl marriage, others a little further off have only girl marriage and those furthest have limited only the belief in the caste principle. And this again is very interesting; it is again substantiated by scholars who have looked into the process of Sanskritisation as we have discussed in some of the previous classes.

In their attempt to claim an upper caste position, some of the practices adopted by the lower caste include the prohibition of widow re-marriage and child marriage. That is exactly what Ambedkar says: when you go down in the caste hierarchy, the imposition, the restrictions imposed on women come down. If a person loses her husband, then she is much freer among the lower castes to get married again, compared to a Brahmin widow or an upper-caste woman who would be forced to remain unmarried for the rest of her life. So, Ambedkar is very clear in his argument that these rules were imposed or imitated from the top.

The second important essay by Ambedkar is Annihilation of Caste.

This is around a 40 -50 page document in the essay. It was supposed to be present, to be delivered in a talk in Lahore, organised by an organisation called the Jatpat Todak Mandal in Lahore in 1936. And it has a very interesting story. So, they invite Ambedkar to be its chairman and they claim that they are a reformist organisation working against caste. So, Jatpat Todak Mandal, its aim itself is to fight against the caste system. Ambedkar sent the draft of his speech to be printed and circulated. When the organisers read this speech, they were shocked because it was very provocative. Then they sent him a mail, saying that your speech contains many very inflammatory, contentious, and provocative sections. You need to change some of them. And Ambedkar insists that I will not change a comma in the essay.

And so, ultimately, he did not go. It was undelivered in that sense. Later, Ambedkar printed several hundreds of copies of that and then distributed them because it was not done. And later it became one of the most celebrated works of Ambedkar. And recently, some 10, 15 years back, it was reintroduced with an introduction by Arundhati Roy, which again created a lot of controversies and other things. So, the organisers cancelled his speech, citing that it was too radical.

And in this speech, Ambedkar offered an emancipatory perspective to annihilate caste and reform Hinduism. So, it has a very interesting biography. Annihilation of caste is more difficult than the other national causes, namely Swaraj.

Imagine Ambedkar was in the thick of nationalist movement. However, he identifies that the nationalist movement and the aim of attaining independence is only part of the story. The real freedom of his men, the real freedom of the Dalit, comes only when they have also been politically and socially emancipated. Social emancipation and social democracy are core ideas of Ambedkar. In the light of Swaraj, you fight with the whole nation on your side. In this, you have to fight against the whole nation and that too your own.

But it is more important than Swaraj. There is no use in having Swaraj if you cannot defend it. More important than the question of defending Swaraj is the question of defending the Hindu under Swaraj. In my opinion, only when the Hindu society becomes a casteless society, that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such an internal strength, Swaraj for Hindus might turn out to be only a step towards slavery.

Very powerful, radical argument. So, Ambedkar is a critique of nationalists and socialists. Ambedkar was less patient with the social reformism articulated by the Hindu upper caste. So, recognising the social evils of society, India's political leadership has founded the Indian National Social Conference. Indian National Social Conference was a social reform wing of the Indian National Congress. It was under the leadership of M. G. Ranade and Reghunath Rao. Ambedkar maintained that the social conference had failed to make an impact in society precisely because of the social reforms that it was advocating. So, for Ambedkar, these attempts are merely superficial. They are just

gimmicks. It is not going to touch the central concern of the whole thing. While they advocated for the social reforms of Hindu families, widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage, etc., they did not advocate for the reorganisation and reconstruction of Hindu society. When you continue to cling to the rules of endogamy, to ensure that you get married only within your caste and do not allow intercaste marriage, then you are not ultimately going to change anything, according to Ambedkar. So, all these things about widow remarriage and the abolition of child marriage are all the products of an insistence on caste endogamy, and it must be broken.

This was too radical a demand for the Hindu orthodoxy. The failure of the social conference is due to their indifference towards the project of breaking up the caste system. Ambedkar also criticised socialists of his time as they had not paid sufficient attention to the caste problem. And this is a usual criticism raised against socialists and communists because they do not recognise caste as an important social phenomenon. And for them, the class is more important. They even argued that the caste system would disappear if a classless society came into existence, and they are all highly myopic superficial views.

Can it be said that the proletariat of India, poor as it is, recognises no distinction except that of the rich and the poor? Can it be said that the poor in India recognises no such distinctions of caste or creed, high or low? How can there be a revolution if the proletarian cannot present the unified front? Very pertinent question. It talks about the caste consciousness of the proletariat and it is also right about the caste consciousness of the bourgeoisie or the caste consciousness of the upper class. For a revolution to be possible, Ambedkar maintained there should be a spirit of personal freedom and fraternity among the compatriots. Caste eliminates this possibility because caste always brings in invisible, unchangeable, immutable divisions between people.

You are not an autonomous individual. You are not an individual who is capable of taking your own decision, even about choosing your life partner. You become a part of a community, a caste whose rules and regulations are very stringent about choosing your

life partner. Ambedkar argues that it is meaningless. Thus, for economic and political reform, the monster of caste must be annihilated first.

Now, the caste system as a division of labourers. Ambedkar criticised the tendency to identify the caste system as a form of division of labour on the following ground. This is one of the most striking arguments of Ambedkar. He would argue that caste system is not a division of labour. Of course, it is a division of labour, but it is much more pernicious than that. It is much more dangerous than that because it is an eternal, permanent division of labourers, those who are in different occupations, in the traditional caste system.

It is a division of labour from which they cannot escape. And that cannot be conflated without modern day understanding of division of labour. Our modern-day understanding of the division of labour assumes that people are given different jobs based on their ability, aptitude, merit, and other things, and people can move from one job to another. There is mobility within that. But Ambedkar very correctly observed that caste system is nothing but a division of labourers permanently. A person born here as a blacksmith, barber, or washerman will continue to do that.

It will continue to do that despite his aspirations or talents or his ideas or his ability or his merit. And they are hugely unequal. They are hugely unequal, they are hugely exploitative, they are hugely unequal. So, the caste system is not merely a division of labour; it is also a division of labourers.

There is an unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments. And it is a graded inequality, caste system is a hierarchy in which division of labourers are graded one above the other. It is unfounded in other civilised societies. So, again look at the prestige attached to different jobs.

Look at the stigma attached. These two are corresponding. On the one hand, you have the prestige attached to that of priests and teachers on the one hand, and on the other hand, you have the stigma, social stigma and humiliation attached to people who do menial jobs, people who remove human excreta. They are condemned forever. The stigma never

goes away from such a caste. The division of labour is not spontaneous. It is not based on natural aptitude; rather, it appoints tasks to individuals in advance based on the parents' social status. So, that is the point again and again he argued. A person whose work is manual scavenging, his child is supposed to do that. A child of a barber is supposed to do the same job. There is no open field in which somebody can explore the possibilities. And then caste was a public enemy; caste system prevented Hindus from forming a real society or nation as it killed common activity and unified life. It has also killed public spirit, public charity and public understanding as virtues has become caste ridden and morality caste bound.

Caste deprives Hindus of mutual trust, health and fellow feelings as one is only concerned about, responsible to and restricted to their caste. Very sharp attacks on the pernicious influence of caste system on society. He argued, it prohibits and prevents you from developing a more broader understanding of humanity. It prevents you from developing a sense of empathy or likeness towards an other person. And you are brainwashed to the idea that your existence and your obligation are only to your own caste member.

And we have seen such articulations throughout.

Then towards annihilating caste, mounting a heavy criticism on Hindu sacred text Vedas and Shastras, Ambedkar argued that the most important key to destroying caste is the rejection of the authority of the sacred text. And that is why I told you he burnt Manusmriti, supposedly a controversial action. He envisioned a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity ideals. That is why these terms are there in the Indian constitution.

The Indian constitution is a testimony to the spirit of that. He put forward two plans of action for the annihilation of caste, encouraging interdining, but it was not successful in killing the spirit of caste and caste consciousness. Just imagine he is making this as an action. Even sitting together and then having food together was unimaginable for a large number of people then. Food was taken and served depending upon the caste positions. It was impossible for the upper caste people to sit with the lower caste and eat food together.

That was seen as a revolutionary act. And Ambedkar proposes that.

So, I am winding up the class here. I wanted this week to start with Ambedkar because he is the towering figure of Indian Sociology and that of Dalit Sociology. So, any discussion on Dalit Sociology in India should not miss out without starting with Ambedkar. So, see you with other classes in the coming session. Thank you.