

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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Week-10

Lecture-47

Introduction to Sociology of Dalits I

Hi everyone, welcome back to the class today's lecture is titled Introduction to Sociology of Dalits, and in this class, we will be dealing with an introductory essay written by Paramjit Judge for a volume titled Towards Sociology of Dalits this is again a compilation of articles that appeared in Indian Sociological Bulletin and this essay provides a very broad overview of the recent scholarship on Dalit studies and you can consider this as a continuation of the previous class where we had a rather a broader take on the emergence of Dalit studies and more importantly that of the central figure and contributions of Ambedkar. So, I hope you remember the previous class where we discussed two of his essays, and we want to reaffirm the central position, the most significant position assumed by Ambedkar not only as a scholar but also as a philosopher, a political activist, a political leader and as an icon of Dalit movement and Dalit identity. I will take two sessions on this essay because it is a lengthy essay, around 40 pages long. So, I am going to divide it into two, and we will take the first part of this essay, now, and the remaining will be discussed in the next session. So, Professor Paramjit S. Judge has titled the essay Introduction to Sociology of Dalits.

Dalits, as the exclusive focus of study and analysis, have engaged scholars and social scientists in a committed and concerted manner in recent decades. So, we made some references about how Indian sociology did not cast its focus on Dalits in the beginning, rather it was more interested in understanding the structure of Indian Hindu social structure or structure of the caste system and Dalits were mentioned occasionally. The discrimination, exploitation, and cruelty faced by Dalits were, of course, discussed, and it

was elaborated. But there was no attempt to look at this particular category as a special category of people who are not only at the receiving end of a centuries-old discriminatory system, but also as a group of people who will have certain unique perspectives to understand Indian society in general or that of caste or economy or gender in particular. On the contrary, in the last two or three decades, at least from the 1990s, we see a proliferation of Dalit studies and the Dalit movement, and especially till 1990, 2000 and at least 2010, there was a major Dalit uprising was happening in many parts of the country.

And of course, in the last maybe one decade, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, what we see is a different politics where Hindu nationalism has been able to appropriate quite a lot of Dalit movements or Dalits into the Hindu or Hindutva narrative and that might lead to very interesting manifestations in the future. So, earlier, they constituted a part of the study of caste and the caste system because they were discussed and then analysed just like any other caste. However, certain issues within the framework of castes, such as structural principles and ideology, attracted considerable attention from social scientists between 1947 and 1990, such as untouchability, reservation policy, mobility, and politicisation of depressed castes. One of the most important features of the caste system is its graded inequality, which translates into certain undue advantages to certain castes who occupy the higher places of caste hierarchy, and, conversely, extreme forms of disadvantageous position and discrimination meted out to people who occupy the lower rungs of this particular caste hierarchy. So, for any scholar of Sociology or any scholar of the caste system, the people who occupy the lowest ranks of the caste system deserve special category and special attention.

So, there were attempts to look at them structurally, ideologically and a host of substantive issues like untouchability because untouchability was one of the most highlighted aspects of the caste system, especially that of caste discrimination. Britishers and Christian missionaries were surprised to see that, untouchability was brought to the fore by Indian social reformers. So, issues of untouchability, then the whole question of reservation starting from colonial and then into post-colonial context,

how do we make certain interventions so that these historically disadvantaged groups will have better positions and possibility to take part in the developmental process of the country and then attracted sociologists' attention to depressed class between 1947 and 1990. Research on Dalits gained momentum in the 1990s and has emerged as a major field of intellectual discourse.

This is a very interesting dynamics. Now, Dalits are not only seen as yet another category of the caste system but there is a sub-field called Dalit sociology that has emerged, which offers fascinating theoretical and methodological insights and understanding of the functioning, the ideological and the structural aspects of the caste system in India. There are two aspects of the manifestation of the sustained interest in Dalit studies. First, any work on issues such as modernity, social transformation, voting behaviour, election studies, nation-building, social justice, democracy, human rights, equality and development takes direct and indirect cognizance of Dalits in one or the other way around. So, if you name any important or substantive issues that affect or confront Indian society, these are the most important topics that come to mind.

And such a large and all encompassing topic like modernity, then social transformation including social mobility, how certain castes can be mobile upward while certain castes might stagnant and or certain other castes might go down in the social hierarchy, questions of voting behavior, then election studies, nation building, social justice, democracy, human rights, equality and development. So, these are all important themes in which Dalits appear as a very prominent category. If no reference is made to the Dalits while addressing the above mentioned issues, the concerned scholar may be criticised. Such a situation may not inevitably be logically necessary, but it has rightly become a normative necessity. Now, this is again a very positive development that Professor Judge argues that every scholar is now compelled to cast their focus on this particular group and then try to make some comments about how this particular exercise or this particular this particular concern will affect this particular group of people called as Dalits.

Whether it is a new educational policy or economic policy or any other state intervention, or large-scale social transformation, it has now become imperative that

scholars pay attention to the implications of these policies and transformations on the people who are known as Dalits. It created a great sense of guilt, the normative necessity in the minds and hearts of a large number of sensitive intellectuals belonging to the non-Dalit caste. At present, it seems inevitable because the dehumanised condition in which Dalits lived for centuries was enough to create such a sense of historical responsibility. So, Professor Judge also observes that a host of non-Dalit scholars especially from social sciences and more so from Sociology, experience a sense of guilt and the necessity for showing sensitivity to this particular important question because when you talk about larger theoretical and empirical issues, it is at most important that you show sensitivity to how this particular transformation will affect some of the categories which have been at the receiving end of this caste system for the past so many centuries. So, just like this has emerged as a very ethical question.

You cannot talk about the implication of a particular policy in general; rather, you need to disaggregate and look at the implications of this particular policy in different sections and, more importantly, what are the implications of these things to vulnerable people. Because it is not only in terms of economic vulnerability but also in terms of cultural and social vulnerability, you are talking about people who have been living in an extremely disadvantageous situation for the past several centuries. So, any such policy interventions must show or demonstrate the necessity that it deserves.

The second aspect of keen interest in Dalit studies results from many circumstances of both objective and subjective kinds, whose emergence accelerated at a breathtaking pace during the 1990s. So, here he lists a series of transformations that happened in India from the 1990s onwards, both ideological and structural.

One of the major developments in the early 1990s was the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party as the major political force in Uttar Pradesh. The arrival of the BSP in the political centre stage was a consequence of a division of the vision of one leader, Kanshiram, who gave the paradigmatic shift to the issues of Dalit environment. This was a move away from the social movement approach towards the power of politics at the formal level. The rise of BSP under the leadership of Kanshiram and later the rise of Mayawati. The rise of Mayawati was a very interesting thing. She was a Dalit woman

and she was able to offer an alternative political paradigm to the people and BSP and others they emerged as a very important political force.

And this was something unprecedented, it was never anticipated and this really gave a new trust to the overall development of Dalit politics in that particular period. And also it is important that now we realise that the political fortunes of BSP has dwindled significantly and the Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP)has been able to make serious inroads into the vote banks or into the electoral sections and segments of BSP, that is a different story.. In addition to the dramatic rise of the BSP, there is a formulation of critical middle class Dalit who have largely benefited from the state policies. A part of the Dalit middle class was comprised by the intellectuals, creative writers and social scientists initiated new chapters in the history of Dalit study.

So, this is another point that they observed. A substantial section of Dalits were able to make use of the state policies, especially state policies of reservation. Reservation and other policies that were aimed to ameliorate their situation. A group of a substantial section of people were able to make use of these policies and they emerged as a critical mass and they emerged as Dalit scholars, Dalit writers, Dalit teachers, Dalit professors and Dalit activists and they were able to articulate the issues of Dalits in a more sophisticated and in a more louder manner. No one can ignore the relevance or the topic that this particular group actually put forward.

Finally, the Indian state began to focus its attention on Dalits through the provision of funds and opening new centers such as Ambedkar Center for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy which began to conduct studies exclusively on the excluded section of the Indian society among whom Dalits figured most prominent. Another important transformation was the government policies especially aimed at the academic sphere. Ambedkar Centers were established in most of the universities and the UPA government also started a policy of opening up I think around 30 or 40 center for study of Centers for the Studies of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy in many universities and the mandate of these centers was to exclusively study the process of

social exclusion and then prescribe policies for social inclusion. And now let me again remind you that the particular policy shift has been altered after 9 years with the new government in power, the focus on such centers have been shifted away. Dalit studies in an interdisciplinary area of research.

We now find anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians and legal experts working in this area. As a result of the contribution of the expert from various social science disciplines, we are witnessing the evolution of a highly fertile, rich and contested field of Dalit studies. So, now this particular field of Dalit studies has become very promising and it has emerged as a very promising and fertile one now and has emerged as an interdisciplinary area of research. Now we find anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists, historians and legal experts working on this area.

One of the very important transformations is the involvement of economists in the field. There were a series of very important, very high quality literature or scholarly work by people like Sukhadeo, Ashwini Deshpande and a number of others who looked into the economic dimension of discrimination and other things. So, it has now emerged as a very important field. Dalit studies acquired a strong and visible normative content in social sciences and powerfully reminded that the time had arrived to think afresh about the issue of value neutrality.

Rather than being value neutral or value loaded, the 21st century is essentially the century of value based social research. This goes back to the very old debate, what is the fundamental ethical responsibility of a scientist? Should the scientist always vouch by value neutrality? Or should the scientist always go by a very strict impartiality in every sense? Is that to be seen as an indication of scientific rigour? So, these are much older debate in philosophy of science, in philosophy of social sciences. So, one of the very important transformations has happened in the recent period is that no important scientist, sociologist or social scientist would say that what they are adopting is a completely value neutral position. First of all, it is a realisation that this is impossible. No researcher can claim that what they are doing is completely value neutral.

As if they are not influenced or affected by any of the larger social transformation, it is important. Secondly, the realisation that it may not be ethical to claim value neutrality when you are faced with a very unequal social structure. When you see a society which is characterised by extreme form of social exploitation and social discrimination and violence, then claiming neutrality is nothing but taking sides of the oppressive group. It is as simple as that. For example, it is as simple as saying that, okay, I do not take sides in a patriarchal society.

I try to be as neutral, because the moment you say that you are neutral, then you are with patriarchal structures and their ideology. The 21st century essentially is a century of value based research. So, a value commitment towards a more egalitarian society, a more equal social egalitarian social structure is always put forward. Value based research is based on the domain assumption that there are grey areas of society that needs to be addressed because human societies have reached a level of development of institutions and practices where equality, justice, freedom and rights are natural expressions of meaningful life with dignity. So, this is a value based approach.

So, what is the basis of this value, the argument that human societies have reached a level of development of institutions and practices where equality, justice, freedom and rights are natural expressions of meaningful life with dignity. So, every social scientist is now mandated to ask these questions. How far these questions of equality, justice, freedom and rights are incorporated into this new social forms and social structures. Commitment to these values, maybe you can call them as enlightenment values or there can be different debate into that. But a set of values that uphold these important qualities is something that is always getting highlighted.

Now sociology of Dalits, it is important to take cognizance of the fact that whatever approach we may adopt in order to examine the Dalits, the understanding of caste becomes necessary. However, social anthropologists and sociologists who made the study of caste as their lifelong academic and intellectual engagement might not have dwelt upon the issues of Dalits. They largely remained indifferent passersby when it concerned the Dalits. The consequence of such a mindset led to the understanding of

caste through the eyes of Brahmin and Hindu theology. So, this is again something that we have discussed in a very substantive manner when we look into the history of sociology in India, starting with the Indological perspective.

Scholars like Ghurye and a host of Indology scholars, they exclusively looked at the, (Ghurye of course is a different person, but Indologist in general) looked at the Hindu scriptures basically to understand how Indian society work. And of course, Indian Hindu scriptures would present you with an upper caste view and that was seen as the reality of Indian society and they were not particularly interested in the situation of the Dalits. Later when you are talking about M.N Srinivas, he was criticised for giving only a passing references about Dalits in his book titled Remembered Village, which is the study of Rampura village. Louis Dumont has been criticised extensively for providing a very sophisticated theoretical argument about a Brahminical view of caste.

Berreman calls it as a Brahminical theory of caste. Almost every sociologist, criticised Dumont for presenting a sophisticated version of Brahminism. Now, social anthropology, particularly the British tradition strongly emphasised ethnography as the best method of collecting data along which the canons of scientific research were strongly upheld and observed. The canons of value neutral social science began to influence and shape the Indian social anthropologist who shifted Sociology with great ease and also unnoticed. Value neutrality as it practiced and understood implicated the ideology, free analysis of social facts.

The ideology free analysis of social facts approaching caste system through Dalits would have involved normative concerns for the most dehumanised and marginalised sections of society. So, the whole question is when you at the caste system, how can you very dispassionately analyse it? As if the way you describe the upper caste, the way you describe the lower caste and how can you as a social scientist very dispassionately, very neutrally discuss the situation of these two castes at equal ease. That calls out for a very strong ethical critique because you need to look deeply into the structures of power, the whole questions of who benefits from this situation, at whose cost all those questions are important. Now, trained in the western liberal tradition of equality and freedom, these

social anthropologists would have been intellectually compelled to take a position against the appalling conditions of Dalits which involved moving away from their neutral stance.

As a result, they stayed away from giving the major space to the Dalits. So, Professor Judge makes an observation that they should have because they are all trained in western liberal tradition of equality and freedom. These scholars either went to abroad and they studied or they came back to India. So, ideally they should have been really rattled by the life conditions of Dalits but that did not get reflected. Caste question for the Indian sociologists has remained the crucial issue for the last eight decades and understanding of Dalits remained a secondary concern.

The life world of caste was ideally presented as dominated by the Brahmins and when the ethnographic approach to the study of caste struck its route, the diversity of social life and variations of the caste across the regions were questioned under the expression of field view of caste without bringing much change in the Brahminic approach to understand it. So, the observation is that ethnography and participant observation were used basically to provide a description of the system as it exists but it did not have any pedagogical potential or ideological commitments to understand and ameliorate the situations of the Dalits. So, the classic case is that of

M. N. Srinivas's description of Dalits in that book is very minimal. The reason which he says that he accidentally had to stay in the Brahmin quarter in the house of a Brahmin because of that fact his access to the Dalits got curtailed whereas his access to the upper caste was heavily facilitated. So, this exactly is the problem.. Now, the things that seem as very natural will have very significant consequences in terms of the output and ideological baggage that it actually brings up.

Before exploring the specificities of Dalit studies, it is important to discuss the way caste has been understood in sociological imagination. We can make three broad divisions of various elucidations of caste namely caste as an objective reality, caste as a subjective reality, caste as a unity of subjective and objective reality. Caste as an

objective reality. Objective reality as something that exists outside which can be verified, which can be looked at, which can be understood.

Caste is treated as an observable structure and is largely conceptualised in terms of a set of features which make it comprehensible. Of all such attempts, Ghurye's work could be taken as the representative of the most of them. According to him, there exists six features of caste. I hope you remember we had a discussion of these six features which are the segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation and restrictions on marriage. All these features are empirically observable and in certain ways cover caste and caste system in a comprehensive way.

I am not going into the details that this particular essay, Features of Caste System by Ghurye is a very, very famous essay. The objective of caste is also takes into consideration various external features of the caste which could be observed as an institutional practice, a host of other arrangements like jajmani systems and the economic system in which they are entangled. So, all these things are seen as very observable objective reality of caste. Then caste as a subjective reality, subjective is more to do with your experience as an individual. Objective is out there which is amenable for anybody and everybody to see whereas subjective is something related to your subjectivity, your own individual experience.

Conceptualising caste as a subjective reality would imply the varieties and modes of making sense of one's location in the social structure by treating one's individual experience as unique or by relating to the same set of people with whom one shares the common existence. So, subjective understanding of certain thing, especially when you understand you as a member of a particular group who occupy a specific position in the social hierarchy. And then you try to understand your life and the world around you through your specific positionality. We are going to have a very elaborate discussions on stand point theory from the coming class onwards. We will have extended discussion on Sharmila Rege, we will have detailed discussion on Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukai So, this is basically an argument that your position, your social location offers specific insight

to understand the world around you. Whether you are a man, a woman, a person from lower caste or upper caste, each of these positions is capable of offering a very unique perspective.

Most of the musings on subjective conceptualisation of caste are strongly connected with the objective aspects of understanding caste. However, in recent years an attempt has been made to understand caste as a part of experience. The existence is treated as unique and thus it has been argued that the experience of being an untouchable is untenable for the non-untouchables. And we will discuss that in detail, especially their book, *The Cracked Mirror*, we are going to take up that particular book in detail in the next week. So, the argument that for a non-untouchable person or for an upper caste person, it is impossible to understand the experience of an untouchable life.

Because your life experience offers you very unique and very exclusive experience, exclusive access to certain experience which is not available for others. For example, Gopal Guru questions social science theoretical practices which seem to be ignoring Dalit experience. There is also a reason for this situation which according to him could be located in the inability of the non-Dalits to have the experience and articulate the same in theory building. Similarly, he introduced the concept of humiliation and to characterise the subjective conditions of Dalits.

Guru approaches the concept in the following manner. Humiliation is almost endemic to social life that is active basically through asymmetries of interesting set of attitudes, arrogance and obeisance, self-respect and servility and reverence and repulsion. It continues to survive in different forms depending upon the specific nature of the social context. For example, in the West it is the attitude of race that is at base of humiliation. In the East it is a notion of untouchability that foregrounds the form and content of humiliation.

So, humiliation is been theorised by Gopal Guru. He argues that this has been a very endemic and entrenched feature of Indian caste system where an entire section of

population are forced to feel humiliation in their everyday life. And this humiliation is heaped on these people by people who claim to be upper caste and their lower position of this particular caste is reinforced. It is restated through continuous use of humiliation as a tool. Conceptualising caste as humiliation is an incomplete exercise in the understanding of the subjective aspect. It is important to keep in mind that if untouchability is humiliation to the victim then it could be a matter of pride for the victimiser.

Pride in having a particular caste status is common as the feeling of humiliation for a social location. So, when you abuse somebody by calling out his lowly caste, which is now punishable you are not supposed to use the caste slur. You cannot scold somebody by invoking his lowly position. Now, the person who faced it experiences a sense of humiliation but the person who hurled this abuse, he or she experiences a sense of pride.

He experiences a sense of pride. So, the pride in having a particular caste status is as common as the feeling of humiliation for a social location. Caste as a unity of subjective and objective reality. Most of the conceptualisations combine the subjective and objective dimensions of caste which only certain differences in emphasis. We have considerable number of writings which take cognizance of taxonomy of caste, sub-caste, gotras and deal in great detail about how they exist and work. If we try by treating caste as a systemic structure which could be objectively examined, then it is important to know how such a hierarchical structure has been maintained.

Therefore, caste as a subjective reality does not merely subsume experience and humiliation of pride, but the ideological basis on which the entire structure has been legitimised. So, the argument is that this objective and subjective aspects of caste are not mutually exclusive. Because one requires the other for its existence. The objective reality of caste is maintained and it is sustained through its ideological and its theoretical base which is perpetuated through the members. Members who participate in humiliation and the members who experience the humiliation.

We are moving to the other section of the essay which I will engage in the coming class.
Let us wind up the class now. Thank you.