

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**

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**Lecture-49**

Dalit Women Talk Differently: Debate Between Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege I

Welcome back to the class we are in the week in which we are looking into the influence of Dalit studies on Indian Sociology, and in the previous classes, we looked at Dalit studies in general by looking into the arguments of or contributions of Babasaheb Ambedkar and then in the last class we had two sessions on an introductory essay written by Paramjit Judge which provided a very broad overview of the Dalit studies. The epistemological and ideological promises and methodological promises that it provides and a series of social historical reasons and context led to the emergence of Dalit studies as a very important development in the Indian intellectual scenario. So, we have two more sessions to go for this week, and I thought of looking into a very interesting set of articles written by Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege on the question of Dalit women's issues. When you move to these discussions, we know that the watertight compartmentalisation is almost impossible. It is very difficult to label many of these readings as specifically only on Dalits or only on women because many of these arguments, articles and scholarly interventions cut across the disciplinary boundaries; they cut across the theoretical boundaries.

These articles cut across the boundaries of Dalit studies to Women's studies to standpoint theories to intersectional studies. These articles present a very interesting set of theoretical arguments. The first essay, titled Dalit Women Talk Differently, written by Gopal Guru.

It is a very short essay, but of course, it provoked a lot of discussions and later even inspired Sharmila Rege to write an essay, a more detailed essay in EPW, which we are going to discuss in the next session. They talk about the uniqueness of a Dalit women's perspective. What does that have to offer to Sociology in general and to social theory in particular? This falls under very important interventions in the last two, or three decades that have happened to Indian Sociology by drawing on a very important theoretical turn, what is called the standpoint theory, made popular by a very important scholar Sandra Harding in which she wrote a book called *The Science Question in Feminism* in the mid-1980s. And that opened up very important theoretical debates about the social positionality of a scholar and the questions of strong objectivity, weak objectivity and a host of other interesting debates.

So, I am not going deeper into that particular debate as such but trying to understand how that debate influenced Indian Sociology in general, Indian feminism in particular and Dalit studies more particular and how that invigorated a lot of interesting discussions and debates in the Indian sociological field. So, this essay is a part of that. Dalit women talk differently because, as the very title demonstrates, Gopal Guru is talking about how Dalit women, because of their positionality as Dalit and also as women how their voices are different or how their voices are unique and how their voices are more relevant in understanding the social reality. As a group of people who have been dominated over the centuries because of these two double kinds of domination; one is from the caste domination because of their given position as lower caste Dalit members and the second is at the receiving end of the patriarchal system. So, they are at the receiving end of two dominating domains: one is that of patriarchy, and the second one is that of caste oppression.

Because of this double domination or double subjugation, the voice of the Dalit women is of unique importance and significance, according to Gopal Guru. So, Gopal Guru is an extremely important political scientist. He was a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is currently the editor of *Economic and Political Weekly*, a very influential scholarly journal published in India.

The independent and autonomous organisation of Dalit women has the potential to counter Dalit patriarchy from and the state-sponsored globalisation from without.

That is a basic argument that he puts forward. So, he is talking about establishing an independent and autonomous assertion of Dalit women's identity, which found its first expression in the formation of the National Federation of Dalit women, NFDW at Delhi on August 11th. The remaining part of this essay tries to explain why this initiative is important, and it is not only that Dalit women are assuming a central position in the political scenario, but also because Dalit women's articulations are much more significant in terms of the epistemological and methodological insights that their position can provide to in understanding the social reality. The issue of representing Dalit women both at the level of theory and politics has erupted time and again in the discourses on Dalit women. Dalit women justify cases of talking differently based on external factors, that is, non-Dalit forces homogenising the issues of Dalit women and internal factors, the patriarchal domination within states.

So, this particular point we already discussed is because there is always the chance of more mainstream dominant groups hijacking the voices of the more marginalised. This is a very perennial social phenomenon that you will see in any social movement, in any ideological movement, in any political party, and in any such places where power relations do matter. The more privileged section, the more visible section, and the sections which have a historical advantage always tend to dominate over others and then silence their views. So, Dalit women's voice deserves special attention mainly because of the fact that the non-Dalit forces homogenising issues of Dalit women and secondly because of the internal factors like the patriarchal domination within the Dalits because Dalit community as such is not exempt from the patriarchal influences. Dalit patriarchy is a reality.

So, as I mentioned earlier, Dalit women are at the receiving end of this dual systems of domination. Social locations, which determine the perception of reality, are a major factor, as we shall see in the context of the argument made by Dalit women. So, this is the

point of the standpoint theorist which we are discussing in the coming week as well.

What is your social location vis-a-vis that of your caste, your gender, your class, your ethnicity and this particular position, the place where you are located. This particular position has a long lasting and extremely influential influence above on your understanding of the reality. What constitutes reality for you is, to a large extent, determined by your positionality, which is decided based on all these factors. Context of arguments made by Dalit women make the representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women less valid and less authentic. So, Guru is of the opinion that the experiences and stories of Dalit women are being narrated by non-Dalit women, thereby robbing them of their authenticity.

This is a very important argument. It is a very important argument also a problematic argument that is the whole beauty of the discussion and debate between Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru in their very famous book titled *The Crack Mirror*. So, can we claim the authenticity of our experience because we occupy a particular position? It is impossible for somebody to claim authenticity without really experiencing these people's life situations. This is a very, important question. However, there are feminists who seek to understand the need to talk differently keeping in mind certain external factors. For example, Gail Omvedt is a very important scholar. You must have come across Gail Omvedt when we discussed Marxian sociology, where she uses the Marxian framework to understand the caste system in India.

Would the Dalit needs to talk differently vis-a-vis the left forces are to the betrayal of the promises given to Dalits by the latter. Rajni Kothari shares the same opinion but rather differently. He says with the erosion of institutions, the unsettled controversies over public policies and the growing uncertainty of ideological issues, as well as the decline of democratic functioning of the political forces, faith in the capacity of modern nation-state to provide a framework for both order and equality has declined. So, Rajni Kothari talks about the failure of the nation to provide frameworks for equality and order. And to the reliance on the mainstream governmental and party political processes.

The result has been the rise of a series of movements as distinct from the earlier gainers

of more specific economic movements such as trade unions or cooperative movements. Kothari calls this phenomenon the talking differently a discourse of dissent. Kothari talked about the rise of social and political movements in the 80s and early 90s. Yeah, so they are talking about a series of Dalit movements and women's movements that emerged earlier.

You can read that. Yeah, so talking about the different Rayat Sangha in Karnataka. They question the populism of these peasant movements who representing the interest of rich farmers entered into direct contradiction with the interest of the Dalit agricultural labourers over the issues of minimum wages. So, many of these movements that marked Indian polity during the 80s and '90s also had their contradictions because, many times, the interests that they put forward contradicted the interests of the poorer sections, including those of Dalit men and Dalit women. Secondly Dalit women would not make common cause with the moral economy advocated by the Shetkari Sanghatana and its feminist supporters. They are of the opinion that the moral economy of the Sanghatana offered no solution to their poverty instead it sought to naturalise their poor living conditions.

This is how internal contradictions marked many of these social movements.

The third claim for women's solidarity at national and global levels subsumes contradictions between high caste and Dalit women. This is the point that is more familiar. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve certile forms of caste discrimination as practised by upper caste, upper class women against Dalit women in urban areas and resorting to the slander of Dalit women in rural areas. Women's experience, in general, cannot be generalised without paying adequate address to to the very stark class and caste differences.

A series of examples here show that women do not speak in a singular voice, and the caste interests or the class interests of women are very different. So, a series of issues where the upper caste women are turned against the lower caste women. So, there you see the solidarity was given to the class and then caste affiliation. So, giving examples of Sivasena women attacking Dalit women in 1998. Then, beneath the call for women's

solidarity, the identity of the Dalit women as Dalit gets whitewashed and allows Non-Dalit women to speak on their behalf.

It is against this background that Dalit women have of late protested against their guest appearances in a text or a speech of non-Dalit women and instead organised on their own terms. So, he says that this is the reason why these women had decided to form their own organisation and then make their own voices heard rather than being represented always by somebody else. And the second one is very important. So, the first point Guru says is that Dalit women always run the risk of being outnumbered or being marginalised by the more dominant women's group and that has been the history and the experience.

Second point is about Dalit patriarchy.

We discussed that Dalit women are not free from the patriarchal influences and patriarchal systems of oppression. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated and at times suppressed the independent political expression of Dalit women. This political marginalisation has been openly condemned by Dalit women at the regional differences of Dalit women and at the Delhi meet. So, Dalit women have criticised their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Even among the oppressed group there are different forms of oppressions exist and there are people like Dalit women who are at the receiving end of this multiple forms of oppressive system.

So, Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in Dalit literary conferences and institutions. This descent brings to the fore three things. It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event. Even now you hear a similar story in a wide varieties of platforms, even if in that organisation or some of the so called most progressive organisations whether it is liberal organisations or communist organisations or any other organisation the participation of women and actual representation of women is always a question. Dalit men reproduce the same mechanism against their women which the high caste adversaries used to dominate them. The experience of Dalit women shows that the local resistance within Dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to a different claim for a Dalit women to talk differently.

Guru is a very important supporter of the argument that Dalit women do speak differently and they ought to speak differently. Firstly, defended independent assertion of Dalit women should not be viewed by Dalit men as divisive. Instead it ought to be seen as carrying positive emancipatory potential because there is always a tendency to criticise this Dalit women's independent voice as divisive because that is the most often used justification that when we are fighting against the upper caste why are you bringing in the issues of gender. It will only divert attention or create further divisions within us. So, these are the accusations or charges that are mostly leveled against the Dalit women's assertions whenever they talk about their internal problems.

This issue has to be understood properly.

Secondly, the autonomous mobilisation of Dalit women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. So, this is the most important concern and interesting point for us how Dalit women's position provide a more privileged or a more authentic viewpoint about social reality. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others. So, this is again directly influenced by Sandra Harding's work where she talks about a strong objectivity being available to people who are at the receiving end of a social system of stratification and discrimination.

Because since they are not part of a dominant ideology or a mainstream society and are part of a most disadvantageous excluded section, Sandra Hardings argued that they possess a more authentic view about society. It has to be noted that though there are some non-Dalit women activists sensitive to the caste dimensions of women's exploitation, their stand has remained ambivalent regarding the critique of caste. Because you would have seen non-upper caste women who sympathise with Dalit women, but their position against the caste remain ambivalent. Dalit women's claim to talk differently assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable, therefore talking differently can be treated as genuinely representative.

This makes the claim of Dalit women to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of talking differently foregrounds the identity of Dalit women. Now this can go to certain other extremes which Gopal Guru cautions about. Dalit women's claim to talk differently, assume certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable, therefore talking differently can be treated as genuinely representative.

You are able to represent a particular group because your position as a Dalit is quite stable. In doing so, the phenomenon of talking differently foregrounds identity of Dalit women.

Though it is difficult at this stage to make any definitive comments on Dalit women's movement, one can question the validity of this above assumptions because these are slightly problematic assumptions and must be treated with caution. Dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated and employed than their counterparts from Karnataka. So, the moment you tend to treat Dalit women as a homogenous category who have the authority to talk on behalf of others, then we also will be compelled to look into the internal diversity, internal power structure and the internal power dynamics among the Dalit women and that tells us that the Dalit women do not constitute a singular category. And it would be the former who would represent the Dalit women at Beijing, thus here too a certain section of Dalit women will be rendered anonymous. That is why the second point of the agenda of NFDW mentions the need to associate with grassroot Dalit women. So, talking about how that focus on the diversity is something important. Also the Indian state is keen on projecting itself as well intentioned on gender issues and has sponsored the delegation of Indian women to Beijing.

The state by incorporating women's movement within the jurisdiction of its apparatus intend to domesticate the movement. Hence, the crucial question which arises with regard to NFDW is whether it will succeed in evading the trap of domestication. Every social scientist would be extremely wary of or cautious of the state appropriation of any movement, that when the state appropriates and offers support and protection to any civil society organisation, many times it loses its critical edge. Many times it will be



domesticated, co-opted by the state and then its revolutionary potential will be quite compromised in the long run.

Gopal Guru is conscious about and he is warning about this possibility because this particular visit of this group to Beijing for an international conference is sponsored by government which he says has to be taken with extreme form of caution. Because state has the history of appropriating organisations and domesticating them, making them less revolutionary, less lethal and then less critical. So, this is a very short essay. I thought of combining this with the essay by Sharmila Rege and I will just begin that essay so that you will consider it as a continuation.

Now, this essay is slightly lengthy. It is a special article published in 1998 by Sharmila Rege, a very important sociologist. We have already discussed her essay in the beginning of this particular week and this is again a very, very important essay. Dalit Women talk differently, a critique of difference and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position, SWe will try to complete it in two sessions.

A significant shift in the feminist thought of the 1980s and 1990s was the increasing visibility of the black and third world feminist work. Yet, there has been a reluctance on the part of the white feminists to confront the challenges posed to them by black and third world feminism. Much of the stasis in the western feminism may be explained in the terms of the alliance between feminism and the poststructuralism, postmodernism, more specifically in terms of the category of difference coming to the center of feminist theorisation.

A commitment to feminist politics demands that the limited political and analytical use of this category of difference be underlined. This is a very central tension that we have discussed in the previous classes. The poststructuralist and postmodernist arguments and even Gopal Guru's argument all the time talk about the uniqueness of one's own identity and experience, what you call as the difference. So, this difference in some of the postmodernist renditions can become endless. When you say that you need to come together as a woman then you realise that all women are not equal or all women's

experiences are not equal. Their lived experiences are different in terms of gender, caste, race and other things.

So, you talk about black feminism, you talk about third world feminism and then again you realise that the third world feminism is not the same. You talk about the Dalit feminism as distinct from the savarna feminism or the upper caste feminism of India. Then again you realise that the Dalit women again is not a homogenous category. There are multiple divisions, multiple identities, there are hierarchies within that. So, you keep on you keep on fragmenting and this this story of fragmentation, this story of multiple identities do not have an end.

So, what happens this celebration of multiplicity or this celebration of differences, it comes at the cost of a unified political movement. Because every social movement, especially that of the racial and feminist movements are deeply political movements. They are aimed at engaging in a political struggle, power struggle with the dominant sections of society. So, ultimately Dalit women or any women for that matter are supposed to have a unified fight against the patriarchal systems and nation state many times. So, the moment you go into in search of these differences, what happens is the possibility of a unified fight or a unified consolidation and a unified, forging a unified alliance and then taking up a concerted political fight loses its significance and then edge.

So, this whole question of the feminist political demands and the category of differences are always in a tension. In the Indian context the political pitfalls of the ever increasing impact of postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches in terms of the rise of cultural, logical and communitarian approaches. The rise of the late subaltern subject Sumit Sarkar and the post colonial subject have been noted. So, these are some of the important transitions during this particular time. In the framework of Post-Orientalism studies, the focus remains on colonial domination alone, thereby the pre-colonial roots of caste, gender and class dominations come to be ignored.

The recent feminist scholarship in adopting the Saidian framework not only falls into the

above mentioned traps, but ends up with a frame that completely overlooks the contributions of the interventions of women in the non-Brahmin movement. The invisibility of this lineage has led scholars to conceive the recent autonomous assertion of Dalit Women as a different voice and here, she is referring to scholars like Guru and others. The 1980s were marked by the newly exploding caste identity and consciousness and theoretical and political issues involved in the debate on caste and its role in social transformation. The early 1990s saw the assertion of the autonomous Dalit women's organisation at both regional and national level. Such an assertion had thrown up several crucial theoretical and political challenges besides underlying the Brahminism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics.

However, the debates seem to have come to rest and the relative silence and the apparent absence of a revisioning of feminist politics thereafter only suggests an ideological position of multiple plural feminist standpoints. That is to say the separate assertion of Dalit women's organisation come to be accepted as one more standpoint and within such a framework of difference. Issues of caste becomes the sole responsibility of the Dalit women's organisation. So, her argument is that though from 1980s the Dalit women are seen as yet another category, merely acknowledged as yet another standpoint by practice it is evident that it is only the Dalit women who actually talk about caste as a major issue to be confronted. A host of other mainstream women's organisations, liberal women's organisations or the left women's organisations do not identify or do not deal with caste as the way it should have been done.

In the coming class, we will discuss the section about how this paper is organised .  
Thank you.