

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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Week-10

Lecture-50

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

Welcome back to the class. We are in the last session of this week, and we have been discussing the questions related to Dalit women, it is part of a larger debate within Dalit studies. In the previous class, we had a brief look at an essay written by Gopal Guru titled Dalit Women Talk Differently, which talked about the political relevance and epistemological significance of Dalit women's unique voice. And continuing that particular debate, we have already started a discussion on this essay written by Sharmila Rege titled Dalit Women Talk Differently, a Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position. We started off this essay in the last class, looking into the introductory points that she made.

Feminism of the 1970s had developed indifference from the left. Crucial to this difference were three categories: women, experience and personal politics, which were central to feminist theorisation. So, these three categories were as powerful as political rhetoric. They posed theoretical problems.

The category of women was conceived as collectively based on their being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. The three categories were deployed in combination, and this often led to exclusion around race, class, and ethnicity. Since most of the vocal feminists in the 1970s were white, middle class, and university educated, their experience came to be universalised as women's experience. So this is an important section because

she is summarising the ideological critique of Dalit women or even Black women against liberal feminism that was mostly influenced by the left ideology, and it revolved around three points. One is about the category of women, second one is that of experience and then personal politics because by every almost every women who articulated women's questions were white, liberal, upper class, university educated women who tend to monopolise the experience of other women as well.

Thus sweeping arguments such as old women are niggers are made. So, how were these experiences monopolised? The ambivalence of the left towards the notion of women's issues was thus countered by an assertion that women are essentially connected with other women, and subjective experience of knowledge becomes the basis of the universal experience of womanhood. This experience became the basis for personal politics as well as the only reliable mythological tool for defining oppression. So the critique argued that how one understands one's own experience is through one's own lived experience, and this lived experience offers you a political perspective and political vantage point to enter into the larger political arguments.

At least three major postulates emerged from such an epistemological position. One that there is a system of male domination that this system is political and the politics included all power relations regardless of whether or not the power operated in the public sphere, that is to say, the personal was declared to be political, and as focus came to be on the power in intimate relationship, critique of state or capitalism took a back seat. So this is, again, we mentioned earlier that the second wave of feminism power was brought into the fore, and feminism was seen as an ideological platform to fight against every form of power oppression. So this power oppression is not only seen as being from the state or from the market but also it is seen as having pervaded even in the private sphere. So, the personal political argument reflects this particular position that a feminist, by definition, has to be sensitive to the power relations even within the household, within the private sphere.

You cannot be a very submissive wife and submissive daughter and then practice feminism outside because then you would be oblivious to the power relations that

dominate you within the domestic sphere. Several factors have played a constitutive role in the process that brought the category of difference to the centre of feminist analysis. This has meant, a focus on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy, a rejection of universalism in favour of difference and insistence on fluid and fragmented human subjects rather than collectivities, a celebration of marginal and denial of all causal analysis. So now, coming back to this question of differences because, as we mentioned earlier, the preoccupation with difference can be endless. People's experience differs significantly on the base of your socio-economic and other positionalities. This excessive preoccupation with your standpoint and social location can be so fragmentary and so fragmentary that it can jeopardise the possibilities of forging a larger alliance and presenting a unified front. So this means focusing on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy. So, a larger critique against political economy and the capitalist system, the state can take a back seat, and you can keep on focusing on culture, language, ethnicity and other things that keep people divided. A rejection of universalism in favour of difference and insistence on the fluid and fragmented human subjects rather than collectivities because one of the most important tendencies of post-modernist theory is that it denies or criticises the idea of a more unified human collective identity.

It always talks about fluid and fragmented identities and fragmented subjectivities. So all these preoccupation with fragments and then fluidity prevent you from forging a more clearer set of demands, agenda all such certainties. So, there is a celebration of marginal and denying all causal analysis. This shift in perspective has been aided in different ways following key factors.

So what are the reasons that actually contributed to that? The collapse of existing socialism and the loss of prestige that this brought about for Marxism in Anglo-American academics. The enormous and continued political interrogations of white, middle-class feminism by black and third-world feminists. She is giving the historical context of this emergence of debates in the western world. So I am not going into the details. So she talks about the significance of psychoanalytical analysis led to the sexual differences even among different people.

So the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism and the increasing alliance of feminism with the same. This has also meant broadly taking one of the following two positions. Position of cultural feminism which sees feminists as having the exclusive right to describe and evaluate women. Therefore, passivity comes to mean peaceful, sentimentality means peaceful, sentimentality means nurture, etc. To say that the very definition of women is not challenged, only the dominant male definitions of the same come to be challenged.

The second point that she talks about is the position of nominalism. The preoccupation with the nominalism. It is argued that a category called women cannot exist. It is fictitious because there are several differences in race, class, etc., that construct women differently.

So, the second aspect that defined this poststructuralist and postmodernist position is a preoccupation with nominalism. Preoccupation with the cultural facts that define you, who you are. Thus, using the category of difference, feminists came to celebrate the aspects of femininity that were previously looked down upon or the different voices of women of different nationalities, races, classes, etc. came to be celebrated. So, there was a celebration of these multiple and then fragmented identities.

Their pluralities underlined without an analysis of the structures of racism, patriarchies, international division of labour and capitalism. Therefore, all analyses focused on identity, subjectivities, and representation. So this is the crux of the argument that scholars like Rege put forward that the focus shifted from the larger structural factors that make these differences uniquely oppressive and the focus shifted into fragmented identities which are marked by class and caste and other ethnicity and then racial differences. The pluralities are underlined without an analysis of the structures of racism, patriarchies and international division of labour and capitalism. Therefore, all analyses focused on identity, subjectivities, and representations.

Now, at this point, it is important to note that there has been a resurgence of identities, and the importance of naming the differences that emerge out of race, sex, and so on

cannot be denied. But it is important to underline that we do not have to accept the postmodernist notion of plurality or difference to take note of these differences. So Rege has a very critical position against this postmodernist celebration of differences. That is to say that no doubt the notion of differences did play a significant role in black and third world feminism, third world women naming their oppressions. However, as an analytical and political tool, its value is limited. That is the most important argument. This celebration of identities are fine but what do you do with these identities? What is the ultimate purpose of these identities is a very important question. A shift of focus from naming differences or different voices to social relations that convert differences into oppressions is imperative for feminist politics. So this is again a fundamental point. So, if you go by the previous argument, she is arguing that the relations of patriarchy and racism and the international division of labour are the larger forces that make these differences into oppressive mechanisms, without addressing that and the larger structural factors this celebration of differences will not yield any political positions and political dividends. A shift of focus from naming differences or different voices to social relations that convert differences into oppression is imperative for feminist politics. So she talks about P.H. Collins, an important black feminist and then talks about how she seems to have changed her position.

Now, we shall argue that we need instead a shift from focus on difference and multiple voices to the social relations which convert differences into oppression. How do we explain that women who belong to different caste positions experience oppression in different ways or why the women who are born in a lower caste family have to experience more stringent forms of domination? And so this has to be the focus rather than saying that the experiences of Dalit women are different and that white women and upper caste women are different. So, instead of merely celebrating the differences, the focus should be on much larger and structural factors that use these differences and then perpetuate the differences to different sections of social identities. So that is the argument that she puts forward.

Now, in the section on historicising differences, she gives a lot of examples from

women's movement, especially from Maharashtra, in which Dalit women are seen as putting forward broader politics and not merely celebrating their differences or emphasising their nominal identities and their unique experiences. So I am not going into the details because it is more of a historical analysis. The radical historiographies of colonial India, though they emphasise the autonomous role of peasants, labour and other subaltern groups, equated the historiography of colonial India with that of Indian nationalism. The brahminical reconstruction of the historiography of modern India in the works of Omvedt, Patil and Aloysius have underlined the histories of anti-hierarchical, pro-democratising collective aspirations of the lower caste masses, which are not easily encapsulated within the histories of anti-colonial nationalism. So, she is commenting on how Indian nationalism was understood.

The criticism is that the Indian nationalist movement always had a nationalist character and that most of the time it privileged the upper class experiences and upper caste women and how there are alternative studies or alternative arguments against that by Aloysius and Sumit Sarkar and Gail Omvedt and others. There are more debates about how these movements during Jyothirao Phule's movement in Maharashtra and other things shaped during the colonial period. So let us skip that. It is a more historical analysis, but she is arguing that many of these movements had real larger revolutionary potential, not merely emphasise the differences and then indulging in that. A review of all these counter-narratives underlines that the difference or the different voices of Indian Dalit women is not an issue of identity and politics, some authentic direct experience but from a long-lived history of lived struggles.

Dalit women play a crucial role in transferring across generations the oral repertoire of personalised yet very collective accounts of their families interaction with Baba Saheb or other leaders of the Dalit movement. The questions that emerge then is why this difference, different voice of the Dalit women inaudible in the two major new social movements of the 1970s, namely the Dalit movement and the women's. The next section traces the issue through the latter while making a brief reference to the former. After making this analysis of the pre-independent period in which the Dalit Women's voices were very loudly heard, Why that thing did not happen in the latter moment is what she

is trying to look into.

On the section on masculinisation of Dalithood and savarnisation of Womanhood. I hope you remember the point raised by Guru that the Dalit patriarchy is a reality and Dalit women have to really deal with that as well. She is also acknowledging that. So, she is taking a more detailed analysis of the Dalit movements and then trying to see how they were sensitive to women's issues. So the new social movement of the 1970s and the early 1980s saw the emergence of several organisations and fronts, such as the Sharmik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak Communist Party, Sharmik Mukti Dal, Yava Kranti Dal, none of whom limited the Dalit women to a token inclusion.

Their revolutionary agenda in different ways accorded them a central place. This is however not the case with the two other movements of the period, the Dalit Panther and the Women's movement. So this is again very important how the Dalit Panther party, which was more radical and militant to a large extent, sidelined the Women's question and then the Women's movement. It was constituted mainly by the left party-based Women's fronts and then the emergence of autonomous Women's groups. The Dalit Panthers made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s but in both their writings and their programs the Dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of their mother and the victimised sexual being.

That was the characterisation of Dalit Panthers and left party based Women's organisation. While they emphasised mostly on their subordinate position in terms of economic relations how the factory systems or capitalist system produce an exploitative system for the women. It was strategically avoided, giving a prime position to caste identities. So, all the women were conceived as victims including the Dalit women. The result is a classical exclusion. All Dalits are assumed to be males, and all women are savanna.

It may be argued that the categories of experience and personal politics were at core of the epistemology and politics of the Dalit Panthers movement and the Women's movement. Such a position resulted in a universalisation of what was in reality the middle-class, upper-class Women's experience and the Dalit male's experience. That is

the same argument that is put forward. It must be understood, underlined, that most of the feminist groups broadly agreed that in the Indian context, a materialistic framework was imperative to the analysis of Women's oppression.

However, in keeping with their roots in the class framework, there were efforts to draw commonalities across class and, to a lesser extent, caste or communities. This is apparent in the major campaigns launched by the Women's movement during this period. The absence of any analytical frame that in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar would view caste hierarchies and patriarchies as intrinsically linked in apparent and in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the Women's movement. For example, she talks about how there were very concerted movements against dowry by the liberal Women's organisations. She argues that the practice of dowry cannot be disconnected from Brahminical patriarchy because the practice of dowry is a heavily Brahminical practice and in the process of cultural imitation. A host of caste imitated this practice of dowry, brought this practice into their life. She argues that without looking into this Brahminical influence of practices like dowry and other things you cannot really fight this social evil. The present practice of dowry cannot be outside the process of Brahminisation and its impact on the marriage of practices. That Brahminic ideal led to a preference for dowry; marriage is well documented. Yeah, In fact, it is a colonial establishment of the legality of the Brahmin form of marriage that institutionalised and expanded dowry system.

The relative absence of caste as a category in the feminist discourse on violence has also led to the encapsulation of Muslim and Christian women within the question of talaq and divorce. So, this only concerns these two questions and not any other larger questions. Thus in retrospect it is clear that while the left-party based Women's organisations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous Women's groups collapsed caste into sisterhood, both leaving Brahminism unchallenged. So this is the central point: the autonomous Women's groups who are affiliated with the Dalits refused to look at the caste as a major category, and they refused to outrightly problematise and then critique Brahminism as a central constitutive category. The movement had addressed issues concerning women of the Dalit, tribal and minority communities, and substantial gains have been achieved, but feminist politics centring around the women of the most

marginalised communities could not emerge.

So that is a critique. Issues of sexuality and ethnicity are intrinsically linked to caste, and addressing sexual politics without a challenge to Brahminism results in lifestyle feminism. So this is an interesting thing, a term called lifestyle feminism, who flaunt feminist symbols and then maybe rhetoric and other things without really challenging the larger structural things and yet leaving a very compromised personal and political life.

The second section she talks about is a series of issues and series of violent incidents in India which really showed the involvement of upper caste women against the interest of the women and this again well documented that at the time of caste conflict, at the time of religious conflict, at the time of communal and other ethnic conflicts, the religious solidarity or religious affiliation overtakes any affiliation of gender. You will see upper caste women colluding with their men against or participating in violence against the lower caste women or a particular religious group, women belonging to a particular religious group actively participating in unleashing violence against the women of the other religion.

These questions and these processes have brought in a lot of important issues about the possibility of forging a larger alliance. So she gives an example of an anti-Mandal agitation where a lot of upper caste women fought or argued against extending reservation to Dalit women. So all these are examples. She is talking about the study of Kalpana Kannabiran, who has pointed out how the dialogue between Kshatriya and Dalit men about the Dalit agricultural labourer women dressing well could be solved only by a decision taken by men by men of both communities. Also the examples of continuing patriarchal influence even among Dalit families and among Dalit women.

Her point is that the Dalit women, of course, while they are at the receiving end, have not come out of the other structures of the patriarchal influence. This over-celebration of differences in and fragmented identities is quite hollow in that argument. And then gives the example of the Babri Masjid demolition, where there was a large section of women were involved, and even in the Hindu right-wing mobilisation, women are a very

important party to that or a host of other communal violence in in Gujarat or other places women actively participate in violence against the other religious group. So such reconceptualisation calls for a critique of Brahminical hierarchies from a gender perspective. Such critics have the potential to translate the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations and hierarchies.

In Brahminical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual division of labour are intermeshed such that the elevation of caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of the caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. She is talking about the larger Brahminical influence that significantly affected the prospects of women. So she is again inviting our attention to the practice of lower castes withdrawing women from productive processes outside the work and then making them work only in the domestic sphere, and this was seen as a symbol of more respectable families or more respectable traditions and other things. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour.

Brahminism, in turn, locates this as the failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification for their impurity. So the women who go out for work, who work in the field, women who have to travel a lot in the public spaces are seen as people with loose morality whose sexuality is available to others, and this again was imputed to the inability of their men to control their women properly. So there is a very close connection between the division of labour and the sexual division of labour and the Brahminical patriarchy. That is the point that she talks about. Hence caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour.

Multiple patriarchies exist, and many of them overlaps and differences are structured. Brahminisation has been a two-way process of acculturation and assimilation, and through history, there has been a Brahminical refusal to universalise a single patriarchal mode. Thus, multiple patriarchies result from both Brahminical conspiracy and the

relation of the caste groups to the means of production. There are, therefore according to Sangari, discrete specific to caste as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements. If feminists are to challenge these divisions then mode of organisations and struggles should encompass all the social inequalities patriarchy is related to, embedded and structured by.

Does the different voices of Dalit women challenge these divisions? In the next section, we outline the non-Brahminical rendering of women's liberation in Maharashtra. So this is this is the question that the patriarchy cuts across every caste, so does the Dalit women have the right to move beyond that? Now, in the non-Brahminical rendering of women's liberation, she undertakes an example of that case in Maharashtra. These different organisations put forth varying non-Brahminical ideological positions and yet have come together on several issues, such as the issues of Bhartiya, Shree Mukti Diwas and the issues of reservation for OBC women in the parliament. The emergence of an autonomous Dalit women's organisation led to a major debate, a set rolling by the essay Dalit women talk differently, Gopal Guru's essay that we discussed earlier. A series of discussions around the paper were organised in Pune by different feminist groups, and a two-day seminar by the Alochana Center for Research and Documentation on Women in 1996.

So let us see what is her take on Guru. Guru argued that to understand Dalit women's need to talk differently, it was necessary to delineate both internal and external factors that have a bearing on this phenomenon. So, the internal factor, as we mentioned, is the existence of Dalit patriarchy and external voices, external factors that the general feminists are co-opting. He locates their need to talk differently in a discourse of dissent against the middle-class women's movement by the Dalit men and the moral economy of the peasant movement. It is not of dissent. He argues against their exclusion from both the political and cultural arena.

It further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and, therefore, representation of Dalit women issues by non-Dalit women as less valid and less authentic. Though Guru's argument is well taken, we agree that Dalit women must name

the difference to privilege knowledge claims based on direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to narrow identity politics. So this is a very fascinating point of discussion. Rege is the opinion that while diversity has to be acknowledged, the argument that only a person who occupies a position understands the reality better will lead to more narrowing and then narrowed fields of view and then narrow identity politics.

Such a narrow frame may, in fact, limit the emancipatory potential of the Dalit women's organization and also their epistemological standpoint. The left party-based women's organisations have viewed the emergence of autonomous women's organisations as a setting up separate. Moghe argues that despite the earlier critique of the left-party-based women's groups made by autonomous women's groups, the context of Hindutva and the new economic policy has brought both parties together, and the autonomous women's groups have once again come to share a common platform with the left. The subtext of Mokhe's argument is that autonomy is limiting and that the Dalit women's autonomous organisation faced the threat of being autonomous from the masses. Because the moment you celebrate and talk in an increasingly exclusive language, you get separated from the larger masses.

To label any new autonomous assertion from the marginalised as identitarian and limited to experience, she argues was to overlook the history of struggles by groups to name themselves and their politics. Again, these observations are about the experiences of other organisations in Maharashtra. The secular position is critiqued as Brahminical and individualistic, and the Ambedkarite conceptualisation of the Dhamma in community life is underlined. The common civil courts are opposed to customary law. So these are all about how different arguments put forward by different organisations are presented.

The Dalit Mahila Sanghatana has critiqued the persistence of the Manuvadi Sanskriti among the Dalit male who otherwise traced their lineage to Phule- -Ambedkar ideology. The Sanghatana proposed putting its manifesto at the center, which would be the most Dalits of Dalit women. These non-Brahminical renderings of feminist politics have led to some self-reflexivity among the autonomous women's group, and their responses could be broadly categorised as a non-dialectical position of those who grant that historically. It

is now important that Dalit women take the leadership, but they also do not revise non-Brahminical feminist politics for themselves. That is one of the important observations. Secondly, the left position collapses caste into class and continues to question the distinct materiality of caste and who have registered a note of dissent on the declaration of December 25th as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas.

And see a self-reflexive position of this autonomous women's group who recognise the need to formulate and revise feminist politics for the non-Brahminical renderings are viewed as more emancipatory. These are some of the important learning points that she puts forward. This is an important essay in the sense that it actually problematises the difference that Gopal Guru articulates. While Gopal Guru is very assertive in arguing that Dalit women possess a distinct voice and they talk differently, Rege is raising more questions about how this can also lead to fragmentation without leading to a concerted political movement. So she is arguing that, while these differences are important, these organisers should be more politically motivated and have a more ambitious radical aim in dealing with or in frontally attacking structures of oppression like Brahminism or capitalism or the violence or the domination of the state.

That is her take on this whole debate. As I mentioned earlier, it is part of a larger, very vibrant debate about people's positions and whether this positionality renders their experience more noteworthy. Does it provide an epistemological privilege and what are the political implications of that epistemological privilege?

We are concluding this paper here and this week's discussion on Dalit sociology and mainstream sociology in India. See you at the next class. Thank you.