

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Week-11

Lecture-51

The Cracked Mirror: Introduction

Welcome back to the class. We are in the eleventh week and in this week, we are going to take up a very interesting theme and a very interesting book titled The Cracked Mirror. This is a book co-written by two scholars, Professor Gopal Guru and Professor Sundar Sarukkai. and this book has an interesting history. This book is considered to be widely, extremely important in the whole of Social Sciences in the last one or two decades. And this book is prominent on various counts.

They have titled it The Cracked Mirror, an Indian debate on experience and theory. In the previous classes, especially in the previous week, we discussed Dalit feminism and looked into two specific essays. One is by Gopal Guru, titled The Dalit Women Speak Differently and another by Sharmila Rege, again an essay starting with the same title, Dalit Women Speak Differently. So, each of these articles brought about issues about the questions of positionality, the questions of standpoint theory, the questions of how experience enables people to understand social reality differently and how multiple positionalities and multiple identities indeed have pedagogical and epistemological values and how they ought to be understood and they ought to be promoted.

And we have seen Sharmila Rege's take on Gopal Guru's argument that Dalit women indeed speak differently and that that epistemological that standpoint privilege must be granted to them. Sharmila Rege has a more cautious approach because she thinks that an uncritical celebration of these identities can become quite apolitical and rob off all the

political or revolutionary projects from these movements. So, in all those debates, we came across questions about specific localities, specific identities or the experiences of the people at the margins making claims about their experience and their views being taken seriously by the people who occupy the centre stage. So, in Social Science debates as well, you see this as a question about the debate between the people who occupy the centre stage and the people who occupy the peripheries. And here, the centre stage as well as the peripheries I hope you understand, I am using it in a historical sense because in almost every society you have this huge social stratification and social discrimination in place which historically privilege certain groups with cultural and social different forms of capitals while it denies that to certain other groups.

So, this particular book came out in that kind of a larger context, and this was indeed inspired by an essay written by Gopal Guru in 2002 in this very important Indian journal Economic and Political Weekly, asking the question of how egalitarian Social Sciences are in India. So, basically, he raises this question about egalitarianism in the Indian Social Science field, and this was a very provocative essay, mostly written in a polemical style; of course, it is highly scholarly, but it was written in a hard-hitting way. Gopal Guru is a Dalit scholar and a person of repute. He was a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, now the editor of Economic and Political Weekly, and a person who has contributed immensely to the theoretical debates about Dalit studies, Subaltern studies and a host of other issues, especially in political theory. So, his argument was a scathing attack on the inequality and Inegalitarianism that exists in the field of Social Sciences and especially the domination of the upper class, what he calls the TTB the twice, the top twice-born castes, including the Brahmins and the other upper caste elite groups. So, he argued that the Indian social science scenario is structurally unequal and is just a replica of the Indian society, which is heavily unequal and is made unequal on the basis of caste inequalities and caste inequalities you will also find in the Indian social scenario and that is a problem.

He addresses this essay to garner public attention to this whole question of unequal or lack of egalitarian principles in Social Sciences, which has very specific consequences.

So, he says that this inequality or lack of egalitarianism has created two divisions, one a group of more privileged people, who are more so called meritorious people who are more affluent and those who specialise in theory in producing theory in debating theory in reflecting over theory and another section of the subaltern the downtrodden people who are coming from the more marginalised background who only speak about the empirical reality. I think the major provocation for this work is informal ideas and the comments and arguments that float in the academic field that the Dalit scholars who work on their own lives or deal with issues only merely describe their experience. They get emotional and keep describing their scenario and are incapable of theorising it, or they are refusing to theorise it, or they are incapable of theorising it; they keep giving more evident, more obvious empirical facts than descriptions. This has been criticised by people who, of course, occupy different social categories as substandard work and which lack theoretical rigour.

So, Gopal Guru takes a very critical position on this particular characterisation of the Dalit work as mundane and non-theoretical and also he is extremely critical of the claim that only certain people are capable of doing theory. Because this whole idea about doing theory has been seen as more intellectually challenging, it is seen as intellectually fascinating work, but it is seen as the monopoly of a small group of people and this small group of people are evidently essentially coming from the privileged sections of the society. So, he writes and highlights this whole issue, and he urges to explain why this is the case and why the theory has been the fiefdom of a group of people. He provides historical reasons and context for that, and more importantly, he argues that the Dalits must very boldly come to the field of theorisation because theorisation is so important. So, this is one of the important provocations for the book, and this publication in EPW created some responses, but not much later, this professor of philosophy professor, Sundar Sarukkai, was with the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore, he joined the issue, and then he wrote an essay about problematising this whole question titled experience and theory from Habermas to Gopal Guru. It was a conversation with guru, partly agreeing with Guru but also taking this debate much more than that. So, once these two essays really caught the attention of many sociologists and scholars, it became

one of the most discussed books in Social Science research in recent years. It was widely discussed on the university campuses, and there were comments, criticisms and later both scholars decided to make it a book and Oxford University publication brought it as a book in 2012, and it is titled *The Cracked Mirror*, and it became one of the very popular books, and this book has totally nine chapters. The first one is egalitarianism and social science in India, which is Gopal Guru's essay that I mentioned.

And secondly Sundar Sarukkai's response *Experience and Theory* from Habermas to Gopal Guru and then another chapters, understanding experience, experience space and justice, experience and the ethics of theory, ethics of theorising. Then very interesting chapters on phenomenology of untouchability and archaeology of untouchability. So, due to the paucity of time I will be restricting myself only to the this , the introduction section and first and the second chapters. These are the very important chapters, but other chapters are also equally important. these are broader chapters that deal with broader themes. Whereas these two chapters the last seventh and eighth chapter are also very fascinating chapters specifically on the questions of untouchability,

I would strongly urge you to read this book, it is considered to be a must read for Social Science students across disciplines whether it is Sociology, Anthropology, History or Political Science it is a very important book. So, in this class, I am going to look into the introduction, and we will go; I did not want to prepare a PPT because a PPT may not do justice to the richness of the argument. So, we will go slowly into these chapters, and I will take this particular session to summarise this introduction and then two sessions for the first essay by Gopal Guru and another two sessions for the essay by Sundar Sarukkai. So, we basically take five sessions to discuss these three chapters.

The idea of experience, particularly in the Indian context, is becoming respectable in academic discourse. A major impulse to this revival of interest in the category of experience is the continued frustration with Indian social theory. The emergence of identity politics is a grim reminder of this deficiency in the theories theorising social reality. The politics of identity seems to have entered the discipline of Social Sciences visibly and aggressively. Claims of identity are often grounded in specific experiences.

So, basically, as the title suggests, It is about the experience and theory in the Indian context, and if you remember the arguments in the book by Sandra Hardings and others on intersectionality, it is a more global scenario. They were talking about women's questions. But here, both scholars want to anchor their work in the Indian context and mostly revolve around the Dalit issue.

So, he is talking about how experience as a category is becoming an important prominent category in Social Sciences, though it was looked down upon in certain philosophical areas until very recently. One of the reasons why experience is becoming important is because of the emergence of postmodernism and with the emergence of identity politics. So, in identity politics, we know that we discussed in the previous classes that postmodernism heralded an era where people began to look at their own positionality and then realise that their social milieu is different from that of others and thereby, their experience could be different from that of others. This was again buttressed by larger theoretical arguments, which argued that especially the perspective of the vulnerable groups provides a more objective reality to society because they are not a part of larger dominating ideologies. Postmodernism in a sense brought focus to the multiple identities and people who experience different positionalities and subsequently the argument that these people who occupy different positionalities invariably experience society differently.

So, this whole introduction is about that. There is nothing new in this observation, but what is perhaps more topical is the attempt to validate diverse experiences, and this, by default, involves a critique of any attempt to categorise diverse experiences into a few universal categories. He is talking about this critique against or the tendency of this emergence of experience as an important category here. The suspicion of universal categories particularly holds for those categories in or catalysed by the cognitive domain of dominant communities and cultures. So, these particularities of identities are also important because they are important reminders about the fallacies of a universalising tendency if you just remember, the dominant ideology of any society is the ideology of the dominant class.

It is an argument by Karl Marx. So, similarly to every universal tendency, every universal idea will invariably be the ideas and categories of the dominant group, and they also have an inherent tendency to either marginalise or subsume the alternative identities that exist in the spheres of marginality. There is a need to move resolutely from politics of identity to ambitions of original ideas. So, he is pushing to move away from identity politics because it is very limited in its objective; it asserts its own distinctiveness and then argues that it differs from others.

Guru wants a much larger, much sharper political goal for this identity politics. He argues that could be very limited. The debate in the present volume revolves around the contestation of certain well-entrenched beliefs about theory and its relation to experience. In particular, presupposition based on variations of a Platonic theory of ideas as if certain ideas are existing abstraction. The debate in this book revolves around contesting such disembodied notions of ideas for they are accepted to imply that experience is subordinate to ideas.

He talks about a very important argument, especially if you look into the debate between analytical philosophy and continental philosophy. The continental philosophy talks about, it is not happy with the assertions of analytical philosophy that there is an objective reality and that science and rationality will bring you the objective reality out there. This whole argument that experience cannot be reduced to ideas and that people have access to certain ideas, and this access is always mediated through experience, is an extremely important argument. In the contemporary time, the subordination can also be read as one between experience and theory, where the experience is posterior to theory in the sense that the theory orders experience. So, the conventional academic wisdom according to Guru is as if the theory explains your experience,

Theory explains your experience, and many times, this theory is outside the experience. That is why he is using theory that is posterior to the experience. In contrast, there is argument for the primacy of experience from which theory not only follows but also cannot exist without this foundation. So, the other tendency, the other argument, is to give primacy to experience because you experience the world, you experience the theory, and you experience the realm of ideas basically through your experience. You understand the theory, the values, the ideas through your experience.

Primarily, this is the largest space of debate in this book and we believe that contemporary social theory cannot but engage with these issues creatively and comprehensively. So, that is a fundamental theme that Sarukkai and Gopal Guru want to explore in this book. The very idea that social theory has had a long and troubled relationship with the notion of experience. Inspired by the theoretical structures of Natural Sciences, which in turn was modelled on the unique structure of Mathematics, Social Science kept aside experiences as useful theoretical term. If you look into the history of Sociology itself, Sociology was originally modelled after Natural Sciences.

Well, that it is known as *zōon* and *logos*. It is supposedly the scientific study of society. Scholars, including Durkheim, argued that it is an objective study of social reality. Even Weber argued that it is an objective study of the subjective values of the actors. So, experience or the phenomenological turn comes much later in Social Sciences because it was preoccupied with the question of objectivity.

The reason is simple. For Natural Science, experience is problematic since it explicitly involves the human subject and more importantly is completely private. So, on the other hand, natural science, to a large extent, even now, dismisses and neglects a subjective dimension because the person who engages in research is supposedly absent. Because you are supposedly dealing with an objective reality out there, and the experience as a researcher is insignificant, it simply does not count. Any claim to universality and this duplicability, replicability is seemingly lost in the domain of experience. This is another very important point of difference between Natural Sciences and Social Sciences.

Natural Sciences tend to speak in the language of laws, And you can very well understand that Social Sciences also, especially Sociology also speak in the language of laws. If you remember the law of three stages by Auguste Comte. He wanted to create a Sociology model after that of Physics. But now nobody talks about laws in Anthropology or Sociology or even in Economics.

They talk about laws with a lot of caution and conditionalities attached to them. So, it has a history and that is what, Guru and Sarukkai are talking about. On the other hand, it is evident from the writings of some political philosophers that experience plays an important epistemological role in the production of thought, Who you are and how your location, social, political and economic location, how you are anchoring provides you with a very unique vantage point to understand and engage with and then construct theories. Experience is before thinking and knowing.

However, it is susceptible to radical improvement using theory and philosophy. This is a very important argument. Experience is prior to thinking and knowing because your experience is real. You are born into a family; your childhood experiences are real; the experiences that you that you encounter in your youth are real. So, many times it, it comes automatically; it comes initially, even before thinking and knowing, but it is susceptible to radical improvement by means of theory and philosophy.

Here, he gives the example of Ambedkar, who foregrounded his experience to understand the dominant ideologies, to understand Manusmriti, and his understanding of Manusmriti was heavily influenced by his experience of of being treated as an untouchable by upper caste people. So, Manusmriti is not only a treatise written by a saint sometime back; for him, Manusmriti is a book containing the essential elements of insults and humiliation he proved. So, once he reads Manusmriti in that context, then Manusmriti appears in a very, very different form. This reading is entirely different from an upper-caste person who reads Manusmriti or somebody who does not have not undergone this particular experience. So, finally, experience as the source of reflective consciousness denies a text the advantage of being authorial.

This particular experience allows a reader to read a book in in multiple ways. So, what exactly the author intended is that once the book is written, the author has no control over that. Then the book speaks differently, and it depends upon the context in which the book is read, it depends upon the person who reads the book. So, this experience is something central in denying this whole idea of the book as a complete production of its author.

It is in the sense that the existing experience guides a person to make a careful selection of a text or intellectually inherit that text, which can establish a link between historical and contemporary experience. As for example, the experience of untouchability that was transmitted from one generation to another through the complex mediation of caste and patriarchy. So, given this, why is this continued distrust of experience in the construct of the theoretical? Partly, it is a product of a particular intellectual history in which theory was bifurcated from experience. So, one important reason why experience was subordinated to theory was, of course, the preoccupation with objectivity, preoccupation with the scientific method, preoccupation with creating universal ideas and other things. Another thing he says is because of the theory production or intellectual history, there was a bifurcation between history, experience and then theory making.

As mentioned earlier, original Natural Sciences had much to do with it. Theory in the Natural Sciences can perhaps make do without explicitly factoring in the individual's experience, But this does not happen easily. The history of science can well be read as a systematic negation of the experiential. So, history of science, they argue now that it took a very specific turn by actively denying the author's experience.

If you look into the history of science, we do not get sufficient insights about how individual scientists, their lived experiences, their context and their ideas influenced Science in a very specific manner. So, that particular dimension is quite often neglected or negated. Galileo's dictum that launched modern science was fundamentally about removing of secondary qualities in scientific description. So, he is talking about the earlier tendency where certain things, certain qualities, for example, weight or length or measurable things are seen as primary qualities and a lot of other things, your perception, the taste and a host of other things which are considered to be more individualistic, more idiosyncratic were considered to be secondary. He says that this has a much larger history going back to how Science was understood and then practised.

Science also succeeded in enterprising because it focused on the description of the properties in the world. But this, again, is not an easy task. As philosophers have long argued, descriptions of the properties of the world are primarily and fundamentally

descriptions of our experience of the world; This is a very important argument because even when you talk about empiricism, there are arguments that your access to the reality, the so-called realities are mediated through your senses. And the whole argument about structuralism, the language turn, brings in the fundamental role of language in mediating the reality goes to the reader.

So, the reality out there is mediated through your experiences and senses. The phenomenological tradition, both Indian, where almost all traditions are fundamentally phenomenological and Western philosophy, embrace this basic insight and instead of artificially breaking up the subject and object, they look for ways to extract the objective from the omnipresence of the subjective. So, this is not something I was unaware of that, but the fundamental ways in which they looked at it they still try to create an objective from the multiplicity of these subjective experiences. The appearance of experience in social sciences as an important category of the act of theorising is indebted to critical theories of subjectivity drawn primarily from what is usually referred to as continental philosophy; so, as I told you,, as opposed to analytical philosophy, this is more phenomenological in character.

It talks about human experience, ideas, intuition and and other things. The concomitant critique of universality allowed the possibility of seriously engaging with issues such as local knowledge, ethnocultures and so on. Because analytical philosophy is often criticised for being quite Eurocentric. It is being criticised for using very harsh scientific frameworks, without being culturally sensitive to other cognitive ways in which people make sense of, if you look into the cultural specificities of knowledge production, ok, there are multiple ways in which, multiple epistemologies, there are multiple ontologies So, analytical philosophy is rather insensitive to these arguments, whereas continental philosophy talks about that.

At the same time, and perhaps partly inspired by this revolution, groups and communities began to assert primacy of their experience. Moreover, they began to resist attempts by outsiders to describe and recategorise their experience. So, this again, as we mentioned yesterday, is a very controversial debatable issue. For example, can men study

and understand and explain women's issues? Or can upper-caste people study the experiences of Dalits and then describe it objectively? Can a foreigner study Indian society well? So, these are extremely contentious, philosophically very deeper issues.

An easy answer of yes or no will not be sufficient. These questions, especially this book is a very important insight into these debates. So, this whole question of somebody coming and claiming, if you look into the history of Anthropology is exactly that. The history of the entire Western knowledge production is about that. It has been argued that the non-Western people do not have history.

So, we have to make history for them, The non-Western people do not know how to present themselves, how to theorise about themselves, so that we are coming to theorise that. So, maybe at present that cross form of Orientalism might not be there, or prejudice might not be there, but their remnants still exist. But these reactive modes tend to dissipate, as has happened with postmodernism, for example, primarily because of the lack of attempt to theorise the idea of experience by drawing on different concepts of frameworks. So, Guru says that though the experience has come back to Social Science, the postmodern turn, which celebrates this multiplicity of identity, or which celebrates the fragmentation of identity falls short in theorising it further, And also, it is least concerned about the political implications of that.

So, we discussed that in the previous class, that one of the major criticisms against postmodernism, or the celebration of multiple identities, or this endless story of fragmentation is that postmodernism is more or less an apolitical project. It does not have an inherent political project. In other words, even when individuals' or groups' experiences come to be valorised, the theories of experience are largely Eurocentric; so it is not only theorising insufficiently, but most of the postmodern theories are highly Eurocentric. The theories that spoke of the primacy of experience did not draw on the conceptual framework available in traditions such as Indian, Chinese, African, and so on.

Ironically, this generated universal theories of experience based on the critique of universality itself. So, the postmodern critique of universality because the moment you talk about alternative identities and the need to move beyond the singularity, the

universal, you are talking about the questions of marginality, you are talking about the questions of non-hegemonic categories, or non-dominant categories. But ironically, these non-hegemonic categories also were articulated in a very Eurocentric argument, because they were least receptive or sensitive to the non-Western ideas and epistemologies. Perhaps this paradox lies at the very heart of theorising. This inherent paradox has serious consequences for social theories in non-Western societies that have inherited as many times without due process and due thought, theories from the continental and Anglo-American traditions.

The problem of understanding their experience through their framework is indeed a problem of greater urgency for this society. So, he is inviting attention to these fundamental questions. This book is one small attempt to consider ways of thinking about experience in particular and experience constituting the complex entity. It brings together four published articles and also four new chapters. Obviously, we do not have, do not in any way claim to have engaged with the multitudes of Indian experiences, but focus on a few to illustrate one particular mode of thinking about such experience.

While predominantly dealing with and at the same time not fully dealing with the Dalit experience, we nevertheless look to expanding the possibilities of describing other experiences through attempts similar to ours. So, this is the conceptual core of this introduction. They are introducing the theme of how experience has made a comeback to the Social Sciences and how it still needs to be highly theorised. And then the remaining part is about the chronology of this. In the development of this book, Guru wrote the first essay and Sundar Sarukkai responded to that and then how they decided to put it together, how they went to different universities, and how they put together this in EPW. So, I am not going into that because these are more descriptions.

Now, let us get on with the first chapter. This essay, Egalitarianism and the Social Sciences in India, we will take it up in the coming class. Thank you.