

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**

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**Week-11**

**Lecture-52**

The Cracked Mirror: How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India?

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing our discussion on this very important book, *The Cracked Mirror*, jointly written by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai. In the previous class, we looked at the core arguments in the introductory chapter, in which they actually presented the theme. So, their basic contention is that experience has not been adequately theorised in the Indian context across Sciences and Social Sciences. Experience has been given a rudimentary treatment, it has been neglected, more so in Natural Sciences. However, in Social Science, they are making a comeback, especially with the postmodernist turn, where identities and positionalities are important.

But again, most of these arguments from postmodernist positions are heavily Eurocentric. They also lack the political edge or political criticality or the political angle to that. So, these two scholars engage in a conversation and a dialogue on a series of issues about the questions of theory making, theory and experience in the Indian context. So, this is the essay, as I mentioned earlier, which provoked this whole series.

Maybe you can even characterise it as a very polemical, provocative essay written in a very strong language. It is not a very typical, very refined thing. It is a provocative frontal polemical attack on the existing inequalities. Guru uses some of the very sharp usages, which has become very popular in the Indian academia. For example, his argument about the theoretical Brahmins and empirical Sudras, extremely powerful, extremely sharp terminologies, theoretical Brahmins and empirical Sudras you find in this essay. So, let us get to that.

As I told you, we will take two sessions to do this essay. I will go into detail, mostly reading almost every paragraph of this particular essay, so that we do not miss out on anything. So, in this first paragraph, he is talking about, during the 90s, a series of debates and essays revolved around the quality of Social Sciences in India. And I think that was also the time when ICSSR undertook a periodical survey the of the state of affairs of Social Sciences. So, there was a series of essays that looked into the so-called crisis or the so-called, so-called decline of standards in Social Sciences.

Sociology is more familiar because sociologists keep looking into the way in which the discipline is practised. But this was a larger comment by a series of scholars like Peter D'Souza, Ramachandra Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and others, who commented on a state of crisis in Social Sciences with a sense that the standards are falling. So, Guru does not disagree with this whole argument that there are crises and issues in Social Sciences. But he is flagging, upholding and highlighting a very important central concern. And that he is saying is the principle of egalitarianism is very badly missing in Indian Social Sciences.

He is arguing that this egalitarianism concept is on the centre stage. Because this concept of egalitarianism is central, important, and fundamental because of the ethical, political, and practical consequences of this particular principle. Principles of egalitarianism, as we shall spell out in greater detail in the following session, become relevant in the context where the Social Sciences are divided into empirically inferiorised and critically privileged domains of knowledge. So, Guru, I recognise that contemporary Social Science in India is divided into highly privileged theoretical discussions, arguments and theoretical engagement on the one side and a subordinated, interiorised field of empirical description, elaborations, storytelling data collection and other stuff. So, as the last 50 to 60 years of academic experience with Indian Social Sciences shows, Social Science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy, dividing it into the vast inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical Social Sciences, and privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity that makes them intellectually superior to the former.

So, he is making this binary between the people, the masses, on the other hand, who work on empirical data, and they are more numbers and a small number of elites who indulge in theory,ok, who debate theory, who create theory, who live in theory. To use a more familiar analogy, Indian Social Sciences presents a pernicious divide between theoretical brahmins and empirical sudras. The pernicious dichotomy indicates the lack of egalitarian conditions in Social Science practices in the country.

Now, the egalitarian principle and Social Science practice. It is argued here that the egalitarian principle provides both moral opportunity and capacity to interrogate the exclusionary nature of Social Science practices in the country. So, he is placing this notion of egalitarianism in the centre.

In terms of purity, pollution, divide and agrahara, the exclusive dwelling space of top born castes. Agrahara is where brahmins live and the exclusive dwelling place. Moreover, it also provides normative direction to alternative modes of reorganising the boundaries of Social Sciences to make them more inclusive. The reorganisation of Social Sciences in egalitarian lines seeks to question the gatekeeping by some. So, he is saying that this egalitarianism or the lack of egalitarianism in social science is a reality and not natural.

It is, of course, historically constituted, and it also involves the active participation of a few who work as gatekeepers . This gatekeeping mechanism is another very useful term that, in the ordinary sense, just allows some people to come in, but this could be structural and cultural factors. There are gatekeeping mechanisms; for example, Mark Galender talks about that extensively when he talks about social mobility and education and other things. So, almost every society which is hierarchical in character, which has very powerful systems of stratification, there are visible and invisible systems of gatekeeping which ensure that only certain people get access to or are admitted into more exclusive, more privileged places. First, the egalitarian principle has the capacity to bring out within the practitioner of Social Sciences a sense of more responsibility that would force the latter to offer justification as to why she is privileging a particular social language, Social Science language, say of only theory over the empirical description of the particular phenomenon under investigation.

So, one of the implications of the principle of egalitarianism, Gopal Guru argues, brings in more responsibility on the part of the Social Science practitioners to be more reflexive and to answer why he or she is following a particular theory or particular Social Science practice which in this case would be something more theoretical. To put it differently, egalitarianism would interrogate all kinds of intellectual mores for their arbitrariness because it would tell you that a particular method, theory, or orientation is not something automatic in itself. Your inclination to use a particular framework, to study a particular subject, and then make a particular theoretical argument is not something of your own volition. It is not based on your own volition, it is not based on your own intellectual acumen, but it has a larger social context. For example, the egalitarian principle of social sciences would not accept the following explanations.

One has an innate ability to do only theory. Doing theory is a part of one's natural disposition, and one is privileged to do only theory because one has been born from the thinking head of pure bodies. These are highly problematic claims when you talk about a thinking group of people and people who are not capable of thinking, but these are highly prevalent commonsensical knowledge among certain sections of the population who think that they have a certain predisposition to thinking intellectual labour because for historically they have been doing that while certain other caste are incapable of doing. So, this attitude is very prevalent whether you recognise it or not. It is a very prevalent tendency among certain upper castes who genuinely believe that they are endowed with the capacity to think intellectually and engage in abstract thinking, reflection and theorising while others are not.

Secondary to the first, the egalitarian import basically interrogates the hierarchical division that suggests that some are born with a theoretical spoon in their mouth and the vast majority with an empirical port around their neck. Again, very, very powerful usage. Some are born with a silver spoon because that is a very popular usage. Some are born with a silver spoon, and others are born with an empirical port around their neck he is mentioned here, but it is a reference to a discriminatory practice that existed in

Maharashtra where the lower caste were supposed to carry a pot around their neck so that the spit will fall only in this particular port and they are not, they were not allowed to spit anywhere else. So, again, he makes it a contradiction.

Third, the egalitarian principle would also interrogate the epistemological imperialism that empowers non-Dalits or tribals to launch intellectual expeditions to conquer new epistemological territories that belong to the Dalit or Adivasi intellectual universe. So, this is another interesting area because there are of course a lot of studies, researches carried out by upper caste scholars who show utter lack of sensitivity, lack of sympathy. He talks about inverse orientalism later, but this again is a reality. It is not that easy to go to an upper caste family and then introduce yourself by saying, ok, I want to study your family, or I want to study your kinship system; I want to study your family system. You would not even get access to that.

You would not even get access to a flat, or you would not get access to a gated community, or to do social research among their inmates. It is impossible unless you have some connections. On the other hand, any researcher can simply walk into a slum, any researcher can simply walk into a lower-class locality, introduce themselves as a researcher and then without any ethical or ideological dilemma ask very personal, private questions about their family life, sexual life, expenditure, consumption, what not, almost everything. This is possible because of the unequal power relation between the researcher and the researcher. So, Guru is talking about an emerging tendency of upper caste scholars walking into the Dalit or tribal households, tribal intellectual universe without a point of reflection, without a point of dilemma or oblivious to this larger ethical questions and then conducting research and then making a reward for themselves.

The egalitarian principle would puncture this modernist overconfidence by questioning on moral grounds the competitive elements that render every field of knowledge as a free zone of investigation that can be taken over by anyone who follows the ground rules, procedures and protocols that are devised by the gatekeepers of the social sciences. So, these are the upper caste people who walk into the lives of the Dalits and are the people

who have made the protocols. So, the protocol should be about objectivity, scientific rigour and impartiality, certain ethical rules and other things. But they are the ones who made it and they are the ones who are actually making use of it. Thus, the egalitarian principle undermines the competitive model of doing the Social Science.

So, here, this egalitarian principle would really question that the seemingly objective procedures are okay or the seemingly common-sensical argument that anybody can study anybody because that seems to be a fair rule. Anybody can study anybody; any group can study any group, which seems to be a very fair, democratic and liberal position. But behind this seemingly benign statement, there are very serious structures of inequality which very badly affect one particular section, which is the already deprived and already dehumanised section. It would put moral pressure on moderns to keep off some fields of knowledge that might not be, and that might get better intellectual treatment from others. So, as I told you, there are a lot of studies that make a caricature of Dalit and Adivasi's lives, their fashion style, and their living style.

The egalitarian import into understanding the Social Science practice in India suggests the following reason. First, it would not approve the argument like one cannot demand equal treatment in all fields of intellectual pursuit. This whole egalitarian principle will unsettle this assumptions. Similarly, it would not approve of the intellectual position that some fields of enquiry must be left free for the specialists.

So, it again argues that certain specialists are endowed with certain theoretical or methodological expertise and must be allowed to do certain studies; only they must be allowed to do so. Secondly, egalitarian principle would not approve of rigid ground rules, procedures and protocols that are restrictive in nature. Basically, he is talking about the blind sense of a very peripheral sense of democratisation because a peripheral sense of democratisation would, a liberal sense of democratisation would say that everybody has equal rights But that is not sufficient given the historical inequality. Further, the egalitarian principle, at least at the theoretical level, offers a promise to those cultural groups whose entry into the intellectual field has been historically prohibited by social forces in India.

In the following section, he provides fascinating explanations as to why the Dalits have been lacking in knowledge production, especially in theory and construction. There is a history and context to that. So that is something important. For example, one of the epistemological variants can render the field of knowledge, both theoretical and practical as epistemology or social action communicable across cultural borders with persons of any cultural background in principle capable of utilising it. Thirdly, this egalitarianism presupposes a possibility of a common stock of concepts and categories that are equally available for use and even misused by a person from any caste or social origin.

So, this is again a very important point. So why does this egalitarian principle have this ability to fight with or to struggle with the hegemonic practices that create certain conditions as extremely necessary? Theory as an authoritative practice has destructive implications, particularly for those young scholars who, in their desire to follow the authoritarian, authoritative academic personality, sacrifice their insights that can flourish outside the authoritative intellectual practice. So, Gopal Guru's writings also I am sure is heavily inspired by the everyday practices of academics in the Indian university systems, where he could maybe as a professor of a university, very well personally visit the graded systems of stratification within universities and within classrooms, where the more affluent students will follow or will be more encouraged by the affluent caste professors or upper caste professors, while the students who lack the English sophistication and then the theoretical rigour and command over language would be sidelined by them and they would be left to fend for themselves. So, these are the immediate provocations.

It is not only a Guru's intellectual concern, but also is heavily influenced by his observation of the Indian academic practices. As an intellectual force, this hegemonic practice would lead to caricaturing the Dalit Bahujan as epistemically dumb, pushing them into empirical ghettos or confining their intellectual or theoretical ambitions to the dominant methodological modes to a significant degree. So, this very discouraging atmosphere in the classrooms or in the universities things would either, make a caricature of any attempt by the Dalits and then make fun of it or instil a sense among the Dalit

scholars that they are not capable of theorising and it is better to go by the more safer path of doing some empirical work and then present it and then be safe with that. So, he says that a vicious circle introduces, reintroduces and reinforces the systems of inequality and then unequal academic engagements in the classroom and educational settings. Thus, the lack of genuine egalitarian principles within mainstream Social Science practices, as we shall argue later, would crush the confidence of the marginalised Dalits and Adivasis, lower their esteem and humiliate them through epistemological patronage or charity.

In this context, it is necessary to ask the question whether we have followed the egalitarian principle in the practice of Social Sciences. The answer to this question cannot be given in the affirmative. On the contrary, it is possible to give a very mixed answer. Scholars have failed to address this question squarely. Instead, they have lamented the following standards of Social Sciences, particularly its theoretical components.

He is talking about Bhikhu Parekh's essay. Thus, it is suggested that there is a poverty of political theory in India. While these are valid observations, they do not comment on the authoritative and intimidating character of Social Sciences practices in the country. So, Guru also agrees that the quality or the nature of political theories in India is not something to be very happy about it or it is something to be celebrated about. He is also concerned about the sorry state of affairs. But then, he does not agree with other scholars who blindly lament the following of standard.

But he is asking more fundamental serious questions. Why is it that there is no good theorisation happening? There are very few people who are engaged in theorisation and while a large section of people are engaged in more everyday empirical description? Also, keep in mind that he is talking about a scenario where, at least in Social Sciences, the presence of Dalits and the Adivasis have materialised. Earlier, they were not visible. The entire academic pursuit was in the hands of the upper caste. But reservation and other mechanisms have enabled that.

There are significant number of students from this backward categories there in the classrooms. But their mere presence is insufficient, because other processes at work determine their effective contribution in the academic world. And that is what Gopal



Guru is inviting our attention to. What is ironic is that the lamentation on the basis of the shrinking social base of political theory in India is not so much about the content and form of theory. The authoritative character did not attract scholarly attention, even in the recent report on Social Sciences research in India.

An ICSSR report's chapter argues that the social science practice in India is still exclusive and undemocratic in character. It is self-serving and self-satisfying as well. It lacks genuine egalitarian character. This is a fundamental argument of this particular essay.

Social Science discourse in India is being closely disciplined by self-appointed jurists, jurists who sit in the apex court and decide what the correct practice according to the canons. As I told you, very polemical writing, very powerful writing. These jurists decide what theory is and what trash is. It is a different matter that these canons lack authenticity as they are borrowed from the West rather unconditionally. Because there is hardly any theory that is specifically from India.

The apex court in Social Sciences with its full bench in Delhi, he is also critical of the very Delhi centric character of Indian academia. Because Delhi is the capital and Delhi is the home to several universities, Delhi is the place where academics happen. There are very interesting arguments in Social Sciences comparing the Indian academic scenario with the world system theory or the dependency theory that there is a core, there is a semi-periphery, and there is a periphery.

Among other things, bridgehead methodology is deployed by the jurists to silence descending voice that are questioning this cultural hierarchy and are threatening to offer alternative ideas of social science. However, as we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, Dalits or Bahujans have found it less motivating to invest in an alternative imagination of social sciences in India. So, he is arguing that there is a crisis, of course, in existence, but he is asking a more fundamental question: why does this crisis persist, and what is the alternative to that? So, I think we will stop here for this session and continue with the remaining essay in the coming class. See you then.