

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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The Cracked Mirror: Experience and Theory From Habermas to Guru I

Welcome back to the class. We are in the midst of discussing a very important book titled *The Cracked Mirror* jointly written by Professor Gopal Guru and Professor Sundar Sarukkai. Professor Gopal Guru is a professor of Political Science, and Professor Sundar Sarukkai is a Professor of Philosophy. In the previous two classes, in fact, three classes, we have been having a rather very detailed look into the problem of this particular book and the major arguments or the major themes that these two scholars have been engaged within this particular book. We looked at the introduction chapter of this book, and we also looked at the first chapter written by Professor Gopal Guru in the last class titled *Egalitarianism and Social Sciences in India*, which, as I mentioned yesterday, is a very, very stringent critique of the unequal Inegalitarian scenario of Indian Social Sciences. And he argues, he urges, he exodes the Dalits to indulge more in theorisation because of a host of reasons, because of a host of political and ethical reasons.

As I mentioned yesterday, this article first appeared in *Economic and Political Weekly* and was later joined by an essay by Sundar Sarukkai, in which he responded or kind of he broadened the debate by raising some very interesting and fascinating theoretical questions about questions of experience, who is the owner of an experience, can the owner of an experience, be the author of the experience, very fascinating discussions.

We are looking into the next essay, which is titled Experience and Theory from Habermas to Gopal Guru written by Sundar Sarukkai. Like the previous two classes, we are going to have a very close reading of this essay. I am going by the essay because it is very interesting to read.

Yeah. In the previous chapter, Gopal Guru made some important observations about the nature of social science in India. The most important one, in my view, is about the right to theorise. In Guru's terms, the moral stamina needed before theorising is possible. This issue is not limited to Guru's concern about the theoretical exploitation of Dalits.

Rather, this issue has occurred in almost all discourses, especially in recent times. So the most common way of legitimising this demand for copyright or a moral right to theorise is by recourse to the notion of lived experience, as in Guru. So basically, Sundar Sarukkai acknowledges that the theme or the problem that Guru has raised is indeed a very valid one that a particular section of people with a claim to the lived experience say that they have the more authentic view on that and others are not welcome to participate in that. So such a moral claim, Sundar will explicate in the next section, is almost prevalent in every field of modern times. And he also brings to the fore a very important concept called lived experience.

What is an experience and what is the lived experience? Why this lived experience and is intricately connected with notions of freedom? So he will elaborate and broaden the concerns in the coming sections. So who has the right to theorise? In recent times, notions of authority and authenticity have become dominant in the concerns of theorising. The notions of authority and authenticity. Authority when it relates to the question of who has the right to theorise? Do men have the right to theorise about women's experiences? That is one set of questions about which has, and that is most to do with power relations.

The second question is about authenticity.

How do we ensure that the author, the theorist or the scholar is presenting an authentic view of the people whom he is actually studying, he or she is actually studying? So these

two are interconnected but these two are very separate questions. One is who has the right? Should somebody be born into that particular category, and only then do those have the right to theorise. Secondly, how do we measure the authenticity? How do we measure the accuracy, authenticity and genuineness of what is being reported, what is being discussed, and what is being analysed? So these are very important connected questions.

Guru's arguments that the lived experience of Dalits constitutes the only valid and authentic experience and, moreover, that theorising this experience should be limited only to Dalits is yet another voice in this trend. So he is talking about a host of examples from around the world, including starting from say, scholars, artists, painters and a host of people who have this opposition to the so-called non-specialist people commenting on their work., So this is again not something new; this is again something prevalent everywhere. You will find that specialists in a particular field often frown upon anyone commenting on that.

We have heard dancers saying that the people who do not know dance cannot criticise that. People who are or who would say that non-westerners should not study or they cannot make comments or judgments about Indian society. So this whole question of foreigners versus indigenous people, questions of practitioners versus non-practitioners, people who are specialists versus non-specialists. So all these criticisms, all these debates are present in almost every field and within Science for example he says there are a lot of scientists who really resent non-scientists commenting on that and there are a lot of scientists who are very angry that sociologists and then philosophers are studying Science, the practice of Science and then commenting on that. The sociology of science, or science and technology studies, it is an established discipline that looks into the history and practice and then the trajectory of Science.

So these scholars make comments that often are not acceptable to the practising science, practising scientist. So this argument he elaborates in these two paragraphs, you will find similar arguments in almost every field about outsiders and insiders. So, almost

everything can at times be frustrating as much as it is frustrating for Guru when he sees non-Dalit taking over the Dalit experience. So, I am not going into the details, but this is essentially the argument.

Can an outsider be in a position to make meaningful comments about a community she does not belong to, and who really is the outsider? These are all important questions. So what are the qualities that you attribute to a real insider? He talks about how artists have questioned art critics along the same line. If you are not an artist yourself then what gives you the competence and the right to talk about art. He talks about this very interesting controversy by Sokal and Bricmont launched a frontal attack on postmodernist for abusing scientific terms.

So, here he refers to a very controversial work published by these two people. So Alex Sokal's and Bricmont's are titled *The Intellectual Imposters* first published in French, which really he culled out a lot of passages and sentences and quotes from almost every important postmodernist of our time, Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray and a host of other people and then Sokal demonstrated that these people did not understand the terms, the scientific terms in its accuracy and were either completely erroneous or they were completely ignorant about the actual scientific meanings of that. So he was saying that these postmodernists he is not all, but a particular section of postmodernists are engaging in a play with words, trying to to complicate, to create complicated sentences and then to mislead the readers. So that book created a lot of controversies, there was a huge number of people who supported Sokal and others, and there were also, and each of these thinkers including Derrida and Lacan responded to this criticism by saying that Sokal did not understand the context or rather understand the language in which these books and works were written. But that was a very heavily discussed and debated topic.

This issue he identifies is spread across the place not only something connected to what Guru says. So what Guru raises is not an isolated incident; it is a very pervasive problem in every field of our modern life. Similar concerns are true of religious communities; of course, you would have heard that another religious person cannot comment on a

particular religion because they simply do not understand it. So then people in English writing becomes, yeah, so about English and Indian people consider another illustrative example.

Indian language writers, especially after Indian English writing became newsworthy, have taken the position that Indians and Indian writers who write in English cannot claim to speak for Indian society since a large number of Indians are not English speakers. So all these discussions and debates are very much prevalent. He says that this, so basically, Sundar does not agree with that argument because, for example, he gives the example of if if you were to write about history, then you should have lived in that particular period, which is impossible. So Sundar has no sympathy for that an argument, Now he invites our attention to another very interesting point. But there is a crucial difference in all these claims of authenticity and Guru's arguments.

In many of these cases, the recourse to authenticity and lived experience comes primarily when something unfavourable is written about the community or about an experience. This, again, is a very, very interesting point. For example, if a foreigner writes something so great about Indian society, then we are all happy, we all appreciate that. But when a foreigner writes something negative about Indian society then many of us tend to question his or her credentials.

Similarly, scientists would appreciate a journalist writing something positive about a scientific advancement and experiment. He would be happy. But if journalists criticise a particular practice of science, they would be embarrassed or unhappy. But here, Guru Guru does not really belong to that particular class. His issue is not about the non-Dalit people saying something bad about Dalits.

It is not. It is it is the very act of non-Dalit scholars trying to say anything about Dalits whether it is positive or negative. So that is a very crucial difference. Now when an outsider writes that the community perceives as good, the outsider is not only accepted but also valorised. So also, in the case of writing about Indian culture, that is an important point that we talk about because our position and our approach to the person

who is speaking depends upon what the person says about us. If that person talks about me, which is good, then I appreciate it.

But if the person is speaking something ill about me then I will begin to question his or her credentials and their authority and authenticity will be questioned. At the outset, it may seem that Guru is doing the same thing when he claims that non-Dalit should not theorise about Dalits. That is not really the case. So this is a very crucial point that he is saying. Guru does not take the position that it is impossible for theorists to write about a community they do not belong to. He is not taking the position that non-Dalit cannot or are not in a position to study because many people, many sections, have that claim. Guru does not have that claim. As he rightly notes that would involve his inability to theorise about non-Dalit. For Guru, theory has a particular role to play, which must be based on experience and universal reason.

So this is again the point that we discussed yesterday. The theory has a particular role to play, especially for a downtrodden community this theory is quite emancipatory, and this theory has to come from the lived experience, and it has to be based on experience and universal reason. As he suggests this route is from the initial to the essential. But what is important is that this is a position that he takes before any value attached to what non-Dalit writes about the lived experience. It is an argument that he says he is not concerned about what the non-Dalit writes about Dalits, whether good or bad, that is not his concern.

But his concern is that they cannot do it because it is not their inability, but he says it involves an ethical issue. There is an ethical and political issue involved in it, which also fascinates Sundar. That is, he is not interested in whether the writing of non-Dalits is complementary or derogatory about Dalits, but only that non-Dalits have no moral right to theorise about Dalits, which is interesting. This is a much stronger view than that discussed earlier and needs a critical analysis to see if it is tenable. The basic difference from the other views is that the former reacts to epistemological claims about something, basically choosing to call somebody an outsider based on a judgment or what the outsider writes, whereas the guru's position is ethical and normative and has no place in the theoretical outsider.

I think it is very clear that most of the debates that you see around are based on epistemological claims that somebody is an outsider and because of their outside position, they are not able to understand our culture, our society and then study and then present that authentically and originally that is a claim. But Guru's claim is not that. Guru is not concerned about what the other person is, who the other person is or what the other person is going to write whether it is good or bad but he is taking a moral and normative position that outsiders must not study Dalits because Dalits must invest themselves in study and then theorise their experience because that is more lived revolution. So that is what he is going to explain. Now coming to the next section, experience and lived experience, the dialectics of choice and necessity.

Now he is coming to this question, what exactly is the nature of lived experience? Because the term lived experience is a very often used term in religious studies and in many other things, this term comes up quite often. You study the lived experience of women, you study the lived experience of religious people, you study the lived experience of the Dalits. So what exactly is lived experience and who are the people who can get access to this lived experience? That is a very crucial question that he brings in. Experience consists of many elements, including the subject of the experience and the structure and content of the experience itself.

A subject experiences the structure and as well as the content. The impetus to experience may be internal or external to the subject. So, having the experience of burning my hand, for example, involves an external event that caused a particular experience in me. However, one may also have an entirely internal experience such as hunger, joy, or angst. So this experience can involve an external agency, but you can also have an experience of, say, mental trauma or a feeling of hunger which an outsider does not infuse.

What does this world live to add to the experience? Experience is often confused with the cause of the experience. This allows us to objectively objectify the notion of experience and transport it everywhere to generate similar experiences, leading us to believe that there is a materiality of the whole complex of experience. So this is a very,

very important point that he talks about. Many times we attribute the experience to a particular external setup, or external setting, and we believe that we will, the moment we place ourselves in that particular location, that particular material condition, that space we begin to experience. So that he says is a very limited understanding of experience.

This materiality seen as the course is taken to be independent of the experiencer. So this outside context, outside atmosphere, outside space is seen as the course of experience to the person who is experiencing that. Consider this illustrative example. So he gives the example of the experience of eating in a restaurant, a restaurant whose theme is rural India. So he gives the example of sitting and eating this Ragi bowl.

Ragi bowl, in other ways, which is called Mudde in Kannada, is a typical native food consumed by people in rural Karnataka. So imagine a restaurant, a restaurant in a modern city like Bangalore, but that has a theme. It's a theme restaurant, and the theme is that of a village. So when you enter into that, you get a feeling that you are entering into a small house in a in some interior part of Karnataka and everybody dress up like that, the utensils are of that kind, the food that is offered is not anything modern, but what the food that you see in the rural hinterlands of Karnataka. You go there, you eat that Mudde, the Ragi bowl, then what is happening to you? Are you really experiencing a rural life, or what exactly is happening? Can you call it an experience? Can you? More importantly, can you call it as a lived experience is what he is questioning. The first point to notice here is that a naive view of experience is based on the belief that experience can be replicated.

An experience can be replicated endlessly by anybody. That, again, is a very important, solely a very important problem. It is not the subject's experience but the materiality that constitutes the experience, which is thought to be disassociated from the total experience. So, here, he distinguishes between the subject who experienced it and the external context in which this experience took place. So he says that the commonsensical notion or the general understanding always focuses on the external context without adequately paying attention to the subjectivity, what is happening to this particular person, what

changes are happening to his subjectivity and experience.

Thus, in principle, we usually believe that we can stimulate all experiences. The possibility of stimulating all and any experience is based on the belief that there is no necessary connection between the experiencer and the experience. So, in this example of this rural restaurant, a rural-themed restaurant in Bangalore, it is open to anybody.

Anybody can walk in and then feel their experience. So there the subjectivity of the person who walks in hardly matters. He could be from rural India, he could be from urban India, he could be from any gender, any religion, any economic class, but what he goes, or she goes and sits, and experiences is supposedly disconnected from that of the experience because the emphasis is about the material dimension. This view of experience removes the subject as an essential component of experience. All experience is similar to the experience of fun fairs, and anybody who pays can participate in that experience. Now, but can experience really be materialized?, commodified and transferred without taking the subject of experience into account? So, his attention as a philosopher is inviting our attention to the role of this subject, the person who is experiencing it. Now we can understand the importance of the idea of lived experience. The most useful way to analyse lived experience is to recognise that no element of choice or freedom is associated with it.

So this is a very important and interesting insight. When discussing a lived experience, you talk about a lack of choice. The agent who live in a particular situation has no choice to come out of it. A person is mandated to experience that.

He or she has no choice. There is no will for that person to simply come out of it. You are sitting in a restaurant; if you are unhappy, you can just walk out. And the moment you walk out, that rural experience ceases to exist. You are no longer in that particular experience and then you can get back, you can go to some other hotel, you can get back to the comfort of your house, you are a free agent.

But when it comes to lived experience, you understand a situation where an agent is

implicated in a particular situation, and he or she has no choice in that. That is the gravity of a lived experience. It is not based on your whims and fancies, it is not based on your volition, it is based on the fact that you are in a situation and situation is given to you and you ought to experience it. As in the case of a Dalit case, you are born into an untouchable family and then you are ought to live the life of an untouchable.

You cannot one day get up and think that, okay, this is enough, let me come out of it and then leave like a non-untouchable; that is impossible. So is the case with people born into different genders, situations, family situations and other things. So that is a very, very important point that Sundar points out. Now, experience of this kind, often referred to as vicarious experience, always comes with three important characteristics. One freedom to be a part of an experience, so he is talking about the usual, the non-lived experience, the experience that ordinary people want to have, the case of this restaurant.

He calls it a vicarious experience that, just like buying a commodity, you can experience that. Just like when if you want to feel cooler, you can walk into an air-conditioned room and then feel and experience the cold air and then come out. So there is one freedom to be part of an experience, two freedom to leave at any time if the experience is not satisfactory and three to modify the experience if necessary to suit one's needs. So this is not the story of lived experiences. This is the experience that most of us talk about when we talk about; this is one experience that we understand when we say that we experience the pain of somebody.

When something happens to your friend, you feel that you can experience the pain of that. But here the situation is different. Lived experience exhibits, in general, none of these three characteristics. Lived experience is not just about leaving any experience in the sense that we participate in an experience. If lived experience has to play an ethical and epistemological role, if it has to be adjudge, it has to be adjudicator of some notion of authenticity, then lived experience should be used only for those experiences that are seen as necessary.

experiences over which the subject has no choice of whether to experience or not. This

is an extremely important point. Even if the experience is unpleasant, no choice allows the subject to leave or even modify it. And that situation is a major line of demarcation between the people who actually experience it as an insider and an outsider who comes and then experiences it for the sake of experiencing it. The experiencer comes to the experience not as a subject who has some control over the experience, but as one who will have to leave with that experience.

If you you were to look into a woman who is at the receiving end of the patriarchy, working as a housewife in a very abusive household, that particular person has no way to come out of it and if that is a lived reality, then that is the experience. All this makes lived experience qualitatively different from mere experience. So that is a very important point that he talks about. What this means is that the structure of lived experience is one that acknowledges the essential unbreakable relation between the subject who experienced and the context of and the content of the experience.

I think by now it is clear that the non-lived experience is that you have the whole agency to walk out of the situation or you can change it. It is something like you can change the temperature in an air-conditioned room. Whether you want to feel colder or warmer, you can adjust the temperature, and there you have volition. Whereas people who are working as bonded labourers in agricultural fields, the heat they are exposed to, they have no control over that. This unbreakable relation is the relation of necessity and creates the absence of choice.

Thus, while experience can be duplicated and simulated, the lived experience cannot be opened out for experience by any subject. That is a fundamental point. To take Guru's argument seriously, we have to understand lived experience in this matter. For his argument to hold, the lived experience should be seen as an experience of being a subject and not an experience by the subject or about a subject.

So while being different from somebody who wants to become a part of that, And in the case of Dalit, Guru is very categorical that the Dalit experience is different because Dalit

is born into a, a person is born into a Dalit family, lives as a Dalit and then he dies as a Dalit. An upper caste person, even if he is so he or she is so empathetic to the Dalit cause is not a Dalit. It is not a Dalit, and because of that very fact, it will not be able to experience the kind of experiences that this person feels.

That is the first prerequisite for an experience to be considered as lived experience is that there is an experience of what it means to be the subject who experience. This automatically places an element of no choice. There is no choice whether I want to be the subject of experience, although I may have a choice about particular aspects of my experience. You cannot have a Dalit experience unless you are a Dalit yourself or at least experience what it means to be a Dalit subject with no choice to be otherwise. A Dalit cannot decide all of a sudden that it is enough to let me be an upper caste.

A woman cannot at any point feel and decide that, ok, it is enough. Let me be a man. That is an extremely important point. This participant observation would also not constitute lived experience as long as the observer, who may otherwise live in a similar community, has the choice to leave when going gets tough or when the observed decides to leave. Suppose we say that to be a Dalit subject is to be oppressed with no choice of escaping this oppression. Then, the lived experience of Dalits is not about sharing their lifestyle, living with them and being like them but being them in the sense that you cannot be anything else.

Lived experience is not about freedom of experience but about the lack of freedom in an experience. That is a very precise formulation. Lived experience is not about freedom of experience, it is about the lack of freedom in an experience beautifully written. So Guru goes a step further.

He wants lived experience to justify an ethical principle to do theory. So now, after making this point clear, Sundar is coming to the central argument of Gopal Guru. This means that it is not enough to use lived experience as a validation but is asked to do more to become the ground for social theory.

Can it live up to what Guru demands for it? Now moving to the another interesting section. Guru's notion of lived experience as essentially related to theory is only one part of the theoretical elements of an experience. This is the experience of being a subject and not experiencing the subject we discussed. Being a subject is one part of the experience, an essential part, no doubt, but it does not encompass the complete experience.

So, if one follows Guru's prescription, we must acknowledge the possibility of expanding what we define as theory and knowledge. If lived experience is to be the final validation of theory then we will have to look at autobiographies as epistemologically legitimate in a fundamental sense. So there is some discussion about even including M.N. Srinivas saying that autobiography can be seen as a very valid form of data because the person has really experienced that.

Now Sundar is coming to the question of seeing a person encounter lived experience, and he understands this lived experience from his subject position. Of course, he is a lived experience because he or she cannot leave. There is a lack of freedom. But does that person completely understand this particular form of experience? What is the limit of that person's access to that whole experience is a very important question.ok, Because the whole question of autobiography comes into the picture because autobiography is a person's own depiction of the reality in front of it.

If at all he or she has written it honestly and we know that autobiographies are quite often dishonest. Very few autobiographies are known for their complete transparency and honesty. And most autobiographies are curated and then highly selective in what they want to reveal and what they want to conceal. So this discussion is about how whether autobiography can be seen as because autobiography represents what a person experience.

M.N. Srinivas believed autobiography could be a legitimate tool to understand societies. His argument was based on learning to trust subjective experience and subjective description as being proved to the subject who has experienced or speaks that

experience. We can extend this argument further as I did to claim that fiction based on lived experience could actually be seen as a legitimate mode of theorising. So if autobiography can be seen as a legitimate source of things, then even fiction based on lived experience can also be seen as a legitimate resource. However, this mode of autobiography or fiction contradicts the modernist view that depends on the empirical theoretical dichotomy to generate objective knowledge.

Whatever I experience is truth, and it is reality, or whatever I imagine as fiction based on my experience is reality. This argument runs against the basic principles of objectivity that the modernity wants to make you believe in. Modernity believes that there is a neutral set of criteria, there is a neutral set of procedures, and yardsticks and then qualifications that make certain things objective uninterrupted or uninfluenced by subjective dispositions.

So that is what the objectivity arguments. For example, this particular pen will have a given length and given weight irrespective of the person who measures it. So, modernity's claim for objectivity, modernity's claim for scientific validity goes against this over-dependence over the subjective experience. If a guru wants to hold on to the structure of empirical and theoretical then he should reconsider emphasis on a lived experience because lived experience is only part of the story, it does not take into account the whole question of scientific validation and objectivity because there is an internal tension in guru's argument according to Sundar Sarukkai. Or if he wants to place lived experience at the centre, then he should modify his view of theories, especially his understanding of the empirical, because what is empirical and how do you connect empirical to theory is a very, very problematic question.

One of the ways to do this is to demand that ethics be integral to the act of theorising. If that is allowed then lived experience becomes the ground for such ethical intertwinment with theory. So he is coming to that point. Now, theory and experience, ownership or authorship, so the remaining part of the essay will be discussed in the coming session. I

think we are almost half of the essay, and then we will discuss it in the coming class. Thank you.