

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Week-11

Lecture-55

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

Welcome back to the class. We are in the last section of the essay written by Sundar Sarukkai. This is a response to Professor Guru's essay on Egalitarianism in Social Sciences. In the first section of the essay, Sundar Sarukkai acknowledges that the concern raised by Guru is very prevalent in many other fields of modern social world and it is very relevant. But he identifies that Guru's argument is more radical because Guru is not concerned whether the other person, a non-Dalit is saying good or bad, but he says that the non-Dalit has no right to theorise about the Dalits and that Sarukkai problematises by bringing in this whole idea of what it means to be a lived experience because a lived experience is an experience where the subject has no control or freedom over the experience. It is not at your volition.

Experience is not something connected with a material condition or the external world, but it is more to do with the person's experience. Subjectivity is important because a subject experiences no freedom to move out of that experience, or the subject has very little control over what that person experiences, regardless of whether that experience is good or bad. And then he also talks about the argument that if a subjective experience is supposed to be authentic, but then that argument goes against some of the principles of objectivity and scientific objectivity and scientific quality of modernity because modernity is always suspicious of this subjectivity and modernity's claim of objectivity, modernity's depiction of objectivity or scientific rigour is mostly articulated objectively without any influence of subjectivity. Now, he is expanding that argument by talking

about two terms: theory and experience, ownership or authorship. Again a very fascinating argument.

One of the ways to distinguish the nature of experience and theoretical reflection about the experience is through the notion of authority. Is an individual author of her experience?. What is the nature of authorship between individual and the theory that she constructs? Who has the authorship over the experience? Authorship is an important criterion that distinguishes experience from theory. A person who experiences is not an author of the experience like a person who theorises about that experience. For Dalits it is not out of their volition that they were born as Dalits. It is part of our nature to have such experiences; no extra agency is needed to initiate such a feeling from within us.

Our experience can be broadly classified into two types. One arises from situations not of our making and the other from situations we consciously put ourselves in. Your birth is not something that you can decide or a life that you have very little control over. It is again not within us, but it is imposed on you. You just have to experience it. The second experience, he says, is something that you have control over. Situations we consciously put ourselves in. For example, the experience of being Dalit belongs to the former type and experiencing the feeling of being drunk is often a consequence of a conscious act.

You drink alcohol, and then you experience the effect of that alcohol.

In the first case, We are neither authors of the events we find ourselves, nor the authors of the experience caused by such events. But it could be argued that we are authors of our experience in the second type when you consume alcohol.

If we are not the authors of our experience, then how are we related to our experience? . We are related to experience as owners, a very interesting argument. We own our experience but do not author them. Ownership confers a set of rights over what we own, and authorship confers a different set of rights over what we author.

In the historical trajectory, of these ideas, we can see a sense of private and public playing out in these terms. Authors have copyrights and owners have certain other rights.

To discuss the rights of theorising our experience, I suggest that the dichotomy of ownership and authorship is most illuminating. So you do not own your experience because you are not the one who created it but you own it because you experienced it. Once you make this move, Guru's claim to be rephrased in the following manner.

An owner has a stake as an author. So according to Guru's perspective, an owner should make the claim of an author as well. The owner has a stake as an author. The extreme case of claiming that only those who experience can theorise implies that only an owner can be an author. Is that a tenable position is what Sundar Sarukkai is asking. I hope it is clear to you. It is not that complicated. You do not own the experience that you are in.

You have not authored it. You are not the one who created it. As in the case of a person who is born in the Dalit family, you had absolutely no say in your birth. But at the same time, since you are the one who owns it, you are the owner. So what Guru says is that, since you own it, you experience it, you have the authorship right over that as well and nobody else should have.

And is that tenable is what Sundar Sarukkai is asking. To understand this, we need to look at the notions of the owner in great detail. What does an owner actually own? The owner of a book owns something that the book, in this case only the material constituting a particular book; the owner has no right over the book. She cannot print it and distribute it for example.

She cannot, in principle, change a few lines here and there and publish it as her own. Actually, there is very little an owner can do with the book other than buy it and perhaps read it. The owner owns that particular book, meaning that specific acts are allowed under that ownership. For example, she could get rid of it if she does not like.

Experience is like this. We own our experience, meaning thereby that there is only little we have control of in that experience. There is very little that we have control over that particular experience. Most often we do not have control over what causes that experience. We do not have any sense of how the experience should be.

We have nothing at all to add consciously to that experience. We can not delete unpleasant or add pleasant elements to a given experience. So, even though you genuinely experience a particular situation, the amount of control that you have over that

experience would be very limited. Especially in lived experience as Sundar Sarukkai's argument.

Now, this is why experience enters into a problematic relationship with theory. Because experience, first of all, the domain of experience that you experience that you personally feel in a larger system is very limited. Secondly, you have no control over it in the larger experience, larger sphere. To theorise is to have a say, that is to be able to say. So, any theory is a judgment about it, an explanation about it, and an interpretation of it.

To theorise about a particular experience is to have a say about the experience. You can comment upon an experience. This commenting is what a theory is. Any theory building is an act of commenting upon describing and even passing judgments on that.

And how can we really have a say about an experience? Guru's position would mean that it is the owner who has the final say in saying anything about that experience because Guru says that only a person experience has the right to theorise it. However, we can only partially accept this view because there are many elements of that experience that owner is not really an owner of. We own our experience only in particular meaning of the term and may have control over only some elements of that experience. Even for example, say a question of Dalit atrocity, the person who experience the atrocity who is at the receiving end of that particular atrocity, how much ever atrocious that could be is only part of the story. Any theorisation of the atrocity of Dalit should also include the motivations, the ideas and then the ideologies of the oppressive class, oppressive caste. Only then you will be able to theorise. If a caste insult is hurled at somebody, it could be quite painful for a person to listen to that. And that experience could be quite traumatic. But to theorise that particular entire episode of a privileged caste position, upper caste position using a particular term to insult a lower caste person, if it has to be theorised larger, then the theoretician must move beyond to take into account the subjective feeling and experience of the person, but definitely they have to move beyond the particular field of experience and then look into the notions of the privilege of the upper caste person, the things that are available to him, the languages and vocabularies and terms that are at his

or her disposal, which they can throw at any time.

So, it requires a much larger frame. So, we own our experience only in the particular meaning of the term, and we may have control over only some elements of that experience. In principle, we can theorise about another person's experience because there is a space within that experience unrelated to the experiencer. For example, consider the element of oppression which is a Dalit experience. Dalit who experience oppression legitimately own that experience of oppression.

However, the experience of oppression also involve the oppressor, exactly the same point that we mentioned, either as an individual or as a system, the Dalits have no control or ownership over the oppressor. So, how much of the experience of the oppressor, oppression can be owned by a Dalit who experience oppression in a particular act. And this is also true in every case. This is also true in the case of women who are suffering in patriarchal system, poor people who are reeling under poverty, ethnic or religious minorities who are reeling under majoritarian politics. So, all these scenarios apply to this particular case.

The Dalit experience could be distinctly different for both men and women. According to Gopal Guru's argument, can a Dalit man write about the Dalit women's issue?. As Dalit is not a homogenous category, there are multiple hierarchies within that. These questions are relevant because theory does this job of moving away from the particular.

One's experience may not be enough to validate one's right to have a say about a conceptual world that describes that experience. On the other hand, not having any experience, but theorising about it also seems intrinsically problematic.

Gopal Guru is so critical of upper caste people descending on lower caste households or Dalit households and then making caricatures of them. This is the tension about theorising manifested in two radically different approaches by two things. At one end, we have Gopal Guru and his argument that only people who own an experience can theorise it.

On the other hand, we have Habermas, whose theoretical impulse, would argue, arises in response to an experience but does not expect the theorisation to have anything to do

with that experience. Interestingly, we can see a parallel in the different modes by which the Greeks, the modern West and the Indians formulated logic. Logic is fundamental to theory, but logic was described differently in these traditions. He says in Indian case, the logicians insisted that inference had to be grounded in an empirical, whereas the Greeks, particularly following Aristotle, formulated the logical in opposition to the empirical. So, one can read this difference as an insistence that theory had to be grounded in experience.

The Indian view is against the view that theory is, in some fundamental sense independent of the empirical. So, he says that this division between empirical and non-empirical is much deeper and more deeply historical. There are different ways of understanding this opposition. One way is through a binary of emotion and reason. Experience is often placed under the idea of emotion and related terms, whereas theory is something that presumably arises under the action of reason.

So, that is what you can think about the previous examples where Dalit scholars are accused of only describing certain things very emotionally. The accusation, the suggestion is that why do not you move beyond these emotions and then theorise it? So, theory is seen as non-emotional, moving above your individual experiences and then talk in more rational language. To hold Habermas's position is to give in to this absolute dichotomy between emotion and reason. Many pioneers point us to why such a dichotomy seems to make apparent sense.

Experience is first person, reason overcomes the individual capacity and also limitations. So, any theorisation you talk about, you talk in abstract sense and universal terms, it moves beyond the idiosyncrasies and the specificities of the individual experience. Experience is local and context-specific. Reason attempts to establish the universal presence in local specificity. So, reason tries to establish the universal present in the local, very interesting terms in the local specificity.

You theorise about violence and then try to see different forms of violence exist in caste context or racial context or religious context. But these two terms also share similarities.

Both of them seem to be outside wilful and conscious behavior of individuals. We have experience just as we have reason. Guru's position in contrast to Habermas is to erase this distinction and construct an essential relation between them.

Asking for theory to be essentially related to experience is asking for a reason to be essentially wedded into feeling, emotions and such terms, a very important argument. This thing is not at the level of legitimacy; that is, Guru is not claiming that it is epistemologically legitimate to not relate reason to emotion. He would like to claim that experience and reason are, in some sense, ontologically related.

That is, they are related as facts of the matter. That is the reason why he finds an ethical component in this relation. It is ethically wrong to theorise about experience when one has not experienced the same as oneself. Sundar says that Guru's attempt in a philosophical reading is also to move beyond this binary between reason and emotion and to argue that in this watertight compartment, this distinction must be broken. This distinction must be and then theorising also must be infused with emotions.

That is the argument that he puts forward.

In the last section, theory as distribution of guilt, Habermas and the public sphere. This is an interesting take by Sundar Sarukkai in which he problematises or he analyses Habermas, the very important German philosopher who is known in academic circle, who is known throughout the world for his very fundamental and profound contribution to the idea of public sphere. He looks at why Habermas was talking about the public sphere and then reason and the reasoned dialogue, arguments and then recent dialogue as the only way to modernity and to a civilized world. So, Sundar Sarukkai argues that Habermas was deeply motivated by the instances of Nazi Germany, the rise of fascism and also the rise of neo-Nazis in the 80s and then 90s.

Even though the issue of what happened in Germany was something very specific to Germany, he wants to theorise it further and then take it beyond the populace and borders of Germany, beyond that particular incident of Holocaust, beyond the specific groups of Nazis and then Jews and other people and to make it as a broader, global, universal one. And that he argues is that a theorisation is nothing but the distribution of guilt, a very

provocative argument, a very, very fascinating argument. Habermas always talks about in the language of universalism. He talks about the rise of public reason, he talks about the rise of the public sphere, he talks about the need to have discussions and dialogue, and then he is a champion of modernity.

Why or from Where does this inspiration to theorise this universalism come from? That is what Sundar Sarukkai is asking ; he answers that it is motivated by the specific examples of German people and the specific episode of the Holocaust and the rise of neo-nazism. So, universalism for Habermas is a collective shared mentality, a sense of solidarity inhabiting public space distinct from the political. So, this is exactly the same point. So, I am not getting into that too much, but we will come back to it, but this is the argument. I suggest that what he is doing is using theory as an agent to distribute guilt.

Theory does this very effectively in many ways: depersonalising traumatic events, creating new categories to place these events in, creating explanatory structures as part of the structures, abstracting concepts and ideas that then stimulate universality and so on. So, a very bitter, frightening experience of the Holocaust cost can be theorised. It can be presented as universal by taking it from that particular context. Habermas could have responded to the Nazi experience in many different ways, but as far as he used theory to respond to it, he is deploying theory for a particular purpose, which is of distribution of his guilt, among others. His guilt is phrased in terms such as abhorrence of the Nazi experience, fear that neo-narcism is rising and so on.

But in effect, theory, in the way he constructs it, functions as a distributor of guilt, just as much as Germany now carries the burden of the universal. It is a theory that carries the guilt of the inhuman acts of culture. When others participate in such a theory, they dilute individual sense of guilt for those who are somehow associated with a guilt-induced action, universalisation of the ultimate, universalisation is the ultimate dilution of guilt. Very, fascinating argument.

Let us return to Guru's position and how he compares it. A precondition for theory to do this job is its capacity to establish a distance between itself and experience. So,

Habermas's support for modernity and his thematisation of the public sphere with its concomitant ideas of rational communicative practice are not theoretical moves that arise from lived experience as formulated by Guru. So, Habermas can abstract himself out of that local specific historical context, including the incidents that happened at the time of Hitler and later. In fact, the crucial point here is that the experience cannot dictate authorship. Habermas's theory is for us: those who have not participated in that experience.

He is saying that such a theorisation is, of course, it can be seen as a distribution of guilt, but it is more powerful and more effective. It is not restrictive in its ambition, its scope. It is much more broader. For Habermas then, theory is legitimated by its distance from experience. If he accepts Guru's position, then he would have to say that only those who have suffered under the Nazi rule should theorise about it. So, both Guru and Habermas stand on two opposite views in their approach to the relation between theory and experience. However, Habermas's approach can be usefully contrasted with Levinasian attempt to theorise about the Holocaust. Levinas's theory arose from lived experience, a lived experience of Nazism that he and his family had to endure.

His conception of an ethical theory is directly mediated not just by an experience, but by a lived experience in which the idea of necessity, as described earlier, is strongly encoded. Guru's approach to theorising about Dalits is a Levinasian approach in contrast to the Habermasian one. For both Levinas and Gopal Guru, guilt is not to be distributed and shared among non-experiencers through the guise of theory. The theory is to be felt. It is to embody suffering and pain and to relate the epistemological with the emotional.

That is to bring together reason and emotion. That is really the challenge that Guru faces on the practice of Social Science in India. So, this is a beautiful and fantastic intervention by Sundar Sarukkai, and you can see how he broadened, how he really complicated some of the themes that Gopal Guru presented. When Gopal Guru presented, of course, he was so unhappy with the existing social reality in India, namely the lack of theorisation among the Dalits and the over-enthusiasm of non-Dalits to theorise the experience and, of course, the very extremely discriminatory and exclusionary practices that are

happening in the academic sphere. But that concern Guru has been made deeper, and he then made more elaborated, and Sundar Sarukkai really expanded the horizon of that particular division.

That is exactly what a philosopher does. What Sundar Sarukkai does is to distribute that or to universalise that particular theme away from Guru, away from Dalit, into a much larger question. I am sure you would have really liked this particular argument, which is why this book became extremely popular and influential. There are subsequent chapters that looks at many of these themes very closely. We do not have the time to go through that, but I would recommend that this is a must read, you must have familiarity with this important book because it is not only about Social Science, but it touches upon questions of ethicality, politics, Indian society and a host of other things. So, let us conclude this class and this week's discussion on Cracked Mirror, and we will meet for the final week in the coming class. Thank you.