

Towards an Understanding of Dalit Theory: The Debates in *The Cracked Mirror*

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Abstract

While the already in place emergent Dalit literature has been posing a challenge to the upper-caste narratives on Dalits, in *The Cracked Mirror*, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai argue that now Dalits must broaden the premise of Dalit representation by taking it to the next level—theory. Using experience as a political tool, as Dalits have already established a large corpus of literature, Guru emphasizes that Dalits must realize the importance to theorize themselves from the experiential point of view. While caste has been discussed extensively by insiders in literature, politics and cultural activism, it is argued that Dalits have remained averse to theory. This paper is an exploration of how theoretical concepts hold the power to intervene the cognitive domains of both the oppressed as well as the oppressor, and as a result, can impart unity, continuity, and intensity to the Dalit experience, and how dialectics of owned experience and theory can help construct a concrete universal.

Keywords: Dalit experience, caste, top-of-the-twice-borns (TTBs), institutionalized exclusion

The practice of social science in India is based on (as well as garners) a socio-cultural hierarchy which solidifies the already established uneven divide between the Dalits and the top-of-the-twice-borns (TTBs). While caste has been discussed extensively by insiders in literature, politics and cultural activism, it is argued that Dalits have remained averse to theory. Gopal Guru, in this regard, maintains that the non-egalitarian/autocratic nature of the social science practices in India is the reason behind the 'institutionalized exclusion' of Dalits from the theoretical

realm. The present framework of social sciences in India, Guru claims, is flourishing by mapping the real and the reflected in favour of the socially dominant castes. So, the 'crack' in the mirror that is being discussed pertains to the absence of Dalit theoreticians and Dalit theory.

In 'Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique', Gopal Guru states that Dalits were at margins of the Indian civilization and in spite of the substantial transition that has taken place in the postcolonial India, with the still prevalent politics of 'isolation' and 'insulation', Dalits continue to find themselves to be at the margins of the Indian state. With the already in place emergent Dalit writings posing a challenge to the upper-caste narratives of Dalits, in *The Cracked Mirror*, Gopal Guru argues that Dalits must broaden the premise of Dalit representation by taking it to the next level—theory. Using experience as a political tool, as Dalits have already established a large corpus of literature, Guru emphasizes that Dalits must realize the importance to theorize themselves from the experiential point of view.

The Dalits have traditionally been limited to the manual spheres such as scavenging, sanitation, and manual labour, and factors such as denial of knowledge (both acquisition and production), denial of articulation, intentional exclusion from history, lack of reasoning capacity and confidence, lack of freedom (both from tradition as well as the immediate locale), lack of socio-economic security, coercion to perform menial and manual labour prohibition from developing intellect, denial of upward mobility have prevented them from undertaking any theoretical venture and provided no room for self-reflexivity. Lack of conditions and context stalled any likelihood of innovation or imagination within the Dalit communities. As a consequence of their spatial segregation and ghettoized stature, Guru observes, "Dalits lack the imagination to invent new conceptual instruments." (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 20).

To quote Badri Narayan, "[Dalits] were not allowed to carry or own weapons even for self-defence, and as such, the idea of social assertion never arose in them" (Narayan, 2004, p. 14). In contrast, the TTBs have ruled theory in India because of the facilitative factors such as—access to modern education, migration to Western countries, and reception of several fellowships. Even post-Independence, they have more say in the Parliament, and are the major beneficiaries of intellectual opportunities. One may argue that the reason why the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal cancelled

Ambedkar's prospective presidential speech at their conference also lies in the Arya Samajists' refusal to accept the discursive rationality and social reasoning capacity of a lower-caste person. Ambedkar's firm stand, however, not to cut short the manuscript of *Annihilation of Caste*, reflects his discursive ethics. The inherent pragmatism and vision of such a text, which was discarded in the name of non-adherence to the protocol of time and content, essentially manifests Ambedkar's lived experience. One can conjecture that an upward mobility in terms of an ideological and spatial detachment is necessary to meditate about one's status. Even Ambedkar, in fact, had to go and study abroad before he could reflect back upon and theorize the situation back home. Since one's spatial location stands in direct connection with one's lived experience, space can well be perceived as a discursive, decisive phenomena. It is precisely for this reason that Ambedkar aimed to deterritorialise the sacred and the secular space in *Annihilation of Caste*. Eventually even through the reservation policy, he sought to provide a fair opportunity for the lower castes to gain a new and redemptive experience. Caste-based reservation, hence, was introduced as a measure of 'positive discrimination' or 'affirmative action' to counter the age-old unjust power equations.

Rohith Vemula's suicide, however, shows how cultural hierarchies operate through academic and institutional structures. Vemula, an active member of the Ambedkar Students' Association at the University of Hyderabad, became a victim of right-wing politics that led to his suspension from the university, scrapping of his monthly fellowship of Rs 25,000 for 7 months and his eventual suicide on January 17, 2016. In his last letter, Vemula wrote about how he felt that his "birth was his fatal accident". To quote Vemula, "I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write." (Republished in *The Wire* on January 17, 2019). A university is a space where humanist and liberal ideas are supposed to flourish but as Ashwini Deshpande shows in *The Grammar of Caste* that caste disparities continue to have a stronghold in post-globalization/liberalization institutional and academic spaces. Dalit students who somehow make it to these spaces face discrimination for their looks, clothing, language fluency and reservation. The lack of confidence to articulate well formulated, precise arguments in chaste English only furthers the marginalization.

Dalit subjectivity lies in the subjective experience of being an untouchable — both from the phenomenological and the archaeological perspective. If the top-of-the-twice-borns (TTBs) do Dalit theory, according to Guru, they end up feeding the Dalit experience onto the existing body of Marxist, Feminist, Post-colonial, Post-structural, or subaltern theory. Guru calls this “de-subjectification of experience” because such attempts fail to embody Dalit subjectivity and the experience of untouchability (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 127). The experience of untouchability is very complex and unique to India, and therefore cannot be mindlessly translated via Western theoretical apparatuses.

The relationship between caste and experience, as discussed in *The Cracked Mirror*, calls for a rethinking of Dalit subjectivity, caste identity, and the question of universality pertaining to the varied experiences of inequality, exclusion and other forms of stratification like race and class. Guru & Sarukkai, while adopting divergent positions on the idea of authorship and ownership of caste experience, highlights the theoretical lacuna within the Indian critical thought, in the absence of which one has to apply Western theoretical apparatuses to analyse caste and untouchability. In the absence of a cultural equivalent, however, any such analysis is bound to remain ‘conceptually impoverished’ (Kaviraj, 2013).

The discourse on untouchability in India revolves around the idea of touch. The TTBs have deployed this ‘moral economy’ of the touch to insulate the ‘sacred’ from the ‘cursed’. This ideological mediation of the idea of touch within the Brahminic discourse, to use Guru’s terminology, reduces the untouchable to the level of “walking carrion” (Guru, 2006). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes that *being touched* is about the body-as-object, whereas *touching* is an act of the body-as-subject. While other senses are largely spectatorial in nature, the experience of touching involves both—the toucher and the touched or the subject and the object. To use Anupama Rao’s words, *The Cracked Mirror* is interested in what can be termed “the social psychology of caste” for it uses terms like nausea, humiliation, repulsion, and touch. At one point in the book, Guru writes: “Just imagine what would happen to the touchable if the untouchable were to refuse to become the dumping ground for somebody’s moral dirt or refuse to illuminate the touchable” (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 213). What Guru is trying to highlight in this statement is how reciprocity is central to the oppressor-oppressed relationship

because the oppressor's power lies in its acknowledgement by the oppressed. Similarly, the relationship between the humiliator and the humiliated can be realized when both the object and the subject accept their relative positions. In the introduction to *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, Gopal Guru compellingly notes that to recognize the experience of humiliation is in itself a manifestation of protest and resistance. In the same book, Geetha suggests that within the hegemonic Brahminic discourse the humiliators humiliate because they are well aware of their dominant position within the operative power structures.

In *The Cracked Mirror*, Guru demands that the Dalits generate the "moral stamina" within them to bridge the gulf between experience and theory, on one hand, and to combat non-Dalit theory, on the other. In Sundar Sarukkai's view, "Guru wants lived experience to justify [the] ethical principle to do theory" and poses a normative and ethical stance that has no place for "participant observation" and "theoretical outsider" (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 32). Countering the Habermasian position on the idea of distributing guilt through theory, Gopal Guru upholds the Levinasian approach of not letting the non-experiencers distribute the guilt through the guise of theory. Sarukkai, however, seconds Guru in opining that non-Dalits can certainly 'author' Dalit experience but cannot claim an 'ownership' to the idea of oppression. In opposition to authorship, ownership is necessarily derived from lived experience, which is a very subjective position. The Dalit experience, for instance, would constitute not only what they have, but also what they do not. Moreover, as Dalits do not have the choice not to be a Dalit subject, Guru stresses, the experience of being a subject remains open only to Dalits. For a non-Dalit, to experience the Dalit cause is a freedom of choice. In the lived experience, on the other hand, the relationship between the subject and context is unbreakable. Dalits have an ownership to not only the experience but also to the idea of oppression.

Emphasizing the categories of experience and intensity, Guru & Sarukkai observe that the aim of theory is not merely to describe, interpret or explain but to intensify experience. The experience, therefore, needs to be transformed variously into knowledge—empirical as well as theoretical. While the empirical signification of the Dalit experience in the form of Dalit literature might be 'particular' in its approach, Dalit theorization essentially would reflect 'universality'. Bound by aesthetics, since a literary art-piece is restricted to the symbolic domain, the intended

audience might not be able to comprehend the signification of the Dalit experience through metaphors and imagery. As symbolism revels in bringing home a point via a diverted route, it offers not a direct but a derivative analysis between ethics and aesthetics.

For this reason, Guru's idea behind privileging theory, which comes from a strong dislike to being 'objects' of study, appears to be ethical in nature. The context of Gopal Guru's allegation hints that while only a Dalit can enter the Dalit predicament, non-Dalits can never perceive Dalits as a separate subject. The specificity of Dalit oppression and its representation in literature and theory by Dalits, according to Guru, essentializes the Dalit experience. However, such an idea of an 'essential Dalit experience' and a 'homogeneous subjectivity' continues to be problematic. When Dalits speak, for instance, do the male Dalits also speak on behalf of the female Dalits, and vice-versa? Do the middle class Dalits, who have achieved a considerable upward mobility, qualify to write about the Dalits who are still at the margins? Can urban-based educated Dalits claim an authentic knowledge of community life and rural dialect?

The pertinence of Dalit literature, Dalit literary historiography and Dalit theory, hence, lies in its competence to give representation to the multiplicity of Dalit identity: male-female, urban-rural, Hindi-Tamil, chamar-bhangi. For, in its attempt to homogenize 'culture-specific' subalternity under one umbrella term, the Dalit experience does offer an alternative to counteract the dominant 'Others'—the TTB theory, literature and literary history. The possibilities of the alternative Dalit theory, hence, rest in acknowledging the presence of manifold Dalit identities, on one hand, while making a theoretical intervention, to use Guru's phrase, to combat 'reverse orientalism'. While non-Dalit theory, both within Anthropology and Sociology, 'museumizes' or 'caricaturizes' the Dalits, tribals and Shudras as "amusing objects", Guru postulates that the required shift lies in moving from being mere objects of study to becoming subjects of study (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 25).

To combat the colonial configuration of power, the discourse on nationalism gained prominence; in the present-day scenario, to combat the local configuration of power, the Dalit discourse is needed. Because of the prevalence of graded inequality, however, there is a lack of 'unity' of social experience along horizontal lines. This lack of unity amongst

Dalit sub-castes and all other marginalized minority groups further broadens the 'crack' that is being discussed in *The Cracked Mirror*.

Talking about the cultural construction of spaces, Guru writes:

If the spaces are hierarchically ordered, particularly as in the Indian context, then the dynamic of such spaces would produce the concept of Sanskritization. The social experience produced through the dynamic of such rigid spaces would form the subjective content of the concept of Sanskritization. ... The vocabulary of self-respect and social justice emanating from the Dalit perspective would be treated as inimical to such a sacred space (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 80).

In fact, caste-based atrocities take place when the Dalit attempts to trespass the rigid caste spaces. For instance, the Khairlanjee massacre or the Mahad Satyagraha—the moment the Dalits refuse to obey tradition, they have to face consequences. Tradition prohibits Dalits to violate social protocols that are being passed on since several centuries as 'the truth'. Hence, transformation of an 'agrahara' (traditionally dominant space) into a liberal (more open) space would allow the Dalit masses to not just accept the 'given truth', rather search for 'new truths' (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 79).

One can say, that the present-day social science framework in India is akin to the 'agrahara', a dominant space that needs to be invaded and claimed over by the Dalits. The domain of social science, ever since independence, is divided into two categories based on the domain of power and knowledge—the critically privileged (TTBs) and the empirically inferiorized (Dalits, Tribals and Shudras). Gopal Guru interrogates this intellectual binary by asking if "some are born with a theoretical spoon in their mouth and the majority with the empirical pot around their neck" (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 11).

Here, the analogy of the pot clearly points to the pot tied around the neck of the untouchables during the Peshwa rule in nineteenth century Maharashtra, while the spoon alludes to the silver spoon that a privileged few are born with. However, the questions that arise here are:

1. Why have only the privileged few been doing theory?
2. Do the TTBs have an innate ability to do theory?
3. Have the TTBs, being born out of Purusha's head, been endowed with more reflective capacity than the Dalits?

Guru states that the apparent edge that the TTBs have gained over Dalits is owing to the following reasons: destigmatized occupations, no spare time for reflexivity, low self-esteem, lack of confidence and intellectual calibre, lack of freedom and economic security, while freedom and economic security, Guru emphasizes, are a must for pursuing philosophy and theory. Moreover, Guru notes that the high priests of social sciences in India base their theoretical premises on data collected by Dalits. Hence, the existing framework of social science practice in India, that is largely Marxist and Liberal, is undemocratic and exclusive in nature. The egalitarian principle, Guru proposes, would bring in the concept of 'moral responsibility' in the practitioner of social science. It would bring about subversive changes in various ways— it would keep a check on the caricaturing of Dalits/Shudras/Adivasis so that they are not used as mere specimens; it would question the traditional intellectual positions; it would offer a promising theoretical space to the Dalits to provide subjective criticism from insiders juxtaposing the objective criticism from outsiders.

Critiquing the Marxist and Liberal discourses in India for the "epistemological deficiencies", Guru writes:

The Marxist discourse introduced concepts such as class, exploitation, proletariat, labour, and alienation for everybody, including Dalits. In the liberal discourse, caste, nationalism, citizenship, rights, and multiculturalism are the potent categories for everybody. ... This by implication suggests the Dalit failure of historical imagination to do theory. Although such rendering does pose a huge theoretical challenge to provide alternative sets of categories, this is a challenge that is worth taking up (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 27).

Here, Guru talks about the need for an egalitarian framework of social sciences because Guru's discontentment is not only based on the Dalit-other theorizing the Dalit experience but more importantly, the Dalit subject not being able to/allowed to do the same. Hence, comes the question of ethics.

Sundar Sarukkai questions the experiential slant of doing theory by arguing that experience is short-lived, fluctuating and individualistic. Sarukkai maintains that experience is subjective, has an element of essentialism, and hence, is unreliable. Therefore, it cannot be used as a valid source of standardizing reality at a universal level. On the other hand, Gopal Guru endorses experience as the most ethical source of doing

theory. Guru acknowledges the issues raised by Sarukkai as a challenge in dealing with the idea of experience. But he upholds that doing theory involves 'reflection' and not merely 'reaction' to experience. Possession of experience, according to Guru, not only intensifies experience rather provides a higher level of 'reflective consciousness' (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 113). Guru goes on to propose that: "Experience needs to be treated as the initial condition and theory as the essential condition for producing unified knowledge" (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 123).

The question that arises here is, why can't a Dalit autobiography be a perfect reflection of the Dalit experience? An autobiography also equally emphasizes on personal experience and gives emotional description of what has happened. No one can deny the importance of autobiographies in Dalit literature. But in an autobiography, Guru clarifies, experience can lead to reification. Theory, on the other hand, does not target individuals. Dalit autobiographies like *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* by Shyamlal (2011), or *An Untouchable in the IAS* by Balwant Singh (1997) are life-stories where the authors are evidently reflecting upon how their caste identity remains firm despite having achieved class mobility. Such a lived experience, Guru emphasizes, can be the only legitimate category for theorizing.

The debate between Guru & Sarukkai centres on the idea of 'ownership' of the lived experience of the suffering subject and the possible 'authorship' of the Dalit experience by a non-Dalit by "parachuting into somebody's experience" (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 120). Guru states that the social experience conceptualized by an 'outsider' cannot be authentic. Only the ones who own the experience of humiliation and abuse hold the ethical right to conceptualize this "differential" experience with "inner evidence". The "differentiated" social position of victimhood provides the Dalit subject an "organic link" to theorize reality. However, the non-egalitarian social sciences fail to provide this "productive space" to the Dalit subject via which he/she could not only reify the lived experience and its contents but categorize and conceptualize such experiences using "method and experiment". Since existing theories on caste cannot do justice to its complex lived reality, Guru invests his faith in the emancipatory potential of the Dalit theory.

The burgeoning of Ambedkarite consciousness in India gave way to Dalit intellectual activism, which upon its gradual foundation realized

the need for self-representation. The said 'intellectual activism', which began in the form of Dalit folklore and poetry, eventually culminated into an emergent body called Dalit literature. Dalit literature, however, can be perceived as an 'emotional' outburst of powerful feelings and experiences, whereas theory remains a matter of 'reason'. The initial phase of Dalit intellectual activism in South India began with the alternative historiographical accounts of Iyothee Thass, and with the cultural-cum-literary initiatives of Swami Acchutanand in the North. In the era following Ambedkar, however, Dalit intellectual activists resorted to descriptive theorizing wherein they were extensively quoting/summarizing Ambedkar rather than taking his legacy further. The emergence of the Little Magazine movement followed by the Dalit Panthers' movement, nonetheless, kept the Dalit cause alive.

While the worldwide dissemination of Dalit literature through English translation is helping in internationalizing the Dalit question, it is necessary for Dalit writers to also pen down theory from the experiential point of view. Theoretical concepts hold the power to intervene the cognitive domains of both the oppressed as well as the oppressor, and as a result, can impart unity, continuity, and intensity to experience. The dialectics of owned experience and theory, hence, can construct a concrete universal. As theory is not merely about piling up facts and figures but a comprehensive analysis of the same, it becomes a conceptual category. If non-Dalit theory misreads or misinterprets the Dalit experience, Dalits themselves need to shoulder the responsibility to rectify it via construction as well as deconstruction.

The Cracked Mirror proposes that the ground for theorizing caste can no longer be the notion of cultural hierarchy or the idea of purity-pollution but a close phenomenological analysis of the psychic reality of living a caste that would help understand the idea of touch, humiliation, exclusion, repulsion and self-respect from the subjective position of a Dalit. All these ideas essentially exist in terms of experiential space. The metaphor of the mirror suggests that experience and theory should ideally reflect each other; but within the Indian social scenario, this mirror is cracked. The image of the 'cracked mirror' suggests distorted reflection between experience and theory. The book, hence, suggests that a collective rethinking of untouchability must be undertaken by both the Dalit and the intellectual elite to minimize/repair the existing crack in the representation of reality. To accomplish this, Dalit theory must emerge

and take shape to achieve the following: to alter the place and position of the Dalit as an outsider in the theoretical realm; to not simply claim an ownership of the Dalit experience but to universalize it into larger structures of power; to analyse and intervene into the theorizing space of the elite theoretical pundits; to provide egalitarian meanings to the Dalit empirical experience; to rearticulate social relations and address forms of exclusion/inclusion using theoretical apparatus; to establish a sense of equality and egalitarianism both in theory and practice between the Dalits and non-Dalits; to realize Dalit theory as a genre of performative possibilities as against the deficit theorizations by TTBs, and last but not the least, to mend the crack in the mirror.

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