



Social Exclusion and Caste Hegemony: A Semiotic Understanding

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“All men are not created equal, and that is the root of social evil” -Frank Herbert

Abstract

The present paper intends to explore that how caste hegemony played a major role in maintaining ‘social exclusion’ in India and in Karnataka particularly. The modes of social recognition and derecognition models are generally representing through language. This representation obviously becomes as a social reality. This politics of social recognition is always discriminatory and partial. However, language can be taken into consideration in this paper as one of the signifiers for bringing out the different modes of caste hierarchy and social exclusion.

The discourse of caste hierarchy and outcaste are not merely signifying the oppressed conditions alone, but they are also the resulted phenomenon of ‘symbolic violence’. Consequently, socio-cultural sufferings and violent practices like untouchability are still prevailing despite of all democratic practices and social movements in India. Peter Burke defines symbolic violence in History and Social Theory is something different from the concept that is being discussed in this paper. According to Burke, “symbolic violence... refers to the imposition of the culture of the ruling class on dominated groups, and especially to the process by which these dominated groups are forced to recognize the ruling culture as legitimate and their own culture as illegitimate” (1993:86). This argument appears to be general and linear at the outset. But as far as the underlying structures are concerned, this argument substantially brings out the semiotic realizations and conditions of caste and caste systems in India.

Keeping in mind these objectives, this paper investigates thoroughly the socio-cultural conditions of social exclusion and caste hegemony, specifically in Karnataka. It is true, social exclusion and caste hegemony have been the crucial topics in the human history. For this reason, Instead of, rehearsing the old debates that have been circulated across the time and space, but trying to put them in a new



order and perspectives. And also it is necessary to understand their impacting dimensions through semiotics.

Introduction:

This paper does not focus on the historical wrongs done to the dalits and other depressed communities and how the dalits were deprived of sociocultural and political privileges for centuries. It only attempts to understand the politics of social exclusion policy and caste hierarchy is being represented in a semiotic condition throughout the history. Therefore, the paper would like to explore the trajectory of caste hegemony in the perspectives of semiotics from the periphery towards the centre.

Caste is one of the predominant parameters in India for two major phenomenons. One is to understand socio-political and cultural attitudes of any social groups. The other is, to assert the sociolinguistic and political identities of the given communities of this country. And apart from these sociocultural reasons; caste is also being functioning as a social indicator to signify that, caste as a stigma, shame, supremacy, privilege, tolerance, intolerance, pain, touchable and untouchable so on so forth. Thus, caste is taken into a consideration in this paper as a signifier that does not attest any particular or specific semantic dimensions on its own. But it definitely gets a meaning in association with the given socio-religious and political contexts.

Caste per se has no any particular sociocultural meaning except a social status. Hence, Society is primarily a means of sharing structure i.e. it is a combination of shared features. This sharing takes place in terms of both social and cognition. Therefore, each and every societal aspect is defined based on shared features of any given community. The very basic question arises here is, then why, there a social segregation, divisions, conflicts within a given community itself? Why are there social hierarchies in a society? These contradictions are not emerged from out of the communities but they are the bye-products of this sharing system alone. Therefore, this paper firmly believes, no society is symmetric and justifiable one.



The definition of identity is always a politically motivated and discriminatory. The question of identity is not purely an individual. But identities are always constructed in inter-individual contexts. These are always trying to connect with a social reality. This reality is naturally being affiliated to any one of the social institutions within a given community. Hence, every member of the given community has an identity. But all identities are not privileged; only some are privileged. The question arises as to find out which identities are acceptable and privileged. Obviously, an upper caste identity has the place of privilege among all the groups within a community. These are privileged identities not just because they belong to upper-castes, simultaneously, they are also socially recognized. This social recognition obviously enjoys all sort of sociocultural prominence and hegemony. Consequently, Dalit, downtrodden and backward communities are suffering from not just of sociocultural recognitions, but the identity itself.

In the post independent situation, though the Indian constitution provides safeguards and privileges to these communities for the betterment of their socio-political lives. But still, it has become so difficult for Dalits and other backwards to get ridden of the dominance, hegemony and the other sort of atrocities by the upper castes in their day to day life. Therefore, social recognition has not yet been accomplished by dalits so far. Now, this accomplishment of dalits remains as an illusion, not even dream alone. No, I am not suggesting, it should prevail even in future. I am only contesting it and also foreground the hard reality that confronts dalits to accomplish their aspiration to establish the identity and difference.

In the field of social understanding researches, there are only few inquiries which approach language in terms of its symbolic violence. That is to say that language has not been properly addressed as a strategic means for governing social systems and practices as well. Generally, it is believed that language is a neutral reality. No, it is very hard to accept this assumption. Because violence is not some extra-linguistic condition, every social reality is being inherent in a language that always explicates systems of dominant meaning. It also intricate, on how language favours a particular way of thinking about social practices and understandings, and most importantly, how this linguistically mediated rationality forms the



basis of a strategy for governing community affairs. In the sense, an understanding of the symbolic power of language, showing how the meaning of social group is scripted according to the changed social conditions of advanced liberal societies. It is demonstrated that social practice is rationalized according to a hegemonic rationality. This social negotiation is reflected historically so as to show how social practice gets employed in transforming the question of societal responsibility by inculcating ideas of efficiency into the social settings. It is established that Language violence as epitomized in the process of subjugating the dalits and other backwards.

Segregation is not a transitory stage for dalits, but is a permanent social divider. This division replicates in the linguistic structures and narrations. All these narration are intrinsically established in every language. That is why; Language becomes one of the prominent indicators for understanding sociocultural discrimination in terms of caste, ethnic, gender etc. Basically, the concepts like social exclusion and inclusion are directly connected to the development paradigms of modern economics. The every aspect of modern economics is being negotiated with symbolic capital. However, this symbolic capital can be discussed in terms of sign and symbol relations. These relations are never equal/symmetrical; they are always unequal, injustice and discriminatory. Consequently, the distribution of power, social capital and economic resources are survived till recent in unequal conditions in India and elsewhere. These developments are signifying the politics of social exclusion and inclusion that are taking place within a community. However, Segregation is more tangible in a social setting, whereas, the act of social exclusion is intangible and intrinsic. The act of semiotic understanding becomes an important tool in analysing such subtle and implicit realities of social groups.

The social policy discourses are never been developed in India so far to address the wrongs done both in past and present. It means the very question of discussing social exclusion and cultural participation in Indian social contexts becomes nullified. Any attempt at identifying and exploring the underpinnings of social exclusion, violence and untouchability requires clear definitions of the boundaries of these normative terms. Because, there is no uniform notion of untouchability exists across either in Karnataka or in Indian caste systems. I am not



denying the discrimination and atrocities of castes, but I am only propositioning the epistemological complexities that occur in 'Dalitism' and the construction of casteism. It is obvious; the complexities of Indian social organization are relying upon caste and caste systems. At the same time, the colonial sociology rather simplistically argued that Indian society was primarily divided into two religions categories, the Hindus and the Muslims, while the former were further subdivided into mutually exclusive castes [Sekhar, Bandyopadhyay:2004]. This argument marks the differences between castes within Hindus, but does not explicitly highlights the imposed segregation and hierarchies existing within Hindu religion communities.

The politics of inclusive growth and process of communicative act can be substantiated based on the codes of Participation, Performance, Action, Activities and Organization of Dalitis in par with mainstream communities. Every social act is a symbolic act. This particular act takes place in the form of castiesm, exploitation, domination etc. consequently, this paper considers, the codes of Participation, Performance, Action, Activities and Organization by particular caste, are highly symbolic by nature. But they prescribe violent practices sanctioned by sociocultural institutions. But these practices and power relations are always regulated and restrict the upward mobility of Dalits and any other backwards.

It is hard to deny that the history of Dalit is the history of oppression. At the same time, the concept of **Dalit** is evolved in the late ninetieth century; in fact, the concept of **Shudra** was the real representation of all the oppressed social groups since the primordial days of **Varnashrama**. Semiotically speaking, the term Dalit doesn't collocate with Shudra in any sense. The phenomenon of untouchability seems to be an important factor, because the untouchable condition was never assigned to the communities of Shudra in a whole even in the days of Varnashrama system. Perhaps, Dalits were not recognised as part of Shudra communities, rather they were not recognized social beings at all, but misrepresented as Chandals. This concept has no social recognition at all. Look at the concept Chandal that connotes inhumanity and abusive conditions in its every communicative reference. Moreover, the concept Chandal is a synonym of pollution and untouchability.



The word pollution basically denotes the environmental conditions. This condition can be divided into two broader categories like; natural environment [Nature] and human environment [society or social community]. Dalits are not allowed in both the domains; because they are untouchables. They are not supposed to touch water, air and land etc. They will get be polluted and remain impure. As a result, untouchability always dealt with two major kind of representations like abstract [morals, rituals etc] and concrete [place, person and things] realities. Such symbolic violence patterns did construe very firmly the discourse of untouchability as an eternal sociocultural reality.

The discourse of backwardness has no match with the discourse of untouchability. It does mean that backwardness signifies socio-economic status, whereas untouchability indicates social denial and misrecognition of social beings. It seems to be very relevant to discuss about the concept of Dalit. Historians and linguists tell us that the word 'Dalit' is derived from Sanskrit root form 'dal' which means split, crack, break etc. When used as an objective, it means split, broken, burst, crushed etc. Jotiba Phule used this term to describe the outcastes, untouchables as oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste ridden society. 'Dalit as a self designation, however, is quite recent. It springs out of an awareness and perception of the oppression/humiliation' [Guru: 2009]. Pantawane emphasizes the notion of Dalit, "What is Dalit? To me, Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism . . . He represents the exploited men in his country . . . Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on "to be Dalit" has now disappeared" (1986: 79). At the other hand, Martin Mackwan highlights the implications of outcastes and untouchability, "Discrimination manifests itself through visible practices such as separate drinking water wells, segregated housing colonies, separate burial grounds, segregated places of worship, separate seating of children during mid-day meals at school, prohibition of inter-caste dining and marriages, prohibition of dressing like others do or mounting a horse during a wedding, amongst scores of other forms. Discrimination also manifests itself through non-visible forms in the shape of caste prejudices that can be heard in the spoken language through



idioms and phrases as well as in literature” [year? P: 2: Internet]. All these arguments assert only the existence and identity of Dalits in every walk of their social life.

The very important move of Dalit movement and ideology is to delegitimize the mainstream history of Karnataka that is encoded in the episteme and semiotics of hegemony of upper castes. Especially, the so called intellectuals both from Sanskrit and English centric orientation of Kannada world often reiterate and reproduce the hegemonic legacy alone. In addition to this, they also derogatorily remarked, developing a perspective from below as “a frog’s perspective”. This move has become particular agenda and vision of Dalit writers of Kannada literature, here the worth mention is Devanooru Mahadeva. This writer has tried to address through his literary works, the greater questions of inclusive social democracy. This counter hegemonic resistance has been inherent throughout in Kannada culture cutting across time and space; these emerging trends would create larger space for internal democracy because social and political awareness is the strength of the community.