

Engaging with ‘Caste’ in Higher Education: Reflections on Critical Pedagogy in India

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Abstract

Caste based discrimination is an often denied social reality of higher education in India. But, the National Sample Survey (NSS) data (2007–08) for Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is indicative of the structural exclusion of students from amongst marginalised social groups. The overall GER in India was 17.31, while GER is the lowest among Scheduled Tribes (ST) at 7.74, followed by Scheduled Castes (SC) at 11.60, (Other backward Castes) OBC (14.80) and others (26.85). The suicide of Dalit PhD scholar Rohith Vemula (University of Hyderabad) and MPhil Student J Muthukrishnan (Jawaharlal Nehru University) has accentuated the assertion that what is needed is a challenge to Brahminical hegemony in the Higher Education rather than a debate between the competing values of inclusion and quality. In this paper, I argue that through critical dialogue and pedagogy in pursuit of the humanist goals of liberty, equality and fraternity those involved in higher education have a responsibility to counter Brahminical hegemony in our classrooms and campuses.

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Context and Frame

Caste based discrimination is an often denied social reality of higher education campuses in India. The blindness to caste exists not only in conversations amongst students and faculty but also exists in the academic curriculum and the administration of a University. This blindness is symptomatic of the privileged rather than those who find doors of social mobility closed on them as a result of the casteist mindset. Such blindness has even manifested itself in the form of academic writing. More recently, in 2002, the debate on caste in academia was initiated after Prof Gopal Guru wrote the article ‘How Egalitarian are social sciences in India?’ arguing that Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras and critiquing the theoretical claims made on behalf of Dalits by non-Dalits. The brahminical blindness in academic writing has however started to change in the last decade with writings from Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, Satish Deshpande, Sukhdeo Thorat, Sundar Sarukkai and others.

A discussion in social sciences has started on how caste operates in the Modern Indian City. Thorat and Atewell (2007) have shown through a field experiment the discriminatory processes that operate even at the first stage of the application process in the private job market. In another field experiment in National Capital Territory (NCT) Delhi by Thorat et al (2015) it was found that house owner prejudices deny housing for both Dalits and Muslims, with Muslims experiencing greater discrimination. Dalits and Muslims who manage to get homes on rent, do so by agreeing to unfair terms and conditions. Both these experiments have shown that caste was never dead and have thrown open new questions to understand caste in the city and so-called modern India.

The centrality of caste in understanding contemporary Indian social reality is aptly described by Prof Gopal Guru in a Caste Dialogue in 2013 when he was asked by Prof Jodka ‘What do you think is specific about the current moment of caste and how could we best describe it? Is there anything different about the way we talk about caste today when compared to, say, the early 1950s or even 1970s’ to which Prof Gopal Guru replied saying:

‘I am not sure whether ‘moment of caste’ is the right description here. The word ‘moment’ has an element of temporality to it, whereas caste is an experiential reality. It operates in its own universe with a *Sanatan* quality to it. In its essence, caste remains sanatan even though it manifests some kind of change in its appearance... For example, at one level, caste as a lived or experiential reality continues to hit one hard. At another, caste is perhaps rendered completely opaque. The universe of caste involves both continuity in its essence and change in its expression.’

While sociologist, political scientist and economists are paying attention to caste and acknowledging its varied manifestation in villages, cities and daily life experience in different and perhaps convoluted ways, the same has not been the case with higher education in India.

In 2007–08 as per the NSS data, the overall GER in India was 17.31 percent, but among social groups GER is lowest for ST (7.74) followed by SC (11.60), OBC (14.80) and others (26.85) (Khan and Sabharwal 2012). Higher education in India, faced with accusations of casteism after the suicide of Dalit PhD scholar Rohith Vemula (University of Hyderabad) and Dalit MPhil Student J Muthukrishnan (Jawaharlal Nehru University) exists in a tension of false values between ‘inclusion and quality’. The real tension is not about inclusion and quality, but about a challenge to Brahminical hegemony in the Higher Education space. As Chukka (2016) points out, ‘these suicides are symptomatic of higher education spaces being designed as exclusively upper-caste spaces characterised by an underlining hostility for the official reservation policy—spilling over as outright disgust and hatred for students from marginalised backgrounds, irrespective of their academic achievements or merit.’ Hence, Higher education needs to find some answers to deal with this systemic and institutionalised form of discrimination, to deal with this monster called caste. Are we even listening when Dalits and Adivasis Speak?

“After joining this place, I feel frustrated. No one talks properly here, no one behaves properly. Students underestimate me. It may be because I do not dress like them. I do not speak like them. I feel teachers also do not like me. They also do not pay any attention to me. In fact, I am a first class student, but here they treat me as below average.”

“In the college office, I feel insulted on hearing comments on facilities given to us and also due to their negative behaviour. The amounts are inadequate and then we receive them late. The office staff is rude to us. They say, ‘Don’t stand here, do we have only this work to do?’, or, ‘Don’t you feel satisfied that you are given entry here, that you need more things.’”

Interviews with Neo-Buddhist Students in Velaskar and Wankhede (1996)

The volume of the evidence of the presence of caste-based discrimination in higher education is surprising considering the limited nature of the response from Higher Education to counter the problem. Velaskar and Wankhede (1996) were one of first to document the nature and extent of the discrimination in medical and engineering colleges with a methodology that is oriented to capturing ‘views from below’. They conclude that discrimination in higher education is very real and it invokes feelings of pain and anxiety; of resentment, anger, hatred, hostility; of confusion, bewilderment and insecurity; of apathy, worthlessness and helplessness; and of self-pity. The article illustrates the nature of prejudice, hostility and humiliation that students from Dalit communities face in higher education.

More than 17 years later, the situation does not seem to have changed much with Singh (2013) putting forth similar experiences of discrimination

faced by Dalit and Adivasi students in his article ‘ Defying the Odds: The Triumphs and Tragedies of Dalit and Adivasi Students in Higher Education’.

“In the campus, there is a lot of prejudice against Dalit students. Many a times, the administration is not serious about our work and harasses us by delaying our applications or finding faults and making us run here and there. Their attitude towards us is very derogatory. Just watch their faces when some Dalit student goes to get his/her caste-certificate attested or for any schemes/scholarships that are there for us.”

“In Class, the teachers never wanted us to come ahead and displayed their prejudice quite openly. We were given low grades, poor labs and were never treated equal. As Dalit students, all of us just desired to get the degree somehow and leave the campus as early as possible”

Singh (2013) documents the discrimination faced by 11 interviewees in different institutes and disciplines of higher education from faculty, administration and fellow students.

While most of the experiences are similar, what seems to have changed is the response to discrimination. Velaskar and Wankhede (1996) document tension to escape ones past amongst Dalit students by living in a “semi-limbo” of the ex-untouchable, which involves not so much hiding of one’s caste but avoiding its announcement. The second strategy is ‘clustering’ as a response. Singh (2013) on the other hand shows how Dalit students are not just victims, they also resist and fight against discrimination with whatever resources they can gather. He documents how students seek support and inspiration from family, from the ideas and struggles of Babasaheb and are organising rather than passively clustering. But then again he indicates how the most routinized methods of exclusion is through dropouts and further goes on to say that most extreme and distressing form of dropout is suicide. Insight foundation has documented a total of 18 suicides from January 2001 till April 2011 of Dalit and Adivasi Students in India. These are not just numbers but the most tragic end to the hopes and dreams of liberation for a community that has seen centuries of drudgery, humiliation and slavery.

In 2006, the Thorat Committee that was formed to look into the suicide of a student at All India Institutes of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) stated that professors at AIIMS tried to intimidate students to prevent them from deposing before the committee and in 2014, sociologist Sasheeji Hegde pointed out that students from marginalised backgrounds experience a strong sense of alienation and disaffection within the university set-up, which needs to be addressed immediately. (As quoted in Chukka 2016). Hence, the question is not whether there is or there isn’t discrimination in higher education, the question is whether we are prepared to listen to the struggle of those who fight the discrimination for the goal of inclusion. As Singh (2013) rightly puts it, ‘If we really believe in them (i.e. the goals of inclusion), then we must give these words concrete content—we must listen to those who ‘live’ these goals, who struggle to make them a reality.’

Educationists have not taken adequate steps in that direction. Given the nature and extent of the presence of discrimination in institutions of higher education, it is important for educationists to learn from other countries which have sought to counter similar though not same problems relating to race, gender and ethnicity. The paper attempts to looks at critical pedagogy through Freire and hooks to understand how issues of discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity have been countered in the Americas and then focuses on Rege (2010), Sequiera (2011) and Bodhi (2011) to argue for the need to usher a Phule Ambedkarite Feminist Pedagogy to engage with caste and patriarchy as the social reality of our learners in Higher Education in India. In this paper, I argue that those involved in higher education have a responsibility to engage in dialogues that counters brahminical hegemony in campuses through critical dialogue and pedagogy in pursuit of the humanist goals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Locating the self and the argument

Before, I begin, I must make known the location from where I argue. The suicide of Dalit PhD scholars Rohith Vemula at University of Hyderabad in January 2016 and Dalit MPhil student J Muthukrishnan at Jawaharlal Nehru University in March 2017 caused a lot of angst in me as a stakeholder in higher education in India. Belonging to a privileged caste and at once having experience patriarchy in higher education (even though Gender equality as an institutional value is constantly affirmed). I write from my limited privileged witnessing caste based discrimination in higher education: Knowing how faculty and students especially those from privileged communities refuse to accept that there exist a caste problem, that caste dialogues generally with those from privileged communities ends up being a dialogue not about caste and privilege but one defending their attitude in support or against the reservation policy.

Hence, educators who engage with caste in Higher Education may find themselves navigating through several questions. Some of these questions include, what would it take for us and some of our privileged colleagues as educators to admit that caste discrimination exists in Higher Education? How would Freire, hooks, Ambedkar, Phule and Feminists respond to these issues of discrimination in higher education? As educators, how do we counter this caste-based discrimination and initiate a radical anti-caste dialogue? What theoretical basis do we have to engage in such a dialogue? Are such dialogues going to be effective to unlearn years of socialisation and personal values? Can such unlearning happen without a certain amount of pain? How would learners and educators from oppressed communities perceive such a dialogue? In the next section, I reflect on educational ideas of Freire, hooks, Phule and Ambedkar to engage with caste through the lense of critical pedagogy.

Friere and hooks: Phule and Ambedkar

Critical Pedagogy known by its myriad names as transformative pedagogy/learning, emancipatory pedagogy, anti-oppressive pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, decolonizing pedagogy, social justice pedagogy, humanizing pedagogy, discomforting pedagogy is in a broad and rudimentary sense a teaching learning methodology that is inspired from the Frankfurt School and ideas of Paulo Friere. Critical Pedagogy is about the critique of existing models of education, it is grounded on social justice, sees education as inherently political and works towards reducing human suffering of various kinds with a focus on those from margins.¹

While several educationists have now contributed to the idea of critical pedagogy, Freire and hooks provide for some foundational basis for critical pedagogy in the Americas.

Most writings on Critical pedagogy are incomplete if ‘The Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ by Paulo Friere is not mentioned. Friere (1996) in this book problematizes the dehumanizing banking concept of education and puts forth the idea and praxis for problem posing education and the investigation of generative themes for conscientization. Conscientisation is about an attitude of awareness, it refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. Freire’s emphasis on “praxis” action and reflection upon the world in order to change it is crucial to the idea of dialogue and transformation through education. Friere argues for a liberatory education through dialogue as the essence of education as the practice of freedom. The dialogue that Friere refers to is based on profound love, faith, humility and where the dialogue itself is a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust is a logical consequence. He further says that such a

dialogue cannot be without hope and it also cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking. Friere's work on pedagogy of the oppressed is about consciousness raising and transformation in the context of the situation of peasants and colonization in Brazil and holds relevance even today where most of the experience of higher education in India is not about the humanization of our learners but perpetuates their dehumanization through a Brahminical hegemony in education with an emphasis on Eurocentric categories and continuance of the colonial hum-bug.

Taking inspiration from Freire, hooks (1994) also argues for education as a practice of freedom in the form of an engaged pedagogy aimed at self-actualisation. She also takes inspiration from the ideas of a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh on philosophy of engaged Buddhism that sees the aspect of well-being of the healer, the therapist or the teacher because 'if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people'. hooks says, 'Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being.' Basically, hooks places an emphasis on well-being of the educator as well as the students. She speaks of the respect for students that is necessary for a dialogue in the classroom. hooks urges us to see that engaged pedagogy does not (only) seek simply to empower students. She emphasises that any classroom with a holistic model of learning will be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process.

In reading hooks, I find it difficult not to draw similarities with the experiences narrated by Singh (2013) and Velaskar and Wankhede (1996). hooks writes,

"In a feminist classroom, especially a Women's Studies course, the black student, who has had no previous background in feminist studies, usually finds that she or he is in a class that is predominantly white (often attended by a majority of outspoken young, white, radical feminists, many of whom link this politic to issues of gay rights). Unfamiliarity with the issues may lead black students to feel at a disadvantage both academically and culturally (they may not be accustomed to public discussions of sexual practice).... Such black students may feel estranged and alienated in the class.'

Such emotions of alienation and isolation are also experienced by Dalit and Adivasi students not just in classrooms but also in hostels and while interacting with the administration and faculty outside the classroom. The articulation for a new pedagogy by hooks and Freire comes out of their own experiential reality of marginalisation. bell hooks narrates her own experiences as a black woman in higher education classrooms and how even white male progressive professors who believed in ideas of Friere practiced dominating pedagogies. Freire too experienced poverty and hunger in Brazil, but he does mention his own limitations as a white male in the Brazilian context in a conversation with hooks. What follows is another question. Since critical pedagogical theories of hooks and Freire stem from their own experience, would it be apt to apply those theories to the complex experience of diversity of caste, religion, class, language, ethnicity that is characteristic to an Indian Classroom?

While the current impulse for critical dialogue in the classroom may origin from Freire and hooks, there is a need to base ourselves on struggles against exploitation in the Indian reality. The writings of Phule and Ambedkar provide much of that ground that articulates from their own experiential reality for a radical humanising anti-caste feminist pedagogy. In Phule-Ambedkar writings, education is seen as an instrument of liberation from the exploitative Hindu caste-patriarchy at the same time as an instrument for the making of a new society that values liberty, equality and fraternity. Savitribai Phule's poems in Kavya Phule (1854) on the plight of the Shudras (lowest of the four varnas-castes), concludes about the radical potential of transformation for the Shudras through education,

'Education is the path,
For the Shudras to walk,
For education grants humanity
Freeing one from an animal-like existence'.

Ambedkar as a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly had provided written evidence before the University Reforms Committee constituted in 1925–26. This report answers several questions on what should be the purpose of the University, the role of teaching and research, the argument against administrative separation of undergraduate and post-graduate teaching. He also submitted a report to the Assembly on the State of Education of the Depressed classes in the Bombay Presidency to the Indian Statutory Commission on behalf of the Bahishkrita Hitakarini Sabha. Ambedkar's famously quoted advice in his speech in Nagpur at the All India Depressed Classes Conference, in 1942 'Educate, Agitate and Organise' is a clarion call for the oppressed which embodies the action-reflection that Freire spoke of. Both Phule and Ambedkar set up several educational institutes and their idea of education underlines the centrality of dialogue. Despite their enormous contribution to educational thought, their work continues to remain neglected in the Indian educational discourse. (Velaskar 2012)

Freire, hooks, Phule and Ambedkar have their own ideas on education and while the core remains aspects of humanization, consciousness raising, social justice and self-actualisation, the content of their thought largely depends on the context. While much of their idea of liberatory education stems from their own experiences of exploitation, domination and humiliation, there are nuances in each of their educational thoughts that can only be formulated from the rootedness of their own lived experience.

Dialogical Education in Contemporary Higher Education

The alienation of Phule-Ambedkar's ideas on education is beginning to change. It is rather surprising that such alienation of Ambedkar's work on social transformation was also present in Social Work Education which has social justice as its stated goals. Bodhi (2011) writes how social work education is theoretically starved and speaks of the need for a new social work that is critical, progressive and ethically humane based on epistemic positions of Dalits and from a Tribal world view to resurrect social work education in the country. The beginning of Dalit and Tribal Social Work (DTSW) at Tata Institute of Social Science in 2006 has heralded this dawn in social work education. I have been a student of Dalit and Tribal Social Work from 2010–2012, I owe much of my political transformation and the epistemological journey to the dialogues in and outside the DTSW classroom.

Rege (2010) has revived Phule Ambedkarite ideas of education by explaining how Phule and Ambedkar brought together emancipatory non-Vedic materialist traditions of Lokayata, Buddha, Kabir and new western ideas of Thomas Paine, John Dewey, and Karl Marx. The educational philosophy of Phule-Ambedkar challenged the binaries of western modernity/Indian tradition, private caste-gender/public nation, thereby rethinking modernity and the idea of education. Sequiera (2011) too writes about how new learners in sociology from oppressed communities are 'silenced and sometimes shamed' as a result of their identity based on caste, gender and language in higher education. The acknowledgements of these

problems and historical guilt are crucial for guiding new educators to move forward to make higher education democratic, inclusive and liberatory.

Both Rege (2010) and Sequiera (2011) have documented pedagogical experiments and in some ways shown the path to a radically humanising dialogical higher education.² The limitation of the work of Sequiera and Rege, however remains, that it does not stem out the lived experience of a Dalit or Adivasi in the space of higher education. Dalit and Tribal Social Work Educators have started a journal titled 'Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Studies and Action' which documents articles from students and academicians on issues of Dalits and Adivasis. These new knowledge products are by themselves processes that are not only sensitive to the identity of the learner but achieve the far important goal of democratising the space of higher education by acknowledging the power of and power in knowledge production.

Conclusion

In conclusion, educators today have to acknowledge and call out that discrimination exists in higher education primarily stemming from caste and ethnic identities. And that this discrimination has cost lives of students, meritorious students who were hopes of historically enslaved communities. There were and are students who make it despite the odds. The discrimination exists in the content of our curriculum, in the university administration, amongst teachers and amongst fellow students. There is a need to acknowledge the presence of caste in the classroom and engage with it. It would be foolish to think that there can be a single model dialogue on caste as a syllabus for all institutes of Higher Education to implement. This dialogue cannot be a one size fits all formula. Writings of Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar and other anti-caste social thinkers and Adivasi revolutionaries must provide the theoretical basis for such a dialogue in India. The manner in which we engage will depend on the context of our learners, our commitment to social justice and more importantly our willingness to stretch the boundaries in a 'regimented' educational setting like higher education. Once we engage in a dialogue that relates to the experience of our learners, our learners and educators as well will want an education that is 'healing to the uninformed unknowing spirit' hooks (1994). They will want a knowledge that connects what they are learning and their overall life experiences. But this dialogue cannot be said to be a one-dimensional strategy that we use on our learners, the beauty of this dialogue is the practice of freedom that the learners have in not accepting the guidance. As Dirkx (1988) puts it, 'it would be naïve and silly for us as educators to think that we can always foster transformation and it would be better if we see our role as one in which we enter for a time, a journey that is and has been on-going within the individual and collective lives of those with whom we work.'

Notes:

1. My personal notes from a Lecture by Prof Leena Abraham at the 6th Dalit and Tribal Studies and Action Colloquium on Context, Pedagogy and Pedagogical Practices in Social Work Education at the Centre for Social Justice and Governance, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, September 2017.

2. Sequiera (2011) writes about Priyanka Velip, a tribal woman in his class who insisted in writing her dissertation in non-standard English rather than trying to write in her own language to challenge the ghetto of the 'other'. He also writes about his experience of using Digital Story Telling in the classroom. Sharmila Rege at the Centre for Women Studies, Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule University, Pune had helped bring out a series of publications by students of women studies ("Exploring the Popular: texts, identities and politics" and "Isn't This Plate Indian/Hi Thali Bharatiya Nahi Ka? Dalit histories and memories of food" to name a few.)

3. Sanatan means eternal, something without a beginning and without an end.

4. Brahminical ideology is a dominant discourse in India which sees caste system as sacred, legitimate and functional.

5. **Phule Ambedkarite:** Phule Ambedkarite implies a fusion of the ideas of Anti-Caste crusaders Mahatma Jyotiba Phule(1827-1890), Savitri bai Phule(1831-1897) and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar(1891-1956). While Jyotiba Phule and Savitri bai Phule initiated anti-caste movement in the 19th Century in Western Maharashtra by providing education to excluded communities and women, Ambedkar dedicated his entire life to the struggle for empowerment of Dalits in social, economic and political life. He set up several educational, social and political institutions during his lifetime to further the cause of the oppressed castes across India.

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