Social Exclusion and Caste Hegemony:
A Semiotic Understanding

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Abstract

The present paper intends to explore how caste hegemony played a major role in maintaining **'social exclusion'** in India and particularly in Karnataka. The modes of social recognition and de-recognition models are generally represented through language. This representation obviously becomes 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 do not merely signify the oppressed conditions alone, they also the result in the phenomenon of 'symbolic violence'. Consequently, socio-cultural sufferings and violent practices like untouchability are still prevailing despite democratic practices and social movements in India. Peter Burke defines symbolic violence in History and Social Theory as 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 thoroughly investigates the socio-cultural conditions of social exclusion and caste hegemony, specifically in Karnataka. It is true that social exclusion and caste hegemony have been crucial topics inhuman history. For this reason, instead of rehearsing the old debates that have been circulated across time and space,

we try to place them in a new order and perspective. Further, it is necessary to understand their dimensions which could impact through semiotics.

Keywords: Social Exclusion, Caste Hierachy, Symbolic Violence, Dominated Groups

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 the social exclusion policy and caste hierarchy 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 phenomena. One isto understand socio-political and cultural attitudes of any social group. The other is to assert the sociolinguistic and political identities of the given communities of this country. Apart from these sociocultural reasons, caste is also functioning as a social indicator to signify caste as a stigma, shame, supremacy, privilege, tolerance, intolerance, pain, touchable, untouchable and so on and so forth. Thus, caste is taken into consideration in this paper as a signifier that does not attest any particular or specific semantic dimensions on its own. However, it definitely acquires a meaning in association with the given socio-religious and political contexts.

Caste *per se* has no particular sociocultural meaning except as a matter of social status. Hence, society is primarily a means of sharing structure, meaning, it is a combination of shared features. This sharing takes place in terms of both social conditions and cognition. Therefore, each and every societal aspect is defined based on shared features of any given community. The very basic question that arises is: why then are there social segregation, divisions, and conflicts within a given community itself? Why are there social hierarchies in a society? These contradictions do not emerge from the communities; they are the by-products of this sharing system alone. Therefore, this paper adopts the viewpoint that no society is a symmetric and justifiable one.

Definition of Identity

The definition of identity is always politically motivated and discriminatory. The question of identity is not purely individual; identities are always constructed in inter-individual contexts. These are always trying to connect with a social reality. This reality is naturally 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 how to determine 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 sorts of sociocultural prominence and hegemony. Consequently, the Dalit, the downtrodden, and backward communities are suffering from the lack of not just sociocultural recognition, but their very identity.

Indian Constitution and Social Recognition

In the post-independent situation, the Indian Constitution provides safeguards and privileges to these communities for the betterment of their socio-political lives. Still, it has become so difficult for Dalits and other backward castes to get rid of the dominance, hegemony, and other sorts of atrocities practiced upon them by the upper castes in their daily lives. Therefore, social recognition has not yet been achieved by Dalits so far. Now, this accomplishment of Dalits remains as an illusion, not just a dream alone. No, I am not suggesting that it should prevail even in future. I am only contesting it, and I also foreground the hard reality that confronts Dalits to accomplish their aspirations to establish their identity and difference.

Language and Symbolic Violence

In the field of social understanding research, there are only few inquiries that 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. However, it is very hard to accept this assumption. Because violence is not some extra-linguistic condition, every social reality is inherent in a language that always explicates systems of dominant meaning. It is 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 a sense, an understanding of the symbolic power of language shows how the meaning of social groups 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 to show how social practice is employed in transforming the question of societal responsibility by inculcating ideas of efficiency into social settings. It is established that language violence is epitomized in the process of subjugating the Dalits and other backward communities.

Segregation as Permanent Social Divider

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 narrations are intrinsically established in every language. That is why language becomes one of the prominent indicators for understanding sociocultural discrimination in terms of caste, ethnicity, gender and such factors. Basically, concepts like social exclusion and inclusion are directly connected to the development paradigms of modern economics. 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, unjust, and discriminatory. Consequently, the distribution of power, social capital, and economic resources survive, till recently 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.

Discussing the Wrongs of the Past and the Present

Social policy discourses in India have never been sufficiently developed to address the wrongs done both in the past and the present. This means that 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. This is because there is no uniform notion of untouchability existing across one whole

state like Karnataka, or across the whole Indian subcontinent's caste systems. I am not denying the discrimination and atrocities of castes, but I am only proposing the epistemological complexities that occur in 'Dalitism' and the construction of casteism. It is obvious that 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 religious 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 highlight the imposed segregation and hierarchies existing within Hindu religious communities.

Inclusive Growth

The politics of inclusive growth and process of communicative actions can be substantiated based on the codes of Participation, Performance, Action, Activities, and Organization of Dalitis on par with mainstream communities. Every social act is a symbolic act. This particular act takes place in the form of casteism, exploitation, domination, and so on; consequently, this paper considers that the codes of Participation, Performance, Action, Activities, and Organization by particular castes 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 other backward castes.

It is hard to deny that the history of Dalits is the history of oppression. At the same time, the concept of **Dalit** is evolved in the late19[th] 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 as a whole even in the days of Varnashrama system. Perhaps Dalits were not recognised as part of Shudra communities, rather they were not recognized as 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.

Pollution

The word *pollution* basically denotes the environmental conditions. This condition can be divided into two broader categories: natural environment (Nature) and human environment (society or social community). Dalits are not allowed in both domains because they are untouchables. They are not supposed to touch water, air, land, and so on; they will get polluted by their touch and remain impure. The upper caste people, if they got touched by the untouchable, will get polluted and then they must undergo many purification rituals by which they can be purified. As a result, untouchability has always dealt with two major kinds of representations: 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.

Discourse of Backwardness

The discourse of backwardness does not match 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 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, and so on. Jotiba Phule used this term to describe the outcastes and 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) On 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". (2014 P: 2: Internet) All these arguments assert only the existence and identity of Dalits in every walk of their social life.

Dalit Movement and Karnataka

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 orientations of the Kannada world often reiterate and reproduce the hegemonic legacy alone. In addition, they also made derogatory remarks, developing a perspective from below as "a frog's perspective". This move has become the particular agenda and vision of Dalit writers of Kannada literature; here the name worth mentioning 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.

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