



THE 'CRITICAL' IN CRITICAL CASTE STUDIES: EXPLORING A PRACTICE

Sambuddha Bhattacharjee

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Doctoral Student,
Department of Political Science,
Presidency University, Kolkata,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Sambuddha Bhattacharjee

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Abstract

Caste as a social practice have been attempted to be theorized through the lenses of domination, exploitation, redistribution vis-à-vis recognition etc. However, these themes run across many other analytical categories like race, gender, linguistic identity etc. Critical Caste Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, attempts to examine the production and dispersion of such forms of marginalization and aims to undo academic silences by engaging in intersectional analysis.

The current essay delineates major landmarks of dealing with categories of domination and exclusion in Critical Race Theory and then goes on to mark the limitations of transatlantic theorizations to capture the lived manifestations of caste within the Indian social structure. It ends the argument by an attempt to utilize the approaches of Critical Social Theory to arrive at experience-near theorizations through the promise of Dalit Studies. By doing so, the essay attempts to outline the possibilities of Critical Caste Studies as an academic practice.

Keywords: *Caste, Domination, Exclusion, Dalit Studies, Critical Caste Studies*

Introduction

In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? (Ambedkar, 1949)

Democracy in India is a story of deflating illusions, of opportunities and oppression, where democratic politics itself is seen as necessary for decisive action to expand the scope of an egalitarian order in a non-western post-colonial state (Khilnani, 1997). However, the realities of this democratic process are quite different from the intended objectives of the framers of the Constitution (Jodhka, 2017). The early nationalist leadership held the system of caste to be incompatible with the vision of the nascent nation-state – reactionary caste system was portrayed as a barrier to progress. Backwardness was measured in purely economic terms; caste was held to be an ideological and cultural hangover, not a material fact. While literature on deepening of democracy in India has proliferated (Yadav, 1999, Palshikar, 2004), politically, caste is much more active institution today than in the past largely due to electoral vicissitudes in a competitive political market.

On one hand, 'brain arbitrage' is the new currency of trade in the shining software-package India. On the other, redefinition of India in terms of an aggressive assertion of monochrome selfhood has been deepening its roots. Notions of purported 'common sense' are being touted as the natural and inevitable order of things and powerful seductive temptations of clarity and neatness are being played into in the forms of neatness of authoritarian politics, clarity of a statist vs. pure market economy, unambiguity of alliances between political actors etc. However, in a society like ours, where expectations shift swiftly, where ingrained fluidity continuously challenges old deference, the aptness of choices does not depend on its over-enthusiasm in the de-historicizing neatness of modernity and democracy but on appreciating the divergent structures that muddle through the conflicts of modern politics. Conflict is the lifeblood of democracy – it is something that forces people to make the most intimate of the choices that release the energies of creation and destruction in a democracy.

Critical Caste Studies, as an academic exercise, is about doing exactly this – to unearth the realities of caste practices and to utilize such practices to disinter other forms of domination by transcending the limitations of conventional theoretical frameworks.

The Way towards Critical Caste Studies: Inspirations from Critical Race Theory

The centrality of race in social, political and cultural thought is being felt since the 1980s. Race, as a collective and communitarian identity, holds larger social and political significance as it involves questions of belonging, affiliation, location and could be the

locus of discrimination, exclusion and oppression (Nayar, 2010). Race studies attempts to do probe into this by studying race as both the context for and consequences of socio-political problems. It is thus an explicitly political reading or critical practice within legal studies, historiography, social theory and literary criticism. A short description of the genealogy of Critical Race Studies is in order to help in establishing its links with the emerging field of Critical Caste Studies.

It was W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that set the ball rolling for this new critical practice. He disputed the biological determinism behind Eugenics, Social Darwinism, Nazism etc. and clearly moved towards a social constructionist view of race – race as a category, he argued, was not scientifically demonstrable but it emerged within the social discourses and practices. Racial difference in biology does not, in this constructionist view, indicate racial inferiority. In *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), he argued about criminality not being an essential feature of black personality. His insights on the issue of double consciousness described the social reality of a black man in America – the conceptualization of self-image being mirrored through the behaviour of others (in this case, how a white American would construct the idea of a black American) and omnipresence of the double identity of being black and an American in the lived experiences of the black community.

The New Negro (1925) by Alain Locke was another defining moment – it pleaded for a higher amount of self-consciousness among the blacks. This was followed by Hoyt Fuller's *Black Aesthetics* (1968), which proposed that there could be no compatibility or conversation between the African American and the white American writer as their corresponding consciousness would always be different. This view firmly denounced the adequacy of white literary cultures as a frame of reference for the blacks. Larry Neal, following this line of argument, attempted to develop a black aesthetic tradition by turning to figures like the trickster in African mythology as an icon of black consciousness that resists white frameworks (Nayar, 2010). Using myth and folklore was an extremely political step because these are collective, shared and communitarian and not individual – presence of which would later be found in the theorizations by Roberto Esposito.

The last decade of the twentieth century became rife with similar issues as multiculturalism would turn out to be the ideology of the global age. Although multiculturalism has been a particular response to an undeniable trend towards moral and cultural pluralism, the privileging of certain standpoints and cultures became more pronounced due to the machinations of various forms of capitalism in different nation-states. As a result, identity politics gained ground as a political critique of liberal universalism; it questioned the construction of culture, behind a façade of universalism, in line with the values and interests of dominant groups (Heywood, 2015). The psycho-emotional force of identity politics propped culture up not only as a source of oppression, but of liberation and empowerment – the personal got fused with the political.

In this environment of purported pluralism, the work by Jacques Derrida on the question of the foreigner and the politics of cosmopolitanism, became relevant. When a foreigner arrives at the host country, he or she is asked questions about his identity and intentions. Derrida opened his argument with the language in which these questions are usually posed:

If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him? (Derrida, 2000)

Playing with the etymology of hospitality and host ('hostis', the roots of 'foreigner', means both enemy and guest) Derrida calls into question the problem of language: who is the guest and who is the enemy? Derrida's negotiation of the laws of hospitality and identity of the foreigner are – in spite of his complicated wordplay – a matter for serious importance as the exercise of naming of a category, of instituting a discourse is to decide upon a person's life. (Nayar, 2010)

The preparation of detailed census reports by white administrators in Africa, South America and Asia, denoting certain castes and tribes as criminal, the perpetration of xenophobic violence on the Jews by the Nazis had a few things in common – entire apparatus, involving, technology, politics, economics and culture were directed to keep the body as a subject under constant monitoring, surveillance and control. Commonly referred to as biopolitics, these prejudices were merged with national and territorial questions after 9/11 – descriptions of 'Islamic fundamentalism', 'Muslim terrorists', Afghanistan as a rogue state etc. Roberto Esposito's work, in this backdrop, suggested that the immunity paradigm became more dominant over the community one within politics.

Under the similar ideological firmament, Aihwa Ong's (2003) work on refugees is significant as it proposes three technologies of subject-making: firstly, orientalism and establishing the dominant culture as the recognized identity; secondly, attempts to normalize and assimilate ethnic groups into standardized American moulds and thirdly, the polarized position of the state and the refugee. Ong's work demonstrates how racial discourses merge with discourses of health, economy, nationalism, morality, welfare etc in order to position the refugees in particular ways. Critical Race Studies has, thus, been an attempt to foreground race and ethnicity as key categories in the analysis of law, history, politics and culture.

Limits of Transatlantic Theorization vis-à-vis Caste

In 1923, the Institute of Social Research was set up at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. Scholars associated with this institute attempted to develop a critical perspective in the discussion of all social practices. They critiqued upon ideology as systematically distorted accounts of reality which attempted to conceal and legitimize asymmetrical power relations. Theodor Adorno (1903-69), Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Jurgen Habermas (1929-) were the leading thinkers of this school. The writings by Jacques Derrida in literary theory, most importantly, *On Grammatology* (1967), by Michel Foucault in the history of ideas, by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in philosophy, by Julia

Kristeva in semiotics and psychoanalysis, by Slavoj Žižek and Jean Baudrillard in political philosophy were inspired by the churnings of critical thinking.

But before all these churnings, the genealogy of political theory was assumed to be probably more neat and clear on its definitional sanctity of the modalities and conceptual categories it espoused.

Exploitation has been an important conceptual framework in Marxism. It is commonly held that workers are exploited because they do not get the adequate share of the pie of profit. By appropriating the surplus labour rendered by the workers, the capitalists gain profit and the workers, in return of their necessary labour just get the bare essentials so that the supply of workers for working in the factory is never stooped and the profit-producing industrial cogs keep running. However, this conceptualization of exploitation is inadequate as it obscures the connection exploitation has to the labour theory of value and alienation. This framework has its limitations in dealing with force and domination (Holmstrom, 1976). And domination is an important category to deal with caste.

Domination in the social space was, most abstractly, described through the relation between positions, dispositions and position-takings by Pierre Bourdieu through his use of the concepts of field, capital and habitus to articulate his theorization. A *field*, to him, meant a subset of objective positions with distinct logic; *habitus* meant a system of dispositions that in interaction with objective structures shaped position-taking in the form of practices and *capital* denoted how the social space in the most advanced societies is primarily ordered by the distribution of economic capital and cultural capital (Seim & McCarthy, 2023). However, by replacing classes on paper with capitals on paper (the primacy of the social space over the economic sphere), theorizing domination without exploitation (domination as the indirect effect of power relations through complex spaces of positions and position-takings, while exploitation is directly linked with class analysis) and prioritizing position over production (thus ignoring the relations of production), Bourdieusian social space undervalued the need for a fundamental account of class (Seim & McCarthy, 2023).

This would have impact on how to theorize caste in conjunction with class. The classic recognition-redistribution modality (as explained by Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser) remains, similarly fraught with difficulties to be treated in isolation as economic inequalities remain to be perpetuated through caste inequalities and hence, any attempt to dissociate caste from class would run the risk of empirical shortcomings (Jodhka, 2013).

The Need for a Counter-narrative: Engaging ‘Critically’

Dalit Studies emerged as a new field of study since the 1990s, mostly to cater to the scholarly curiosity around untouchability and caste discrimination in institutional contexts. However, it was limited to the imagination of caste being a mere birth-based mode of segregating Indians into high and low categories. Problematizing caste remained outside the purview of mainstream public discourse and academia – it has not been successful in dealing with questions regarding the exercise of privileged caste power through capillaries of everyday existence on the one hand and on the other, the agency-laden movements and anti-caste resistance of subordinated communities.

As explained already, the methodological tools of conventional social and political theory have been inadequate to explain caste. Louis Dumont, when presented with the evidence of change in the structures of caste under the conditions of modernity, had proposed the idea of substantialization of caste. The public and governmental enunciation of caste as the pre-eminent mode of individual and community identity and the academic engagement with the phenomenon of caste through governmentalized categorization had blurred a contextual and objective appreciation of caste (Bairi, 2013).

Sociologists like M. N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille and Dipankar Gupta have been insistent on the gradual fading out of caste as a frame of meaning-making and self-identity. Caste has been touted to be explained not through hierarchy but through difference (Gupta, 2010). On one hand, the Brahmins and the upper castes identify their social space as casteless and seem to be in denial of their caste identity and hence, face a paradox as this historical denial is based on the recognition of their *caste-ness*. On the other hand, attempts at assertion of Dalit identity is based on the very notion of recognition with the *caste-ness* of the oppressed. This conceptualization of caste as a mere form of inequality is increasingly becoming a dead-end, showing its limits (Bairi, 2013).

The modalities of occupation and dignity have been widely used to describe such conventionally demarcated treatment of caste. However, the writings and experience of the Dalit necessarily underscore the view of caste being a source of everyday discrimination, dehumanization, inequality and violence (Satyanarayana, 2013). Hence, moving beyond the study of dominant caste groups and aspects of social mobility, the objective of the critical practice of interrogating caste should have involved the discursive practices through which regimes of caste inequality continue to persist (Rawat, 2013). Moreover, the practices of the colonial government ended up creating a strange concoction of the forward castes and the rulers. This resulted in the colonial state fixing the identities into separate compartments. While, the castes and tribes surveys and census reports highlight the *varna* representation of India, the fieldworks draw attention to *jati*, kingship and ethnicities.

Hence, it is important to launch a programme of deconceptualization, the project of not modifying but of abandoning the dominant political-philosophical vocabulary altogether. Through this, the practice of Critical Caste Studies must seek to retrieve and uncover indigenous conceptualizations, terms and categories, of Indian social and political thought, to find and follow its logic, and eventually to experiment with applying it normatively to theorizations of contemporary India's actual social and political realities.

Dalit Swaraj through Critical Thinking

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), the most influential of the egalitarian theories in the 20th century attempted to shape both modern liberal and social-democratic theorizations of social justice. He employed an instrumental notion of primary goods to conceptualize his version of transcendental institutionalism. Following the Rawlsian difference principle, it is possible to argue for treatment of the difference in an egalitarian order in the project of Critical Caste Studies– to resist the rush to reconcile (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). The epistemological authenticity of Indian political thought cannot remain in mere indigenizing while appropriating foreign structures of knowledge, it lays in a forward but downwards excavation to democratize political and social thought.

In the preface to *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946), Ambedkar divides the Hindus into five classes- firstly, the orthodox, secondly, the Arya Samajists, thirdly, the ones who think caste is losing relevance due to non-recognition by the law, fourthly, the Hindus, who are indifferent to the question of social justice and the fifthly the class of rationalist Hindus, who give primacy to social reforms over political Swaraj.

Under the leadership of Mr Gandhi, the Hindu Society, if it did not become a political mad-house, certainly became mad after politics. Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and the cry for Swaraj took the place which social reform once had in the minds of the Hindus. (Ambedkar, 1941)

When asked about what advantage the Dalit would gain by conversion, Ambedkar replied:

“What will India gain by Swaraj? Just as Swaraj is necessary for India, so also is change of religion necessary for the untouchables. The underlying motive in both the movements is the desire for freedom.” (Ambedkar, 1941)

It is possible to argue that when Ambedkar deployed the idea of Swaraj to justify his controversial decision to convert, it was a classic instance of Hegelian sublation i.e. simultaneous cancellation and preservation – picking up and preserving what he finds valuable in the concept, even as he cancels and overcomes what is retrograde to his aims and intentions (Singh Rathore, 2017). This was his way of dissolving the tension of the double-bind and of refusal to accept the paternalism of Hindu Swaraj. This agency-centred understanding of Swaraj was his way of ensuring free, equal and agent-centred participation in the political sovereignty of a free nation.

However, the Rawlsian paradigm has an ingrained scheme of perpetuating injustice of inequality by prioritizing liberty over equality in the lexical ordering. It is possible to argue that swaraj without Dalit swaraj is tantamount to liberty without equality. (Rathore, 2017)

Conclusion

Modernity and so-called Western civilization are not satanic evils, as Gandhi calls them in *Hind Swaraj*; rather, insofar as they exist at all, they are most paradigmatically banal evils, as Hannah Arendt would say: insufficient, inadequate and riddled with innumerable contradictions - just like all lived traditions (Rathore, 2017). This is an important rider that Critical Caste Studies must take note of.

Critical Caste Studies attempts to see caste as a social disorder; the field can be said to have two crucial trajectories:

“...first, it is committed to examining diverse cultural, religious, political and economic mechanisms by which caste-power is produced and dispersed through a putatively inviolable caste structure.... And second, it is devoted to unraveling the discursive and non-discursive counter-caste practices ...” (Ayyathurai, 2021)

By doing this, it attempts to overcome the failure of South Asian humanities and social sciences to critique upon caste as the invention of self-privileging groups and the widespread disciplinary attitude of condescending only to see the pitiable conditions of the oppressed but refusal to engage with counter-cultural subjectivities of such Indians. Critical Caste Studies thus attempts to make the oppressed subaltern speak, to borrow from Clifford Geertz, through her ‘experience-near’ conceptualizations and to serve, to borrow from Iris Marion Young, justice through difference.

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