

Review Article:

Theorizing Social Theory for Dalits and non-Dalits: Gopal Guru's Generic Intervention

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Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 264, Rs. 685/-, ISBN: 978-0-19-807831-9.

Dialogues on the Dalit Other

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai debated in this provocative book about the specificity and accessibility to lived experience of the suffering subject by referring to untouchability and social theories about it. The debate centres around the question of uniqueness of untouchables and the extent to which a non-Dalit or someone who is not an untouchable can understand and theorize about Dalit experience. Guru and Sarukkai explored such questions in the form of a dialogue by positing what they call the non-Western mode of differential otherness that does not collapse into a binary and yet attempts to participate in each other's "form of life" by a dialogical play of languages, which often open up closures of each side.

Gopal Guru asks, "If social experience is given by others, how can it be authentic?" (124) This is a question that cries for an answer in the *Cracked Mirror* for the one who owns a degrading, humiliating experience of being violated. The mirror is cracked because no one else can own the experience of being tormented and violated unless one's own being is implicated into such an experience. Therefore the claim of authenticity of "social experience" is essentially cracked—as it can neither be transferred and transposed, nor can it be authored and

owned without being an "object" of it. This sums up Gopal Guru's claim about specificity of Dalit experience and its inappropriable "inner evidence" (126-27).

Guru claims that conceptualization and theory building about Dalit experience misses necessarily the "inner evidence" and the "differential experience", resulting into a refusal to accept the "pain" involved in the experience of being a Dalit or being an other by a non-Dalit subject. Guru theorizes this situation of incommunicability of Dalit pain to others by arguing,

(...)the de-subjectification of experience or its unification into common experience depends on *the inability of the system to produce differential experience.*¹

Why can't the system produce differential experience that marks Dalit/tribal/subaltern subjects of experience? Guru argues that such an inability could be filled in by social theory by undertaking the task of building an ethical co-responsibility of sharing the experience of the Other by "inter-subjectifying", which is quite a daunting task for "laying down the metaphysics of emancipation" (127). Guru lays down such a metaphysics by claiming that the "organic link" between experience of victimhood, marginalization and degrading inhuman conditions and an already "differentiated" social position as a Dalit or an Other leads to "search of a new truth" (79). The new truth is that within the larger structure of domination-oppression, the Subject cannot be reified into only a particular kind of experience and its contents, rather the concepts and categories used to describe such experiences find a new meaning and a new truth by creating a "productive space" for a theory of emancipation. Such a

theory of emancipation, *a la* Guru, does not allow repetition of morally degrading and objectionable experience for Others (119). Guru argues that the idea of emancipation may arise from specific degrading experience, but a theory of emancipation bases itself on an ethical co-sharing and finding an alternative way of "restructuring" of the "cognitive apparatus" that enhances the moral capacity to transform such experience into a struggle for emancipation. So, Guru favours a kind of social theory that leads to a moral struggle for achieving what it attempts to cognitively restructure and transform. This leads Guru to suggest an alternative theory of experience and practice that does not lose the specificity of Dalit experience and yet builds on it in order to transform it into a situation of an "egalitarian order" (206).

This is *not* just an acknowledgment of the ontological wound but an activity of sharing each other's pain by being responsive to the Other and jointly alleviating the subjects from the causes and sources of moral degradation such as the phenomenon of untouchability. This is also giving a "moral orientation" to people who outsource untouchability to Others to proclaim their superiority and sacredness (221-22) that goes into a practical reordering of the social world into the lived experience of being equals. Guru argues that a theory of Dalit experience is not just about Dalit lived experience but it is also about how such lived experience does not curtail the possibility of co-sharing of this lived experience transpositionally within the already shared and common structure of oppression to which all others could attribute their lived experiences. This link with Other's experience makes it also possible to speak about Dalit experience and as such can produce the Dalit subject in an interactive and intersubjective common social space. Guru is well-aware that this space shall be inhabited by the tormentor as well, while sharing the Dalit experience within it can break the silence and the asymmetry between the owner and the author of such experience. Guru suggests how the mirror image of the Dalit as a repulsive and rejected Other can act as a subject of reflection for identifying the roots of domination and oppression and hence can open up the space to a new interpretation of the agency of domination to transform it into a project of subaltern emancipation.

Critique of Critical Reason

The Dalit-subaltern project of emancipation assumes an entirely new intervention in social theory that arises in the contemporary Indian context. Guru hinges on the foundational problem of speaking from outside the

margin of epistemic otherness that is usually attributed to the subject-position of Dalits. For Guru such subject positions elude the very act of positioning the Dalit as an other subject or as an excluded subject. *The irrecoverable subjective experience of being an untouchable and being a pariah eludes the epistemic capture of knowing and framing the Dalit subjectivity.* The non-Brahmin Dalit tradition of doing theory marks a deep difference with the top of the twice born (TTBs), whose reflective ability does not suffice to "restore" the Dalit agency to reflect on their existential conditions without making it "unique" (24). Further Guru *debunks* TTB mode of theorization of Dalit experience both on empirical and theoretical grounds: empirical, as "parachuting into somebody's experience" (120) constitutes a "patronizing or posterior epistemology" for Dalits; and theoretical, as Dalit experience and subjectivity is a deposit and a repository of a social experience of somebody else whose availability to the theoretician is only fed onto the existing body of Marxist and Feminist theory. This act of parachuting and feeding, according to Guru is 'de-subjectification of experience' that leads to an imminent unification of Other's experience who are on the margins (127), while such acts of theory building produce only a subject-effect without embodying an essential subjectivity. Herein lies an important critique of epistemology of othering that many of social theoretic frames do practice in today's context. Guru attempts to rein in epistemological post-facto description of the Other as objects of suffering as well as an equally condescending epistemological charity shown to such people as subjects.

For example, the image of the subaltern as a domesticated other who could be fully known in theoretical terms by using power-knowledge-reason nexus in post-structuralist critical theory that conflates specificity of experience with becoming a specific agent is critiqued by Guru. Once such a critique is launched, the problem of object and subject constitution remains for Guru as not only mutually constitutive but also as mutually constitutive grounds for talking about Dalit experience. This whole exercise of theory-building by Dalits themselves is very different from Subalternist project of "conceited reference"² to the interiority of Dalit experience, or, different from an apparently unique and empirical "as-it-is" commonsense celebration of Dalit experience. Habermas-Giddens' notion of difference-within in modernity³ also gets critiqued in Guru's rejection of abstractions drawn out from empirical mode of Dalit experience as Dalit theoreticians and writers can overcome the distorted cognitive apparatus of submitting to Other's interests and actively rearticulate the relationship between Dalits and the dominant in terms

of being the differentiated other, or on terms of reclaiming the lost material spaces by reordering the space of politics and economics. The terms of such reclamation and rearticulation often are radically emancipatory, as Guru sees it by terming it as establishing an egalitarian social order.

Indeed Guru stands in favour of an egalitarian social order that raises the Dalits and subalterns into the status of equal moral worth as human beings. There is a contextualized humanism in Guru that produces the hinterland of moral and political action as praxis that can unsettle a system of maintaining social subjugation at the normative and ethical levels. Guru sets such normative-ethical goals as goals of Dalit theory. These goals are goals of egalitarian justice conceived in terms of self-respect, dignity and convergence on struggles to establish equality and justice. This convergence happens through ethical identification with Dalit experience and through participation in struggles for Dalit emancipation that establishes organic linkages with revolutionary struggles for transforming the order. This is how the place and position of Dalit as an other could be altered and transformed in a hierarchically organized society not just by subjective ownership over Dalit experience and Dalit body but by universalizing it in terms of larger structures of domination that would alter narrow meanings of dalit experience into egalitarian meanings. This is where Guru successfully confronts othering of Dalits as well as of exclusivization of Dalit experience not by advocating a simple universalization of Dalit theory but by a rearticulation of social relations that marginalizes the Dalit. Guru highlights the critical role of establishing a sense of equality between Dalits and non-Dalits both in theory and praxis by establishing egalitarianism in every field of action and in every space of lived experience.

An Unassuming Ethics of Theorization

Guru calls this idea—moral-ethical egalitarianism, which is an achievement of a rising, raising consciousness among both Dalits and others. It must be initiated from the Dalits themselves—they have to demand equality and become equal in an unequal social order. Sundar Sarukkai, in his revisionary arguments on such a notion of equality points out that experience of being an untouchable is not just about another but of oneself so that the untouchable believes herself to be untouchable (189). Guru however, gives a subversive moral-logical account of this belief in being an untouchable by saying, “just imagine what would happen to the touchable if the untouchable were to refuse to become the dumping ground for somebody’s moral dirt”(213) that indicates

that the touching-touched relationship is ideological and not cognitively “natural”. Rather the cognitive naturalization of touch as a function isomorphically follows the institution of caste and purity-pollution paradigm of touching-touched relationship. Guru emphasizes a kind of strategic essentialism of Dalit castes that the dalits only can utilize to subvert and transform the caste hierarchy and its Brahminical ideology, which within itself can create a set of untouchables such as Ācharyās (192-93). Sarukkai raises this issue of such a category of Brahmins as untouchables as a “positive virtue”, while Ambedkar’s untouchables as a negative social fact. He further explores whether there is a way of making untouchability a positive virtue as in the case of Ācharyās. He answers this exploration by drawing upon Derrida’s ‘logic of supplement’⁴ that sustains a hierarchy of oppression by creating a permanent place for the oppressed within the structure and without which the structure cannot sustain itself. Sarukkai uses this notion of supplement to alter the picture of Dalits only as untouchables, as the fundamental inability to touch upon someone or something is intrinsic to the very idea of touch, as touch has a significant incorporeal dimension. This position of Sarukkai supplements Guru’s discussion on Dalit creativity that declares Dalits as sun, who remain untouchable, as no one can touch the sun (116). It is in this sense that the untouchability of the untouchables gives to them an invincible position that mere transformation into an equal touchable would not. Guru considered this as a transgressive-transcendental moment of debating and theorizing about the status of the untouchable that seeks a sense of ethical co-responsibility within the tormentor⁵(117). The self-knowledge of being a tormentor resignifies the space of repression as a space of untouchables seeking/establishing justice right there, unmediated by fields of ideology, law and other technical procedures. Although Guru thinks of justice as “unmediated real” (pace deleuze) that is ready for annihilation and not just an overcoming of the differential relation between the tormentor and the tormented (118-9), yet he privileges an ethical moment where repression is understood inter-subjectively and not merely in an objective way. Subversive social theorization acts on reality itself by often performing differently the same act of repression (Potraj, who inflict harm on themselves to demonstrate in public the extent of repression) (121). The agency of subversion built culturally in the very community, for Guru, gives an alternative, if not a supplementary fillip to theory building in the subversive mode. The act of willing subjectivation to repression allows the Dalits the right to exit from such a framework of oppression, just as upper castes can do. This, for Guru,

is a move against freezing the Dalits into certain constructs and essences, as one needs to make "connections between several local experiences that belong to the same logical class of collective suffering and exploitation" (26). These argumentative moves by Guru establish the possibility of a moral-ethical collaboration between Dalits and non-Dalits in maximizing the moral worth of a struggle against untouchability and other such paradigmatic instances of marginalization.

An interesting example given by Guru brings out this theoretical surplus. The case of upper caste women dancers who do not acknowledge that their dance form had originated in the Devdasi tradition and instead "de-contextualize and de-historicize" it by "spiritualizing" it in the "Krishna-Gopi" version. (125-26) Guru argues that the body language of the upper caste woman dancer could be free, while her access to Devdasi experience would be very limited. Guru is talking about the repressed universal of the Devdasis in the specific form of the Krishna-Gopi dance form and its agency of the upper caste woman, which is how the construct devdasi could be released from its fixed and frozen essence, while it would not mark a complete freedom from devdasihood, as the dance recaptures the image of the devdasi within the very denial in the Krishna-Gopi tradition. Similarly Dalit experience could be released from the pathology of being Dalit by a contrast between its subjective representation and objective presentation, or by a transpositional act of depositing one's own experience into another's. Guru explores such a dialectical possibility without thinking that it is an opportunity to escape the grill of repression of the Dalits, but it would functionally highlight an attachment or commitment to reorient the Dalit experience in a move towards inter-subjectivity, which brings in a new dimension of moral experience (127).

An Assessment

In sum, Guru traverses the field of social theory in all its dialectical, transformative, archeological and genealogical and such other modes not to arrive at an empty formal picture of theory building, but to arrive at a performative realizability of Dalit theory as a genre. This is a nuanced materialization of the ideologically constructed notion of the Dalit that embellishes the TTB class of theorization. He takes a materialist stance of conceptualizing Dalit experience in spatial and material terms as opposed to representational terms, as every act of representation is looked upon as performative that establishes an intersubjective linkage between Dalits and

non-Dalits, particular and universal and thereby bridge the gap between poles of opposition. Guru's novelty lies in cracking the mirror of representation by launching a frontal attack on theories of representation as propagated by the professional class of theoreticians who simply feed in Dalit experience as a component of their theories. His innovation lies further in identification of an intersubjectively constituted and pre-engaged relationship between Dalits and others within the larger matrix of social relations wherein they can not only speak for themselves, but can transform the oppressive relations by redeeming themselves beyond guilt and punishment to an identifiable objective agenda of egalitarian social theorization. This transformative and participatory mode of social theorization happens in sharing a common language and common ethical responsibility as co-constituted agents, which, for Guru is inalienable and recoverable even in the context of violence and injustice. This creates the possibility of dialogue on the very experience of injustice and repression that Guru espouses through theorists engaging themselves in accepting a political and ethical framework that makes constitution of a "subversive subject" possible (127). Guru shows that such subversive subject not only critiques its own uniqueness but it breaks through the nexus of webs of meaning and truth in order to overcome the asymmetry of lived experience in a new and altered multiverse of sharing 'in' the Other. This needs to be articulated by the Dalits themselves in social theory as a necessity towards establishing an egalitarian order not just as Dalits but as common subjects living within a formal structure.

Guru succeeds in reconstructing the subjective conditions of Dalit theory making by situating the agency of the Dalits in the intersubjective space between Dalits and non-Dalits that is informed by the necessity of a democratic egalitarian social and political order. The book makes an interesting intervention in the critical hinges of available genres of social theory and brings out the critical role of the Dalit point of view in transcending itself in a broader field of unification of one's specific experience in the unravelling the structure of domination. This way he moves away from ontological commitment of being Dalit or subaltern by preserving the agency of Dalit-subaltern subjectivity in subverting the structure that produces such subjects and moves further in transforming the structure normatively and dialogically into an egalitarian stance.

The question remains, what is so new in Guru's agential corpus of social theory? It is not just an insured preservation of the voice of the Other subjectivity but it is the larger goal of fighting and resisting the structural inequalities that results in Guru's resistance to

objectification of the Other's body and experience, while it constructs the subjectivity of the Other in intersubjective and dialogical terms. This is quite new as Indian social theory needs to graduate from the mode of subject and object centred reason to a critical examination of the very reason that theory depends upon and which leaves us back to social reality without any mediation. The old mode of social theory did not sharpen the task of theory building by locating the specific agency, while it emphasized on objectivity and universality of theory by dissolving situated subjects. In Guru's attempt the new emerges from assigning an inappropriable place to Dalits in building universal theories based on their specific social experience. Although the specific experience comes from the other yet theory building requires an identification of the collective agency of the Dalits in the work of creating theories on their own existence in which a non-Dalit can participate. Guru retains the self-other dialectic from the place of the Other in a dialogical encounter between them in the field of "social experience" that necessarily refers to a structure and not to its specific contents alone.

NOTES

1. Gopal Guru argues about the case that theories on/about Dalit experience violate "subjective conditions of its own possibility as a theory." (126) The argument leads to diagnosis of significant limitations of social theory and its enterprise to speak for others. This is a knock down argument against

- theories of representation. The case of untouchability brings out this impossibility of turning untouchables into touchables within the body of theory.
2. Minh-ha, Trinh T (1989). *Woman, Narrative, Other: Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 1.
 3. Sundar Sarukkai's essay entitled 'Experience and Theory: From Habermas to Gopal Guru' in *the Cracked Mirror* (pp.29-45) raises this issue of difference within and between experienter and theoreticians who-did-not experience, which is the central problematique of this book under review. Indeed by acceding to the possibility of such a distinction, Guru draws the same distinction by reformulating as a distinction between "ownership" and "authorship" that produces a large hinterland for building many aspects of Dalit theory such as moral, epistemological and political, as Guru goes on to espouse.
 4. Derrida in his early writings, namely, *Of Grammatology* (1967/76) used the idea of supplement as a "scandal" that leads 'reason away from the path of the desirable and destroys Nature, or alternative the supplement puts itself in the place of Nature (pp.148-152). Further the "chain of supplements" create both an aporia and an auto-affection. Sarukkai's deployment of this logic turns Brahmin into a subject of "refusing to touch others" as well as "not to allow others to touch". He called it a paradox. Indeed later Derrida, while commenting on Jean Luc Nancy notion of body and touching-touched relation builds up a logic of body as taking-place, which he terms as taking-the-place-of, as a mode of return to the new by substituting the body by incorporeality of touching relation. Sarukkai considers such incorporeality as part of the "narrative of self", which Dalits can engage themselves in (188).

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