

CASTE DYNAMICS, RESOURCE POLITICS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGY *

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Abstract

Caste dynamics from the perspective of ex-untouchables has been theoretically revolved around the notions of purity of blood, creation and sustenance of hierarchies, excommunication and exercise of power based on the social construct of higher beings. While these core aspects have remain intact of caste as a mechanism, the operational part of investigating the material and spiritual components from the perspective of the oppressed groups have got seldom attention in the academia.

Ambedkar dream project to annihilate caste from the surface through redistribution of resources did not materialise. Ambedkar's clarion call of equality, liberty and fraternity through the establishment of social and political democracy has stuck with in the debates around reservation alone. In a neoliberal economy, the question of reservation has further been entangled in the access to space within educational institutions, employment and political spheres, while on the other end large chunk of land has been transferred into the hands of industrial houses without even settling the question of large scale landlessness. While the first part is extremely essential, the scope for upward mobility of the community as a whole gets limited. The second one gives better scope but has not been addressed despite the existence of laws like Land Ceiling Act and provisions for redistribution. This paper delves deep into the dynamics of caste, resource politics and the dichotomy of justice from the margins.

Keywords: Caste Dynamics, Social Power, Knowledge, Resource Politics, Social Justice, Epistemology

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'In the past the peasants who had small pieces of land who couldn't eke out enough from it for their survival used to eat fruits from the nearby forests and used to collect leaves, flowers and dried tree branches and by selling these to others supplemented their income. They also used to maintain a couple of cows or goats and were living happily in their villages depending on the village common grazing land. But H.M's government's conspiratorial bureaucracy have used their foreign intelligence and have newly established the great forest department and have incorporated all mountains, hills, valleys along with barren lands, and village common grazing lands in this department, thus making it impossible for goats or the poor peasants to find even breathing space in the forests...'

Jyothiba Phule in his Marathi book

'Shetkaryacha Aasud' (Cultivator's Whipcord) 1882

The Emergence of a New Debate

Caste dynamics and rights over resources in the context of social justice is one of the most complicated issues that is hardly in any discussion circles. As such this is not a new question; however the current format is a relatively newer one. There are specific reasons and compulsion for raising this question at this juncture of history as the betrayal of the betrayed continues for centuries unknown till today. Raising this issue would unfold the conspiracy of the upper caste rulers of this country to which they may be obliged to answer. Such a study would require long time as well as deeper analytical tool, which this paper does not intent to engage with. This paper engages with the philosophical understand and theoretical postulation of these concerns from the purview of justice concerns.

In general terms the caste and it's dynamics surround around untouchability practices, social discrimination, excessive violence between social groups, lack or hindrance of opportunities, political oppression and suppression of rights. In recent days these have been together clubbed into the category of social exclusion, even in the academic arena. However this does not cover the entire question of resource dynamics. Caste dynamics from the perspective of ex-untouchables has been theoretically revolving around the notions of purity of blood, creation and sustenance of hierarchies, excommunication of racist considered not equivalent and the exercise of power based on the social construct of higher beings (Ambedkar 1936; Srinivas 1952; Dumund1970; Lee and Thorat 2008). While these core aspects have remain intact of caste as a mechanism, the operational part of investigating the material and spiritual components from the perspective of the oppressed groups have got seldom attention in the academia.

Although in 1947 Ambedkar (1979) refers to the question of nationalisation of land, industries and resources to be nationalised, in the post Ambedkar phase the community elders, political leaders, scholars

and intellectuals from the Dalit¹ communities missed this critical aspect of interpreting the material aspect. The dream project of Ambedkar to annihilate caste – which is yet to see the daylight – from the surface of India in theoretical terms related with the question of discrimination free India. The clarion call of equality liberty and fraternity through the establishment of social and political democracy has to greater extent stuck within the debates around reservation alone.

In a neoliberal economy, the question of reservation has further been entangled in the access to space within educational institutions, employment and political spheres, while on the other end large chunk of land has been transferred into the hands of industrial houses without even settling the question of large scale landlessness. While the first part is extremely essential, the scope for upward mobility of the community as a whole gets limited. The second one gives better scope but has not been addressed despite the existence of laws like Land Ceiling Act and provisions for redistribution. The scope for accessing forestland under the recently enacted Forest Rights Act 2006 for the ex-untouchables is almost a big cipher. The calls for and investigation on how we look at the questions of resource politics from the margins.

The Dynamics of Caste and Resource Question

Caste as a structure is an age-old mechanism of hierarchy based on social constructs, economic manipulation, political power and cultural supremacy of a particular class of people, who are believed to be higher in the ladder than others. In either case there is a set of people who are higher and the other ones. Since caste still operates as a definite pre-condition in establishing marriages, social relations and access to employment, millions of Dalits and other former low-caste people remain behind in education, employment and access to wealth. Although untouchability and casteism is banned in India, discrimination is widely practiced and statistics draw the logical conclusion that there is a broad correlation between one's economic state and one's position within the caste hierarchy. The government may boast of economic progress and grand new development schemes, such as highways joining major cities or plans to interlink major rivers, but it has failed to address issues like education, caste and gender discrimination and the rural-urban gap. The result is the continued upper-caste dominance in profession, business, and culture (George 2013).

¹ The term Dalit denotes the ex-untouchables as per Hindu social order of caste. The technically term is Scheduled Caste. All Scheduled Castes and Dalits, but all Dalits are not listed in the Scheduled Caste list. This is not a legal term; however, it has not been notified illegal either. For these reasons, this term is applied in this paper.

Dalits continue to face the wrath of the caste lords and are denied of human dignity and rights, including a just share in the resources like land, water, forests, minerals, mines and aquatic resources. Caste discrimination and Dalit Rights over natural resources is one of the most complicated issues, which as such this is not a new question; however the current format is a relatively newer one.

The operational mechanics of caste as a system is to be understood in two parts viz. the material and ideological-cultural-spiritual one. The material base of caste system systematically took away the control over property (the entire resource base), operationalised division of labour, income distribution and surplus appropriation. In the second part the geo-centric culture, history, ideology and spirituality was replaced with an alien one consisting of slavery, subjugation, made the indigenous communities realise that their culture is substandard, subjected them to inhuman suppression, and the caste (*jati*) was determined by birth determined leading it to be their lone destiny. Therefore everything was centred on 'birth'. The indigenous communities were culturally, ideologically and spiritually forced to apply all energy and efforts on the revival of their 'birth' from the present lower caste one to a higher ladder in the next round. This elevation of status – as per the '*shastras*' – was only possible through tireless service of the upper caste lords in the present birth thereby avoiding the traumas in the next birth (George 2011).

This traditional order was not merely an ideological construct but an economic and political structure too. It articulated and encapsulated an entire system of production that existed over centuries with only minor alterations within its confines. The economical and political realities of inequalities were justified, defined and glorified through religious pronouncements based on the divine divide of purity and pollution. Traditionally, ritualistic compulsion and coercive oppression ensured their compliance in providing virtually free labour for the upper caste landowners (Teltumbde 1996). The fact that they had been denied right over land or territory only compounded the matter by making them completely dependent upon the owners and controllers of the means of production and livelihood.

The subsequent consequences had been drastic, where all forms of resources, (both productive and natural) including land, water and forests went out of their hands. The belief system that evolved over the course of time told the indigenous people time and again that they were not supposed to owe any property, lest lay claims over it. They were reduced as slaves and labouring classes on their own land. Land and forest turned to be alien to the Dalits. Today land, forests and other natural resources are not free from public debates or academic investigations. However with caste becoming the key constituent and the centre of power it also developed as a social system in resource control and management aligning to the fondness of these centres. The very character of control and management shifted from a community based production to production for the castelord, who in return amassed, accumulation maintained a

surplus. In this process the relation of community with the means of production drifted, thereby altering the character of relations among communities too (George 2011).

Caste remains as the oldest feudal system in the world, which categorically disallowed the slaves to hold any property. The downfall of feudalism in Europe was also the beginning of modern capitalism. With the growth of capitalism as a world economic system, it aligned with dominant social systems and power centres. In India, capitalism began to exploit its roots during the colonial British regime. The programme of capitalism had its earlier collaboration with Indian mercantile capital and British capital. Unlike Europe, it did not have to battle against feudalism; rather it was implanted on the trunk of the latter in India. As a result, even in the capitalist institutions in the cities, caste discrimination simultaneously existed. Ambedkar was quite aware of the exploitative potential of capital and hence he had declared capitalism and Brahminism as the twin enemy of his movement. Capitalism was in an infantile stage then, but Brahminism encompassed the phases of slavery, feudalism and extended its tentacles as we see to the phase of imperialism (Teltumbde 1997: 40).

It is an undeniable fact that Dalits have suffered displacement from land through the ages. The land occupied by them has always been seized at the flimsiest excuse, forcibly or through economic strangling. The right to hold land – even homestead land – of these groups, has always been tenuous at best (Teltumbde 1996). The continuous process of expropriation of resources, particularly land, from these sections takes on a new dimension today. The pasture and fallow lands were developed by the labour, particularly the Dalit toilers in the hope that they would at last acquire a piece of land to call their own. Once the land is developed and made cultivable, they were forced off it through various measures, covert and overt, legal and illegal, economic and extra-economic. Debts and mortgages, denial of water for crops and lack of agricultural implements and inputs, social boycotts, upper caste violence, rapes, mutilations and killings throw them off the land. Their labour invested in the development of land is expropriated, at best at a pittance (George 2011).

The complexity and dynamics of caste system is still a lingering puzzle for social scientists across the world. Caste closely functions with an idea and agenda of pollution (George 2015: 164). It is certain that the concept of stratification finds a specific space of self-consciousness of the Indian psyche. This stratification further connects and involves deeply the mechanics of the caste system to the social dynamics of untouchability, exploitation, discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation as a natural by-product at one end; while on the other it creates the countless degrees of economic inequality in terms of access to wealth and resources as well as rights over land, water, forests, business, knowledge and resources. The material domain of the lower castes is closely linked to the culture and spiritual values they emotionally uphold. However, all these have been substantially rejected by the social order of caste.

Thus the idea of stratification is not only limited to the social order, rather it is extended to all other areas of economic, political, religious and cultural life – thereby enabling its clutches on power and governance. In this sense power and governance is a means establishing perpetual domination, control and rule (George 2015: 164-65).

Justice, Construct of Social Power and Dalits

Many theories of power have consistently debated in academics and it is often concluded that the more the power is exercised, the more injustice is committed. Rawls (1999) refers 'Justice' as fairness is one of the core components of social institutions, which essentially addresses two principles of socio-economic inequalities that need a rearrangement. He says,

'...the first requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, while the second holds that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society. These principles rule out justifying institutions on the grounds that the hardships of some are offset by a greater good in the aggregate. It may be expedient but it is not just that some should have less in order that others may prosper. But there is no injustice in the greater benefits earned by a few provided that the situation of persons not so fortunate is thereby improved. The intuitive idea is that since everyone's well-being depends upon a scheme of cooperation without which no one could have a satisfactory life, the division of advantages should be such as to draw forth the willing cooperation of everyone taking part in it, including those less well situated' (Rawls 1999:13-14).

While re-examining this entire synthesis of justice, it in fact would be the thwarting away of power structures and constructs, which invariably in India consists of a difficult combination of Caste, Class, Feudalism, Patriarchy and the ethnicity question. The construct of power in such context contradicts to the very idea of justice where Foucault (1984) comments,

'...it seems to me that the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power... one can[not]t, however regrettable it may be, put these notions forward to justify a fight which should... over-throw the very fundamentals of our society' (Foucault 1984: 6).

Epistemologically, the two theoretical position in the context of caste reflects a contradiction between power construct and justice, where justice as a mechanism has not disempower the institution of caste – rather it has provided more impetus, particularly due to the negative connotations that justice delivery mechanism has produced. Therefore the idea of justice has remained concentrated in and around the brackets of power structure – historically in the hands of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya combine,

which at present has taken shape of the combination of multiple oppressive and repressive ideologies like Brahminism, Capitalism, patriarchy, racial supremacy and ethnicity – as the notion of fairness is completely absent and whatever exists is the mercy of the power centres and power structures. Operationally in such contexts, the formation of classes is central to the operation of power over any sections, by which the so-called lower origin people gets transformed into an oppressed class; therefore are secondary and not eligible for justice on the principles of equality. This means as a whole the idea of justice needs critical reinvestigation from a different perspective.

Duffee (2002: 4) suggests that the basic conception of the unified theory of social power is that people exercise power over other people by three different means – economic, political, and social. Kunhaman (2015) notes, in any social process, the central question is power. Power is used by the strong against the weak to maintain the status quo. This also suggests that there is a close relationship between the theory of power and the theory of oppression (George 2015: 168).

Young (1990) in her theory of oppression argues the five faces of oppression. The first two are ‘exploitation’ and ‘marginalisation’ – both are the results of exercises of economic or compensatory power. The second two faces of oppression are ‘powerlessness’ and the ‘normalisation and legitimisation of violence’, both the results of uses and abuses of condign power. While violence gets normalised and legitimised, it also creates the culture of silence. Oppressed people become so powerless that they do not even talk about oppression. They are silenced without any will or voice. Under such a situation, even the little space for engagement gets squeezed off. The fifth face of oppression she calls as ‘cultural imperialism’.

These five faces of oppression legitimise the flow of social power. Social power is always generated in a circular flow. Therefore the mechanism of oppression is also in a circular flow. This indicates that the powerful at one end enforces over the powerless, while the powerless empowers the powerful by permitting that flow in a normal and natural manner. This circular mechanism is complete only through a two way process of downward and upward flow. Thus, as Kunhaman (2014) states that the silence of the oppressed is more dangerous than the violence of the oppressor.

Consequently, this predicament also influences the knowledge creation as it raises questions like who creates it, what acceptance do the oppressed people have while creating their knowledge and how the ideas and value chains of caste critically impact knowledge as well as knowledge creation. There are few theories in social science, which holds validity across time and clime, for social processes are ever changing, yet nowhere close to ‘Justice’ as a livid reality nor as a discipline. Guru (2002) categorises that the social science as a field of scientific enquiry has never been egalitarian, particularly in the context of

the divide between the theoretical *Brahmins* and empirical *Shudras*.

Dalits and the Neoliberal Resource Politics

The introduction of the market economy – under the aegis of globalisation, liberalisation and privatization – an extension of capitalism – has already thrown to the wind its intentions. This has already startled the earlier assumptions of some who believed that market economy would open up the spectrum of equality and liberty for the oppressed people. The fact is diametrically opposite. Uprooting the people off their land, forests, common property, and ancestors have been on the rise in the phase of neo-liberal economy. This has not only alienated the groups, but also increased the poverty gap indicators. The little space that one could gain through reservation in education, employment and political power is completely dismissed with the advent of private companies and the efforts to dismiss the entire idea of reservation is on a full swing (George 2015: 66-67).

A strong market driven development is on the agenda. Eventually resources like land, forests, water, minerals, and the common property would be in the hands of corporates. Corporates are not for any charity; they are here to make profits. The best and easy mechanism would be to apply the most oppressed ones as the soft targets since they are the easiest of all prey. This has already begun. Community rights are regularly dismissed and all physical space is dwindling. This in turn has changed their relationship with nature, work, occupation, language, body language, rites, rituals, signs, symbols and myths (George 2015: 67).

The majority of labouring Dalits being rustic poor would have been benefitted by land reforms through the Ceiling of excess land and redistribution to the landless. However land reforms have thoroughly failed in India. The agricultural labourers were left untouched in these reforms. A close examination of various land reforms laws has shown that the present legislative measures have become so complex that a graduated or phased programme of implementation according to priority attached in each problem in various areas was what was really absent in it. Beneath the undercurrents of the dominant landholding system of Zamindari, land reforms and land distribution become more harsh and formidable in the newly arisen socio-political context (George 2011).

The failure of the land reforms can be judged by the fact that 86 percent Dalit own small tracks of land, which is not enough for sustenance, compelling them to work as agricultural labourers. Another is the land based bonded labourhood that the Dalits continue to live with till today. For instance in Central Bihar there is a system called Dakathia evolved by the upper caste to perpetuate their control over the Dalits. According to this, a landlord gave ten katha (a little less than half acre) of land to a labourer who cultivated it and keep the harvest. In return, he had to work at a standard rate of two kilograms of rice and

half a kilogram of *sattu* (flour of Bengal gram) for the entire month. Often ten to fifteen persons (in fact families) in the rural Bihar depend on such land for survival. If the Dalits wish to migrate, the land is confiscated along with the standing crop and if harvested he is forced to pay the rent for the whole year which the Dalits cannot afford. Hence they are bound to that system and the land for generations (DFS 2006).

In caste terms, land reforms brought immense economic aid to the intermediately castes and hence they turned socially and politically dominate over Dalits agricultural labourers. The percentage of rural Dalit labour households with land declined from 44.38 percent in 1974-75 to 35.05 percent in 1993-94. On the other hand, during the same period the rural labour households without land increased from 55.65 percent to 64.95 percent (DFS 2006). Presently many of those displaced have ended up as daily wage labourers in the Public Works Department, working on national highways, suffering from poisonous fumes, heat and dust, and earning less than Rs. 150 per day.

In the case of forestland, the right to entitlement of Dalits has been completely dismissed in the Forest Right Act² (FRA) as alien and outside intruders. There are several examples of Dalit being part of the forest ecosystem for generations unknown. Several ritual such as worship of earth, soil and forest are instances of the geocentric culture, which indicates that they had been living in close association with forest, forestland and forest resources. In forest areas, the biggest dilemma is almost seven decades after independence, the state continues all anti-Dalit juxtaposes, strengthens caste system, defends and sustains the British-India's draconian acts and laws quite uninterruptedly, without leaving the minimum breathing space at all.

In FRA, the rider for other traditional forest dwellers to conform to the condition of being resident of/dependent upon forestland for the past three generations has left many genuine beneficiaries out. The act was drafted in a way whereby forest dependent Dalits, who were not in occupation of land in the state before the 1930 were excluded from being benefited from the Act. Despite the rider, many Dalits in forest areas have placed their claim to which the authorities have seldom response. An unofficial notification seems to have gone across the states not to entertain any application from the Scheduled Caste category. Interestingly much of these forestland has rich mineral resources, particularly in the Central Indian states. Corporate sector has eyed it for long and the neoliberal economics opens up the boundaries for the investor while the state only acts as a weak instrument to facilitate such movements.

² The Act is known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006

In States like Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand a war like situation exists between the government security forces and the Adivasi³ people in order to establish the supremacy over the forestland under the aegis of anti-Maoist operations. Most of these regions are militarised or semi-militarised zones, who work on the behest of the companies. The mining companies have a free-go all such areas, while the inhabitants have to leave their land in search of life and livelihood. Interestingly the transfer of both cultivable and forestland to the mining corporates are done without resolving the question of landlessness. This legal protection under Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), FRA, Samatha Judgment are consistently bypassed in such areas. All the three were assumedly the efforts to revert the historical injustice committed to the forest-based communities.

The Adivasis are finding it extremely difficult to survive and have been on the forefront of different struggles to protect their land. Numerous studies have already placed the extents of land alienation to face due to mining, industrial projects and other development projects. Under these circumstances, land rights of Dalits on forestland would only be a day dreaming efforts. It is only a matter of time when the resources fall into the hands of the corporate houses. Therefore an (un)holy alliance of all power centres has come to the fore.

Conclusion

The aforesaid context needs a different approach to the entire question of resource politics and social justice in the context of caste as a power centre. The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out, determines the relation of the rulers and the ruled. Hence the study of the crisis of Dalits rights over resources needs historical perspective and approach. Historical evidences are ample to prove the conception of depeasantisation as a net result of the uneven structural changes, land holding patterns that have taken place from time to time due to the commoditisation of the economy in which land plays a critical and predominant role. It is beyond all doubts that industrial land acquisition and free market economy goes hand in hand.

Justice as a mechanism should engage in a process to thwart the power centres eventually leading to the culture of deliverance of justice in a natural manner though establishment of freedom of choice, equal political liberty, fair value, equitable share in benefits, neutral access to resources, freedom of thought, liberty of conscience and freedom of association. On the other hand, the complexity to contain with the

³ The term Adivasi or Adibasi is a common usage to denote the various tribes in India. More or less, it is a heterogeneous umbrella term to represent the ethnic and tribal groups that are generally considered as the aboriginal population of India. The official term is Scheduled Tribe.

implausible forces needs more careful study while engaging with justice concerns as there remains all possibilities of the dominant forces to apply all forms of political powers in order to sustain the power dynamics.

What is perhaps needed is the go back to the origin of anti-caste movement, which clearly addressed the different formats of injustice. Justice is a concept of moral righteousness based on ethics, rationality, relationship with nature, balance of culture, equity, fairness and natural law along with law, administration based on law, taking into account the inalienable and inborn rights of all human beings and citizens, the right of all people and individuals to equal protection before the law of their civil right, without any discrimination on the basis of race, class, caste, origin, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, colour, religion, disability, age or other characteristics, and is further regarded as being inclusive of social justice (George 2013).

In the globalised era, the sweeping changes in political structures, coupled with the disempowerment of state, it would be easy for the dominant forces to control the resource politics. Ambedkar's dream of a 'welfare state' has disappeared in the whirlwind of continued caste discrimination, planned development and further with the outgrown with the globalisation liberalisation policies. Caste, resource and justice together constitute the episteme of knowledge of the powerful sections that is not just capable of being expert or privileged in disciplinary terms, but constructs the potential to manufacture extensive influence, set public agendas, impact discussions, arguments, people's knowledge, opinion, beliefs, attributes, attitudes, norms, values, morals and ideologies. Altogether it is a reconstruction of the social and political realities – a symbolic means of the ideology of power and domination.

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