

Caste and Gender Debates in India

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The Asia Leadership Fellowship Program (ALFP), 2017 has given me a unique opportunity to engage with Asian countries' rich heritage, culture, people, and the ongoing debates in their respective countries. Indeed, it has enlightened me to reflect on the Asian philosophy and knowledge production process. Visiting several places in Japan, meeting the people across cultures, and listening to seminars of renowned academicians and activists made me think deeply about the ALFP theme of the year 2017, "Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How Can We Create Visions for the Future?" We the ALFP fellows come from diverse backgrounds who deal with several aspects of the world on the larger questions of climate change, environment, global health, aging society, human rights, gender equality, discrimination, marginalization, preservation of cultural heritage, higher education crisis, etc. with new challenges to Asian societies. However, we exchanged our ideas related to various issues including the ones mentioned above in order to strengthen the new imaginary world of Asia to move forward towards a better future. This program was also an eye opening for me to learn about language, culture, history, broad social and political nuances and so on. The dedication of Japanese people/citizens to work has to be highly appreciated and that can be a model for the rest of the world. At the same time, questions of gender, citizenship, rights, and public participation are becoming complex in Asia, as seen in the social and political complexity of Japanese society. The themes that were discussed by the ALFP fellows thus helped me to think about the future of the Japanese society in particular and Asia in general. Furthermore, this program widened my understanding about citizenship and social justice issues.

To a large extent, it provoked me to revisit my area(s) of research connected to the issues of gender, marginalization, and discrimination in India, and my social location as well as my footing as a scholar trained in social sciences enabled me to rearticulate many other issues in Asia in an objective and vivid fashion. Being born as Dalit, I have faced caste discrimination from larger society and continue to face multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. Even after becoming a faculty and an academic, I am facing a series of subtle as well as intangible caste-based, exclusionary reactions from peers and larger society. My social mobility is being questioned through the pretentious and so-called "modern academic sphere" that is rooted in the ideology of caste. Therefore, I can relate myself to the questions of *Zainichi* Koreans, human rights, and working class people of Osaka in Japan and forge solidarity with the "commons" of research and society and with the Japanese ALFP fellow specialized in these issues. Caste is a harsh reality for the Dalits who are being pushed to the lower strata of the Indian society through the subtle caste ideology and tangible caste

practices. Caste becomes a privilege for the few privileged in India and it constructs its own “others” and “margins.”

One of the fundamental questions of my existence as a Dalit is: what is the nature of caste-based day-to-day life and how I am going to challenge such oppressive ideology cum practice through my “conscientious struggles”? My social/political awareness begins at home where my mother and father taught me to always stand for justice and equality. They inculcated the values that are essential for just and humane social/political order. Although the two generations of my family were part and parcel of social movement (Ambedkariate Movement) in Maharashtra, Western India, and they were integral part of the endless social and political struggle to eradicate the pernicious caste system, I feel Indian society has not radically transformed and moved towards an enlightened, modern India. Retrogressive caste ideology still lurks in the vestiges of Indian mind. I have realized that we have a long way to go and fight at the level of knowledge dissemination and politics to regain the self-respect of the oppressed sections in a democratic manner.

Further, studying in one of premier institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, emboldened me to reflect on the existence of an anti-modern, hierarchical character of Indian polity. At the same time, the existing process of knowledge production subverts the social location of the marginalized sections and their construction of knowledge based on their social locations. Indian social sciences privilege social theory over empirical research and thus attempt to denigrate the status of Dalit studies as they are empirical in nature.¹ This majoritarian construction of Dalit studies is being challenged through my research. Questions of the social and political matters are complex in nature. In turn, I started research on the marginalized category of Dalit women and the specificity of their excluded life. Consequently, their voices forced me to analyze the ways in which caste, class, and gender determine social as well as political existence of Dalit women. Since Indian academia is embedded in the field of caste-based ideology, it always reproduced societal bias against Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. These intellectual predilections lead me to create an alternative, anti-caste/gender and sensitive/democratic praxeology to engage with the mutual mediations and critical engagements that function between democracy, the state, and Dalit women.

Indian Constitution-based protectionary measures have provided social mobility to Dalit women through affirmative action. However, they are caught in a paradox that is being structured through noncommitted categories of the social as well as the political order.² As Dalit women enter into a world of “the political,” caste Hindus unleash atrocities against Dalit women. Thus, Dalit women are being oppressed at the level of “the social.” The ironical,

¹ Gopal Guru, “How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (2002): 5003–9.

² Babasaheb Ambedkar, “Caste in India,” edited by Vasant Moon, *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches*, Government of Maharashtra (1979) Vol. I.

political/social existence of Dalit women constitutes marooned space of Dalit women within the realm of Indian democracy.

The contemporary Indian society is drastically changing in terms of economy, politics, and social compositions. It is considered as one of the fastest growing economy in South Asia, as well as in the world. It is, however, caught in the cauldron of growing poverty and inequality. In order to understand the Indian society, let us critically read the Indian society from caste and gender perspectives. The Indian society is based on the hierarchy of social order of caste system. The caste system is largely divided into the following categories: the Brahmins (elites, or priestly class), Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Sudras, and the last group Dalits who serve all the four castes (and who are ex-untouchables). According to Ambedkar, "Caste is an enclosed class."³ It is also a division of labor and laborers in India. Thus, caste also intersects with gender in the Indian context. The mainstream Indian feminist movement never addressed the question of caste and gender; rather, they focused much on gender and class. Therefore, the women from the Dalit community who themselves call Dalit feminists challenge the mainstream feminists and argue that Dalit women are triply oppressed on the bases of caste, gender, and class.

The nature of caste is transforming the time, space, and economy. However, the ideology of caste remains the same due to inherent power dynamics of the social structure. For Dalits, caste is a harsh reality because their dignity and survival are being challenged in ruthless fashion. The caste ideology operates through caste practices and occupations. Caste determines distribution of resources and unleash forms of violence. Sexual violence becomes central to caste-based power. The discourse of caste and gender was started in the 19th and 20th century when social reform and colonial modernity was instrumental in challenging the patriarchal religion. The number of social reformers from South, West, and East India largely debated the women's questions related to Sati, age of marriage, education and so on. Similarly, some of the social reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaja, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, Ayyankali, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and others discussed caste and gender discourse in cogent fashion. The majority of the Dalit women participated in the Ambedkariate movement in the 20th century. After India's independence, the women's movement raised the question of dowry, rape, employment, wages, reproductive rights, and so on. Thus, class and gender became the prime focus of women's movement.

In 1995, the National Federation of Dalit Women was established. As Gopal Guru argued, Dalit feminism in Maharashtra emerged as a product of the urban middle-class educated Dalit women in the 1990s. The fundamental argument put forward by Dalit feminists is that Dalit women are a different category from women of other castes and communities. However, the women's movement in India has not addressed the problem of Dalit women as a fundamental caste-based Indian reality. Primarily, dominant women's

³ Ibid., 15.

movement emphasized the coexistence between class and patriarchy but not the interlinkages between caste and women. Dalit feminists argue that Dalit women are triply oppressed based on caste, class, and gender. Further, they have consciously highlighted two issues: “external” and “internal” dimensions of patriarchy. On the external side, they argued that when the non-Dalit women talk about the shared position of Dalit women’s representation, then it reduced the applicability and actuality of their problems at theoretical and political level. Dalit women questioned the multifaceted character of their exploitation including their own community and attacked the patriarchy within Dalits in the public and private spheres. Dalit male leaders’ systematic obfuscation of the Dalit women’s questions in post-Ambedkerian period has strengthened the Dalit patriarchy.

Triple form of oppression is one of the fundamental premises of Dalit feminist theoretical tradition. It is argued that Dalit women are oppressed by non-Dalit men, non-Dalit women, and Dalit men, and it results in the external and internal patriarchy that accelerates the oppression of Dalit women.⁴

The aforementioned themes helped me to generate critical reading on affinities and departures within Dalit feminist politics. Currently, I am engaging with students from Dalit community and trying to help them confront several problems such as academic skills and caste-based discrimination. I am creating awareness among them regarding challenges raised by caste-based patriarchy and job market. I believe that organic intelligentsia from Dalit community can understand the significance of theory/praxis that is essential to put an end to the caste linked mindset and exclusionary behavior of the larger intelligential public. Public sphere that is not impacted by the ideology of caste⁵ can only be created through the generation of alternative communicational spaces such as blogosphere, twitter, and social networking sites. It can be also carried out through the rights related with education and new means of social mobility.

Caste is a dominant form of mentality in India. Ambedkar argues that “caste is a notion; it is a state of mind.” The destruction of caste does not mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change.”⁶ His classic idea of caste as a “notion of mind” is being reproduced in the contemporary era in new forms. As discussed earlier, caste-based Indian psyche is crude even in the midst of the clamor related with Indian modernity.

Let us understand what is external patriarchy through a case of caste-based violence happened in Khairlanji Village. Khairlanji is a village in the Bhandara district, Maharashtra. The incident took place on September 29, 2006. Bhaiyyalal Mhotmange’s entire family—wife

⁴ Gopal Guru, “Dalit Women Talk Differently,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 41/42 (October 14–21, 1995): 2548–50, and Sharmila Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no.44 (October 31–November 6, 1998): 39–46.

⁵ M.S.S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 18 (2002): 1735–1741.

⁶ Ambedkar, “Caste in India,” 68.

Surekha (40), sons Roshan (21) and Sudhir (19) and daughter Priyanka (17)—were lynched by a mob of caste Hindus of the village. It is noted as a horrendous expression of sadism that combines gang-rape, public humiliation, and torture. They were stripped naked, gang-raped and brutally lynched by a group which belongs to the upper strata of the caste society (The caste Hindu women were also central in the violence perpetrated against Dalit women and caste Hindu women helped their caste men to make the mother and daughter naked). In fact, it was a diabolic-moral policing act by the caste-Hindus which claimed that the act of raping, killing, and performing all sorts of violence was a retaliation to the illicit relationship between the mother (Surekha) and a man named Siddharth Gajbhiye. Thus, the gossip becomes a mode to dominate and control the sexuality of a Dalit woman.

The fact finding report by a civil society organization called Manushi and other organizations, as well as government investigation also revealed that Surekha was fighting for her land rights, as the villagers belonging to dominant caste had wanted to grab her land. She approached a police station several times but her First Information Report (FIR) was never registered by police. Therefore, she met her cousin brother (Siddharth Gajbhiye) to take his advice regarding the land related issue. Upper caste men and women thus unleashed violence on her and daughters, and their act had to be understood as assertions of dominant caste identity and protection of caste-based morality. This incident shows the ways in which community, questions of gender, and persistence of patriarchy get articulated in a highly stratified society. Upper caste Hindus were unable to tolerate the assertive Dalit women and their endless quest for social justice. Therefore, they started spreading rumors about the sexuality of Dalit women. Broadly, one can observe that how caste and gender are deployed to oppress certain marginalized sections in society.

I would like to focus on the question of inequality, marginalization, and exclusion in the background of the ALFP 2017 theme “Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How We Can Create Visions for the Future?” I have observed that even in developed nations, states also have to work hard in order to achieve genuine development. For instance, the ALFP has given me unique opportunity to learn about the Japanese culture and society. On the one hand, it taught me the debates on the exclusion of *Zainichi* Koreans, the importance of care system for aging society, the question of unequal wages of women, gendered division of labor, the crisis in higher education, environmental issues, understanding the cultural heritages, disaster management, history as a contested area, *Ama* culture, dignity of labor, Japanese print and digital media, democracy in crisis and the rise of populism, global health, and so on. On the other hand, it made me critically think the following issues; what are the major issues in South Asia and East Asia, and how South Asian countries are going to deal with aging society? The family structure in the Indian as well as Asian society is rapidly transforming, so how can these transitions be analyzed from social science perspective? Secondly, how can one critically think about pedagogy practices when entire higher education system is

undergoing drastic transformation in South and East Asia? Does technology determine the major divide among poor and rich learners? What are the ways in which the gendered division of labor operates in Japan and other countries in Asia in the coming days? Does it help women to participate in labor market? Is there any possibility to preserve cultures through heritage conservation which is marginalized by the state and extremist groups? How can we go for inclusion and conservation of cultures like Buddhist culture? Lastly, what are the ways in which we can improve the people's participation in governance? One possibility that remains is to create a network of the fellows of ALFP as a social capital from their respective countries and further link to the network of the women's groups and civil society, so more people can connect with each other and strengthen participation of many people in political processes.

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