



DALIT STANDPOINT AS A GROUND FOR THEORY: AMBEDKAR AND CASTE

Sujit Babul

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi, Delhi

Abstract

Social theory and lived experience are conventionally understood as disjuncts. Theory is associated with universality and objectivity, and lived experience with particularity and subjectivity. Standpoint epistemology challenges this distinction by arguing that marginalised social locations can constitute distinctive grounds for theorising when experience is critically developed into a standpoint. This paper examines whether the marginalised Dalit standpoint can constitute an epistemic ground for theory in the context of caste. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins, Chela Sandoval, Sandra Harding, and Gopal Guru, it traces the movement from social location and lived experience to standpoint, oppositional consciousness, and conceptualisation. The argument is demonstrated through B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of the caste social order, particularly in *Annihilation of Caste*. His experiences of untouchability and caste are examined as developing into a Dalit standpoint through which the relations of caste could be critically understood. Ambedkar's concepts of 'graded hierarchy', 'social antagonism', and 'division of labourers' demonstrate how the particularity of lived experience can move towards concepts with wider theoretical significance. The paper argues that the Dalit standpoint, emerging from marginalised experience, can constitute an epistemic ground for producing theory of the caste social order.

Key Words: B. R. Ambedkar; Caste; Dalit Standpoint; Social Theory; Standpoint Epistemology

INTRODUCTION

Social theory and lived experience are conventionally understood as disjuncts. The former is associated with universality and objectivity, while the latter is associated with particularity and subjectivity. This distinction generates a series of related oppositions: reason is privileged over emotion, facts over values, and abstraction over situated contexts. These oppositions establish the epistemic authority of theory over lived experience by abstracting from particularity to formulate general concepts that claim objective knowledge and universal relevance. By contrast, lived experience remains associated with the emotional and value-laden contexts through which subjects articulate and interpret their situated worlds. Consequently, the experiential is relegated to an inferior position as it is identified with particularity rather than universality. This emphasis on universality, disembeddedness, and value-neutrality emerges from the scientific methodology of objectivity, which requires the theoretician to disengage from experiential and moral frameworks. Yet a fundamental epistemological question emerges: can the knower and the knowledge claims they produce be disentangled from social location and lived experience?

Standpoint epistemology questions this supposition by attending to the epistemic significance of social location and lived experience. It argues that marginalised social locations can constitute distinctive, non-conventional grounds for theorising, especially when lived experience is critically interpreted and developed into a standpoint. Thus, theory becomes an intervention in social conditions of knowledge, rather than remaining merely concerned with the classification and causal explanation of facts.

This paper furthers this argument by examining whether, in the context of caste, the Dalit standpoint can constitute an epistemic ground for theorising. It investigates this question through B. R. Ambedkar, whose lived experiences as a Dalit and subsequent theorisation of the caste social order provide a basis for arguing that experience can be transformed into theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues for recognising the marginalised standpoint within institutions of social theory through her position of the 'outsider within'. Her argument concerns the social location of Black women. She suggests that Black women, though historically part of white families as helpers, remain socially segregated. This produces the demand for a



Cover Page



distinct self-definition. Within academic institutions, Black women theoreticians experience similar marginalisation: they are part of these institutions, yet remain socially apart. This generates the need for a distinct Black women's standpoint, developed through self-expression and cultural symbols. Through such symbolic articulations, enshrined in art, poetry, music, and autobiographical anecdotes, the marginalised subjects develop self-definitions and self-valuations (Collins, 2004, p. 112).

Collins's argument can be extended to other marginalised social groups seeking to systematise a standpoint. Through such standpoints, marginalised groups can critically understand their collective social position in relation to systems of oppression and hierarchy, including gender, class, race, and caste. These standpoints then become a repository of an oppositional consciousness that develops in contradiction to the systems of difference that produce their marginalisation

Systems of dominance have persisted through binary opposites that are institutionalised within them: man/woman, black/white, bourgeoisie/proletariat, etc. (Collins, 2004, p. 110). One half of the dyad subordinates the other, resulting in the differential experiences of the oppressed. This is the site of marginality. 'Oppositional consciousness' implies the subordinated recognising the mechanism of their subjugation, enabling their resistance against the dominant ideology, rather than reproducing it. According to Chela Sandoval (2004), oppositional consciousness implies that the oppressed "can learn, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to 'break the ideology'" (p. 196). Thus, recognising the marginalised standpoint involves a movement from the perspective of the dominant ideology towards an oppositional consciousness.

Sandra Harding (2004) builds upon the epistemic significance of the marginalised standpoint. She argues that the scientific methodology of social theory supposes a separation between the subject and object of knowledge by disembedding the theoretician from their social location to produce an objective, universal knowledge claim (Harding, 2004, p. 133). This supposition entails that such knowledge would be devoid of social and cultural bias; the subject of knowledge would be transhistorical, homogeneous, and universal, while the knowledge itself would have a factual, value-neutral basis (Harding, 2004, p. 133). However, Harding (2004) claims that this methodological necessity inadvertently produces only weak objectivity. This is because those who have theorised social facts have often occupied dominant social locations, while marginalised groups have remained underrepresented in academic spaces. Consequently, their social prejudices have also been latent in their theoretical claims, reinforcing biases such as racism and sexism (Harding, 2004, pp. 134–135). Harding (2004) contends that acknowledging marginalised standpoints could develop strong objectivity by incorporating the neglected experiences of the oppressed (Harding, 2004, pp. 137–140). Harding (2004) maintains that returning to historicity and social location through standpoints would make theory concerned with social explanations, alongside causally explaining and classifying facts (Harding, 2004, p. 137). Thus, social theory would be a value-laden and prescriptive endeavour rather than remaining merely descriptive. Harding (1992) argues that marginalised lives can provide valuable starting points for generating knowledge, producing less partial and distorted accounts of social relations (p. 181).

This argument can be extended to the marginalised Dalit standpoints within Indian social theory. Gopal Guru (2012a) problematises the relationship between Dalit experience and theoretical authority. He argues that upper-caste non-Dalit theoreticians have predominantly theorised about Dalit experience. This leads to the colonisation of the Dalit epistemological terrain and the objectification of Dalits as "amusing objects" (Guru, 2012a, p. 25). This produces an epistemic dichotomy between "theoretical Brahmins" and "empirical Shudras" (Guru, 2012a, p. 10). As a result, theory becomes an upper-caste endeavour, while Dalits are relegated to empirical activities, such as data collection. For Guru (2012a), this represents the institutionalisation of the existing social hierarchy within the Hindu social order of caste, wherein knowledge production had been the domain of the dominant castes, such as Brahmins (p. 10).

In this milieu, Guru insists that Dalits ought to become subjects of theory, rather than mere objects of non-Dalit theoreticians (p. 25). This requires a movement from the particularity of lived experience to the universality of concepts, enabling conceptual development for analysing the caste social order. This brings Guru closer to feminist standpoint theorists: Dalit standpoints provide non-conventional grounds for critically examining the universal claims made by conventional social theory. This becomes significant where its centralising categories reproduce the concepts and social perspectives of dominant groups, thereby obscuring the exclusions and relations of domination within them (Guru, 2012b, p. 120).



Cover Page



This paper will demonstrate how B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of the social order of caste, especially in *Annihilation of Caste*, marks the movement from the Dalit standpoint and lived experience towards social theory. Ambedkar (2020a) theorises the caste social order from the social location of marginalisation, developing concepts such as 'graded hierarchy', 'social antagonism', and 'division of labourers', while implying the mechanisms of subordination and exclusion. Thus, Ambedkar provides an instance of how the Dalit standpoint can become a ground for theory.

FROM DALIT STANDPOINT TO DALIT THEORY

Guru (2012a) argues that in the domain of social theory, there exists a discrepancy between theoretical knowledge and empirical experience in studying the Dalit situation. Most theories about Dalits have been written by non-Dalit upper-caste theoreticians. As a result, there is objectification of Dalit experience, as Dalits become mere "amusing objects" for non-Dalit research (Guru, 2012a, p. 25). Against this milieu of the colonisation of the Dalit epistemological terrain, Guru (2012a) demands that Dalits become subjects of theory (p. 25). Their lived experiences and standpoints could thereby become an epistemic ground for theoretical production. In this regard, Ambedkar could be seen to exemplify this demand, because his theorisation of the caste social order develops from his experiences as a Dalit.

Two of Ambedkar's lived experiences become prominent: his becoming conscious of his untouchability and his recognition of the persistence of caste in his life. In the first instance, as a child, Ambedkar and his siblings planned to visit Koregaon, where his father was stationed. They reached Munsur railway station, from where they had to take a bullock cart to Koregaon. The upper-caste driver demanded double the money and required them to drive it, while he would walk beside it at a distance, as he considered himself liable to be polluted by their untouchability. The incident made Ambedkar reflect on his untouchability, although he had faced differential treatment before. As he writes, "this incident gave me a shock such as I never received before, and it made me think about untouchability which, before this incident happened, was with me a matter of course as it is with many touchables as well as the untouchables" (Ambedkar, 2020b, p. 271).

In the second instance, after becoming a barrister, Ambedkar was appointed to investigate the grievances of the untouchables. At Chalisgaon railway station, the Mahars of Dhullia village arranged a tonga to take him to their maharwada. On the way, the tonga toppled over from the bridge onto the riverbank, fracturing his leg. Upper-caste tongawallas had refused to drive him on account of his untouchability, and one of the Mahars had to undertake the task despite being inexperienced. Reflecting upon this incident, Ambedkar (2020b) writes, "I learnt that a Hindu tongawalla...can look upon himself as a person who is superior to all untouchables even though he may be a Barrister-at-law" (p. 681).

These experiences illustrate how Ambedkar's social location as a Dalit shaped his encounters with the caste social order. Yet these experiences, rather than being instances of personal suffering, provide a particular position from which the relations of caste can be understood. As Collins (2004) argues, marginalised social locations can provide the basis for developing distinct standpoints through which conditions of marginalisation can be critically analysed (p. 112). This movement from social location to a standpoint involves developing what Sandoval (2004) describes as an "oppositional consciousness," through which the oppressed recognise their subjugation and develop the knowledge necessary to challenge the dominant ideology (p. 196). Thus, Ambedkar's lived experiences can be seen as developing into a Dalit standpoint along with its oppositional consciousness. This becomes the foundation for transforming the particularity of experience into concepts for understanding the caste social order.

The epistemic significance of the Dalit standpoint can be understood through Harding's (2004) claim that a marginalised standpoint can lead to strong objectivity (pp. 128–129). This would produce universally relevant knowledge claims. Harding (1992) suggests that marginalised standpoints could become the starting point for less partial and distorted accounts of social relations (p. 181). This corresponds with Guru's (2012b) claim that Dalits ought to move from the particularity of their experiences to the universality of concepts, thereby providing non-conventional grounds to critique the assumptions of conventional social theories (p. 120). Ambedkar (2020a) demonstrates and justifies this movement, as the Dalit standpoint facilitates the development of concepts such as 'graded hierarchy', 'social antagonism' and 'division of labourers'. His conception of a 'graded hierarchy' implies that the hierarchy of castes differentiates social groups and places them in unequal relations, i.e. one below the other (Ambedkar, 2020a, p. 72). His conception of 'antagonism' emerges through what he defines as a lack of sangathan or association amongst Hindus, as each caste is held in subordination to the other (Ambedkar,



Cover Page



2020a, p. 55). What follows is the anti-social spirit that reinforces the subordination and exclusion of the lower castes, such as the untouchables (Ambedkar, 2020a, p. 51). Finally, his conception of 'division of labourers' entails that a division of labour is a natural, spontaneous process based upon the natural capacities of the individuals (Ambedkar, 2020a, p. 47). However, within the caste social order, it is rather a division of labourers, as their labour depends on the social status ascribed to them through inheritance, securing their rank in the hierarchy (Ambedkar, 2020a, p. 47). Through this distinct Dalit standpoint, his personal experience of exclusion and subordination can be seen as facilitating his conceptualisations of the Hindu social worldview. Thus, Ambedkar's theorisation articulates a movement from the particularity of lived experiences to the universality of concepts.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show how the Dalit standpoint can constitute an epistemic ground for theory. Ambedkar's lived experiences of untouchability and caste exemplify how a marginalised social location can provide a foundation from which the relations of caste can be critically understood. Through the development of the Dalit standpoint and its oppositional consciousness, experiences of exclusion and subordination can move beyond their particularity towards the conceptualisation of the wider caste social order. Ambedkar's concepts of 'graded hierarchy', 'social antagonism', and 'division of labourers' demonstrate this movement from experience to concepts and, consequently, towards theoretical knowledge. The Dalit standpoint, alongside introducing the experiences of the marginalised into existing social theory, provides a basis for critically examining the categories through which the social order is understood. Therefore, the Dalit standpoint can function as a ground from which Dalit theory is produced. As Guru suggests, Dalits can become subjects of theory rather than being mere objects of study for non-Dalit theoreticians

References

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (2020a). Annihilation of caste. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 23–98). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (2020b). Waiting for a visa. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 12). Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India.
3. Collins, P. H. (2004). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 103–126). Routledge.
4. Guru, G. (2012a). Egalitarianism and the social sciences in India. In G. Guru & S. Sarukkai, *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory* (pp. 9–28). Oxford University Press.
5. Guru, G. (2012b). Experience and the ethics of theory. In G. Guru & S. Sarukkai, *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory* (pp. 107–127). Oxford University Press.
6. Harding, S. (1992). Subjectivity, experience and knowledge: An epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition politics. *Development and Change*, 23(3), 175–193.
7. Harding, S. (2004). Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is “strong objectivity”? In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 127–140). Routledge.
8. Sandoval, C. (2004). U.S. third world feminism: The theory and method of differential oppositional consciousness. In S. Harding (Ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies* (pp. 195–209). Routledge.