



The Caste Gender System

A Necessary Analytic of Experience?

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ABSTRACT

This paper formulates a conceptual category called the caste-gender system and tends to follow how the institution of caste operates in systematic complicity with discriminatory gender norms. It talks about the responsibility of feminist theories to address the questions concerning caste experiences and mirrors the implications of such discourses on the experiences of the Dalit woman. On the one hand, aspirations of the prevailing strands of feminism to speak on behalf of 'Indian' women has often silenced the articulations and impeded the audibility of the Dalit woman. While on the other hand, efforts of 'retrieving' the marginal voices has presumed her experiences as given. The work of recovery, naturalising the historical and the discursive, has reified her identity. Engaging with a disparate group of feminists and other theorists, talking about subaltern life forms, the paper intends to convey the sense of ambivalence and complexity through which the very real concerns of the feminists have to articulate themselves. Pondering on the possibilities of 'self-reflection', the paper strives towards responsible modes of feminist engagements. Self-reflection is an engagement — an act of recounting the lineaments of the self and the other, through theoretical-fictional, narrative-conversational modes.

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The Caste Gender System

A Necessary Analytic of Experience ?

The paper will talk about the responsibility of feminist theories to address the questions concerning caste experiences. Thinking of a conceptual category, the caste-gender system, the paper moves on to follow its insinuations in the experiences of the dalit woman¹. On the one hand, aspirations of the prevailing strands of feminism to speak on behalf of 'Indian'² women has often silenced the articulations and impeded the audibility of the dalit woman. While on the other efforts of 'retrieving' the marginal voices has presumed her experiences as given. The work of recovery, naturalizing the historical and the discursive, has reified her identity. The paper engages with a disparate group of feminists and other theorists talking about subaltern life forms. It intends to convey the sense of ambivalence and complexity through which the very real concerns of the feminists have to articulate themselves. Pondering on the possibilities of 'self-reflection' it strives towards responsible modes of feminist engagements.

The caste gender system and the implications of experience

Caste and gender works as/in a system of discrimination. I formulate the term caste-gender system following Gayle Rubin's (1975) use of the term sex-gender system³. Much like the sex-gender system the institution of caste, in the Indian social formations, operates in a systematic complicity with discriminatory gender norms. The relationship between caste and gender could be conceptualised both in direct and indirect terms. In a roundabout way, like all other modes of stratifications, caste has a cumulative effect on gender. In more direct terms, one can see the very mechanism of the caste system as gendered. The system of caste operates on the basis of 'complete' control over the beings and bodies of the woman. The resolution of the problem of 'surplus woman' worked out in the writings of B.R. Ambedkar through the schema of endogamy – in terms of sati, enforced-widowhood and girl marriage, the prohibition of *pratiloma* marriage and several other discriminatory practices – vindicates the patriarchal foundation of the institution of caste. Ambedkar's "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" identifies the linkages between caste and gender in most unambiguous terms. He states, "...superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste" and analyses how the Brahmins had craftily designed it by means of controlling their woman. The logical demand of endogamy, Ambedkar observes, is the maintenance of a constant sex ratio within a caste. In this schema a basic crisis arises out of surplus men and women. As he views "[w]ith the traditional superiority of man ... [w]oman ... has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions...such being the case, you cannot accord the same treatment to a surplus man as you can to a surplus woman..." (2002:248-9).

1. This however is not to reduce caste experiences to the experiences of the dalit woman. Conceding the significance and scope of theorizing caste experiences in the context of other castes/sub-castes, which could be worked out on a different occasion, the current paper reflects on the experience of the dalit woman as its key question.
2. Let me share my unease with the appellation 'Indian' at the outset. It tends to homogenize women as an ahistorical category 'uninterrupted' by the stratificatory processes of class, race, region, ethnicity, religion and caste. Yet, on the one hand the expression deals with the particularity of the Indian woman as opposed to the universal category of woman. The other is to hold on to the generality implicated in the term 'Indian women' in the face of the multiple axes of stratification. This is to remember that various dimensions of discrimination have a cumulative effect of disadvantage on the women living in the specific cartographic-historical-cultural-political space called India.
3. In our societies the sex-gender dynamic functions like a system. The sex-gender system works through an arrangement of institutions enforcing discriminatory norms and practices on men and women. It organizes the everyday living of individuals, families, communities, and societies. It works as a basic principle for allocation of duties, rights, rewards, and power, including the means of violence. The prevalent or dominant form of sex-gender relationship goes, in favor of man, against woman. Gayle Rubin uses the phrase 'sex-gender system' to think of "a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention" (1975: 165).

Three specific uxorial customs – sati, enforced-widowhood and girl marriage were set up to resolve the problem of ‘surplus woman’. As sati and enforced widowhood were not applicable to the surplus man he was allowed to re-marry taking on another bride. To restrict the possibility of enhancement of competition involving ‘consumption’ of woman, man was allowed to recruit his wife from lower marriageable ranks. One can outline the caste-gender system, a birth-related ‘graded hierarchical structure of purity-pollution, based on an ‘inexorable’ law of caste endogamy working through an ensemble of institutional agreement imposing inequitable norms and practices on men and women – where women are oppressed as women “by having to be women”(Rubin 1975, 204).

Delineating the fundamental principles of the caste-gender system⁴ though an indispensable, yet left much undone, work of feminist theory is not the subject of this paper. Remaining theoretical in its exercise, the current paper refers to a question logically a few steps ahead (of defining the caste-gender system). It deals with the necessity of addressing the caste-gender system to nuance a theory of feminism in the cartographic and political space of contemporary India. The hegemonic impulses of ‘Indian’ feminisms, as rightly been marked out in the dalit feminist movements of the 1990s, to represent ‘Indian’ women have made it parochial and weak. The experiences of the dalit women and their struggles are altered and accommodated or often effaced by the existing feminist trends. For the feminists who seek to engage with this challenge it is a motivating moment of reflection. I tend to confront this predicament in terms of the negotiations between the caste-gender system and feminism deploying the analytic category of experience in a specific sense. The conceptual leap I confess, from the basic structure of the caste-gender system to its present day negotiations with feminism, would in certain ways hold back the force of my argument.

I concede this lack, in our conceptualization of caste, as a symptom of a more general epistemic violence involved in our reading of it. On the one hand there had been a trend of eliding caste both by the nationalist and Marxist historiographers. While on the other hand the social sciences, in their escalating research engagements with caste in the last fifty years, run through an insidious split between the ‘theoretical brahmins’ and ‘empirical shudras’ (Guru 2002). The institutionalized scholarship on caste systematically effaces the epistemic dimensions of the non-dominant caste and/or dalit perspectives as inauthentic, non-knowledge. Discourses of social science and history sometimes resort to a structural descriptive mode of representing caste. Some discourses unproblematically conceive caste as an indisputable signifier of backwardness disrupting the processes of India’s coming into nation and modernity. These, along with our privileged living as dominant castes, have much distorted our understandings of the social institution. The scholars have identified that recognition of caste as an oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society is a necessary yet not a sufficient condition of amending the discourse. Along with the structural engagements with caste it is imperative to think of its phenomenological dimensions. The shift towards a phenomenology of caste considering the life worlds of the non-dominant has been emphasized by some scholars⁵.

There remain few insightful theorisations on Indian caste experiences. Focusing on Dalit experiences and untouchability there are arguments on the possibility, ethicality and politics of authentic representation. Defying the hegemonies of the ‘Western’ theories there are efforts to imagine ‘other’ modes of theorizing ‘Indian’ experiences (Guru 1995, 2012 and Rege 1998). Certain strands of feminist theory (Scott 1988, 91), on the other hand, have long been grappling with the problem of using experience as evidence and naturalizing the discursively produced identities such as woman,

4. I am doing it elsewhere.

5. See Debjani Ganguly 2005

gay, lesbian. The problem rests not in the reliance but in the acceptance of experiential knowledge as self-evident. This leads to reification of the subject and essentialization of the identities. I see much of these uncertainties as I strive to think of a nuanced position of feminism in the geo-political space of India. I think of the possibilities of these two views, dalit experiences and feminist contentions, talking to each other.

Before I go further into my argument let me ponder on the word experience and its import in the history of feminism for a while. The word experience is etymologically linked to the Latin root *experientia* which refers to 'knowledge gained by repeated trials'. It is based on a verb *experiri* which implies to try or to test. To the extent the paleonymic traces cling to words, experience bears the processual quality of the act of repeated trials. Marked by the simultaneity of possibility and impossibility it remains ever incomplete. Experience bears both a possibility of an observation, acquaintance or event regarded as something affecting someone and an impossibility of ascertaining it in the fullest of terms as it is always already in a process. This trace of the processual also marks the history of feminist movement. The foundation of the 'second-wave feminism' in the politics of experience, rendering the personal as political – calling attention to the shared experiences of women, produced the potential of a cohesive political movement. Yet in no time it was adduced that women's inter-subjective experience had always also been disparate across class-race-ethnicity-religion. The possibility of a cohesive movement was disrupted and newer challenges were opened up for feminist theory and praxis. This paper, as it refers to the diverse fields of feminist theorizations addressing the problem of inter-subjective experience, remains animated by the politics concerning the question of the experience of the dalit woman.

THE DALIT WOMAN AND HER EXPERIENCE

The dalit feminists react against both the universalizing tendencies in 'Indian' feminist thought and a lack of attention to gender issues in mainstream dalit thought. Mainstream feminist theories informed by these nuances, proposed by the dalit feminists, claim to offer a 'multicultural' approach. Yet such approaches are often dominated by Western debates and taxonomies. In western discourses there remains a kind of uniformity on what feminism means in the very diverse cultures of the global South. Diverse experiences, cartographies and histories are conflated until differences among women are lost. Multiple struggles of very different women, under very different conditions, are collapsed into one theoretical model. Indian feminism is never a homogenous category just as Indian woman do not constitute any automatic or unitary group. Alliances and divisions of multiple axes of discriminations (like caste, class, sexuality, religion) and different histories fracture each of these groups. Feminism in India is thus an im-possible politics of a heterogeneous category of 'Indian' woman. One has to fracture the category of 'Indian' woman yet retain the politics of feminism. It is an im-possibility⁶. For one cannot think of a politics without suspending heterogeneity. Politics requires generalization. How then would one think of the particular⁷, dalit woman?

6. The im/possibility of feminist politics has been ingeniously worked out by Anirban Das (2010) as he traverses through the theoretical alleys of embodied knowledge and ideologies implicated in the marks of the unanticipated. He imagines, beyond the binary binds, the complementarity of the body and the processes of thinking and fleshes out the possibility of a 'different' relationship with the 'other'. Though the book has not engaged with the questions of caste, the current paper owes much to its approach and shares much of its concerns. A section of my argument referring to Scott and Butler is a product of my collaborative readings with Anirban Das. It has been dealt in a more detailed way in his 2010 book (135-155).

7. I do not assume that all strands of thinking that try to consider marginal women have this penchant for the particular. Of course, there are theories (see Nussbaum 1995, Narayan 1997), especially those related to the philosophies of Martha Nussbaum, that assert a universal 'humanism' to be the most suitable for the purpose. My position takes a distance from these assertions and associates intimately yet critically with those who oppose such a universalism.

One can logically conceptualize at least three modes of thinking the particular:

I. The dalit woman is the same as the upper caste/elite woman.

Problem inherent in this mode of thinking: sameness obliterates the specificity of the dalit woman. Their specificity of location, experience and politics gets effaced.

II. The dalit woman is what the upper caste/elite woman is not i.e. she is 'ignorant', 'poor', 'uneducated', 'tradition-bound', 'domestic', 'victimized' 'object' of analysis. The upper caste/elite is just her opposite i.e. she is 'enlightened', 'affluent', 'educated', 'modern', 'public-oriented' and the 'emancipated subject'.

Problems inherent in this mode of thinking are at least two: i) the dalit woman in this mode of theorizing becomes the lesser/ minor/dominated objectified 'other' of the upper caste/elite woman. ii) Defining dalit woman in terms of their problems (or their achievements) removes them from history, freezing them in space and time.

III. The dalit woman is different from the non-dalit woman. She is so different and so much displaced from the dominant that she is not amenable to the law of the dominant. Beyond the reckoning of the general feminist theory, she stands authenticated by her experience.

Problems inherent in this mode of thinking again are at least two: i) objectification and ii) exoticization of the dalit woman leading to an impossibility of a generalized politics beyond the experience of the particular.

The 'dalit woman' is thus a mere position gaining its (provisional) definition from its placement in relation to the 'dominant woman'. She is not only represented as the opposite but also as similar to the upper caste woman or even as her complement. In all these three possibilities – of sameness pertaining to accommodation and unification, of inferiority pertaining to exclusion and denial, and of difference pertaining to objectification and exoticization– the dalit woman, posited as against the elite woman, is conceived as variants of the non-dalit, elite woman. In each of these three modes of conceptualizing the dalit woman, she is constructed as an objectified and undifferentiated group uncomplicated by the heterogeneity that characterizes their conceptual counterpart, the non-dalit woman. Each of these three modes think of the specificity of the dalit woman in terms of her exclusive experience predicated upon her historical and cartographic location – in terms of her 'presence'. A 'presence' that goes beyond the nuances and impasses of the prevailing feminist discourses in India as well as the purported 'high-feminist theory of the west'. The dalit woman is present only in the living that she lives, in the pain that she bears, in the voice that she raises as if her life, sufferings and resistances precede re-presentation. As if experience is not mediated by discourse/s, as if discourses and subject do not constitute each other. The unmediated experience validates and valorizes the presence of the dalit woman. Her subjectivity remains presupposed and left unraveled.

"Dalit Women Talk Differently": Gopal Guru's 1995 essay and the arguments that sprang up around it offered an initial insight addressing the problem of retrieving the voice of the dalit woman. This had blatantly defied the elitist voices symbolizing contemporary Indian feminism. Guru presented a dalit standpoint approach to represent the 'differently talking' dalit women against the hegemonic middle class women and the patriarchal dalit men. Sharmila Rege concurs with Guru's position revealing the possibilities the dalit standpoints produce to reconceptualize prevalent feminisms. Yet she eludes Guru's insistence on the authenticity of the voice of the dalit women which might, she claims, "limit the emancipatory potential of the dalit women's organisations and also their epistemological standpoints" (1998:44). There is an epistemological impasse underlying Rege's recognition of the multiplicity of

voices. She holds that the notion of 'difference' reduces feminist politics to a narrow individual level. Individualistic politics fails to produce a 'community of resistance'. Differences both from within and without also the differences of the 'inter' and 'intra' differential identities reduced to the level of individuals thwart feminist politics at the level of a community of resistance. Rege goes on to argue that the dalit feminist standpoint though emanating from the lived experiences of the dalit woman becomes politically productive in terms of its intercessions with other groups. They could transform the subjective positions of other group of feminists by sharing with them their dreams and deeds. This would not authorise the dominant others to speak on their behalf. Rather this would help others to revise their positions and "reinvent themselves as dalit feminists" (45). The emancipatory work of the dalit feminism as identified by Rege, opening up avenues for the dominant strands of feminism, on the one hand entails a politics of difference while on the other presupposes a primacy of their experience. Rege refuses to accept the authentic experience of the dalit woman "... to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to a narrow identity politics (44)," she asserts. Yet she has to hold on to a full presence of experience that acts as the defining and authenticating moment of the standpoints in her stand point theory.

Sandra Harding well aware of this problematic tends to work on it. In her 1991 article *Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition Politics* Sandra Harding states: "In so far as women, for example, live in oppositional race, class and sexuality relations to each other, the subject of feminist knowledge will be not just multiple, but also contradictory or 'incoherent'" (175-6). She concedes that emphasizing the co-constitutivity of experience and standpoints on the one hand and accepting the significance of diversity of experience on the other raise certain problems. First, this might lead to a kind of solipsism or a counterintuitive claim that one can only speak of what s/he has directly experienced. Second, following from the first problem, what one speaks about her/his experience remain as if beyond analysis. "The speaker refrains from analysing how racism, imperialism, class exploitation and compulsory heterosexuality also structure the lives and thoughts of women in the favoured groups, such as the speaker's" (178-9). The stand point theorists though theorize experience at an epistemological plane tend to work out the problems arising from multiplicity of experiences and that of relying on 'experience' as an unmediated category. They think that this experience is not merely the experience of being but that of politics. The experience of being overtly clings to the notion of presence. The dynamism or immanence implicated in the notion of politics (eg. struggle) seems to question this. But implicitly politics or struggle as the basis of stand point presupposes the full presence of the experience of the politics.

When Guru (2012) says that one cannot speak on behalf of the dalit he invokes, through 'frustration' and 'anger', a moral issue. "An important subtext in Guru's article is the anger, sometimes justifiable, about non-dalits theorising dalit experience. This anger is common to many if not all communities which exhibit a strong dislike to being objects of study by those who do not belong to that community" (Sarukkai 2007:4043) It is immoral, he would say, to theorize subaltern experiences without living their life of humiliation and pain. To think of the legitimacy of this position, in his motivating dialogue with Guru, Sundar Sarukkai (2012) brings in the conceptual dichotomy between ownership (emanating from being in a situation not out of choice) and authorship (emanating from situations we choose to be in) of experience. "*Lived experience is not about freedom of experience*", Sarukkai observes, "*but about the lack of freedom in an experience*" (2007: 4045). Guru's argument, placed in this frame, renders the owner of experience the sole authority to narrate his/her experiences. Sarukkai rightly holds that the owner of experience is not – in real sense of the term the 'owner' of experience. S/he

is the owner of her/his experiences yet cannot author them or cannot own the manifold aspects which constitute experience. “The dalit who experiences oppression legitimately owns that experience of oppression. However the experience of oppression also involves an oppressor, either as an individual or a system, and the dalit has no control or ownership over this oppressor” (Sarukkai 2007: 4046)⁸. So the category of experience will possibly not be enough to authenticate one’s right of statement on the conceptual analysis of his/her experience. Yet, Sarukkai at once points out the problems inherent in the theorizations from without. Theorising bereft of lived experience is a disapproval of the ontological relations between experience and reason. For Sarukkai to rationalize the field of theory, stripping off the streaks of experience in a Habermasian stride, is to ‘distribute the guilt’ – of remaining outside the experiences of oppression and pain – among the ‘generalized others’⁹. Theory is not supposed to be a means of sharing self-reproach among the non-experiencers. “Theory is to be felt, is to embody suffering and pain, is to relate the epistemological with the emotional, that is, is to bring together reason and emotion” (4048).

Sarukkai’s take on the debate, about the authority of theorization, confers it an interesting turn. It does not remain limited within the question: from where would rightful knowledge be produced: within or without. More significantly the debate arrives at the ethicality of the very work of theory. And in the ethics of theory experience turns out to be a significant moment of arbitration. Yet we cannot rely on experience as an explanation or as an evidence of our theoretical knowledge. If neither experience nor the identities formed by experience are historicized, there would not be any possibility of change. Let us remember, who ever theorizes: the dalit on her own or the non-dalit on her behalf would need to problematize the conceptual category of experience itself. In her article, “The Evidence of Experience” (1991), Scott observes that historians trying to recuperate the voices of the marginalized people presuppose experience as obvious and unquestionable. Thereby they tend to naturalize or reify discursively produced identities such as woman, black, and transgender. Such histories of difference: “take as self-evident the identities of those whose experiences are being documented and thus naturalize their difference” (1991: 777). This does not mean that experience is to be repudiated as a means for attaining knowledge. The problem rests not in accepting experience but in considering experiential knowledge as unmediated which leads to reification of the subject and essentialization of identities.

THE PROBLEM OF EXPERIENCE

In canonical history writing experience works as a foundational category where production of experience as a category remains un-theorized. Experience appears as the bedrock of a pre-discursive reality. These schemes of revealing ‘reality’ might portray the existing modes of domination but “precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself” (1991: 778). Challenging this Scott states that experience is not a ‘truth’ that precedes cultural representation; it is in effect arbi-

8. This position is different from Antonio Gramsci, who argued that perspective of the dominated is necessarily contradictory and fractured; a doubled or negative consciousness that must both acknowledge the force and power of elite (or in this case, upper-caste) domination in real and symbolic terms, while struggling to maintain the critical distance necessary for defining oneself against such homogenizing attempts. (See Selected *Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

9. I substantiate Sarukkai’s reading of Habermas’s theoretical response to Nazi experiences, grounded on a distanciation of theory from experience in ‘distributing his guilt among others’, with Seyla Ben-Habib’s, (1987) notion of generalised other. While reviewing the Kohlberg-Gilligan controversy she explicates that the universalistic moral theories privatize and exclude women’s experiences rendering the notion of ‘individual’ insignificant for the rational work of theorizing. She thinks of two modes of self-other relations: generalized other and concrete other. The standpoint of the generalized ‘other’ conceives individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties as the ‘self’. The relationship of the ‘self’ to the ‘other’ is grounded on the norms of formal equality and reciprocity. In contrast the standpoint of the concrete other acknowledges every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution. Habermas’s ‘distribution of guilt’, a part of his larger project of modernity, seems to rest on the presupposition of a generalized other.

trated by modes of representations. Experience is an 'epistemological phenomenon' that is "discursively organized in particular contexts or configurations" (1998: 5). She conceives discourse as a dynamic system that produces meaning through differentiation. Experience is conceivable only from within the known semiotic structure. It is the recognized sign system that renders an experience conceivable. Experience is thus a 'linguistic event'. It is undeniably associated with language. But this link does not reduce experience to "a fixed order of meaning" neither does it settle the disagreements between contending discourses. It rather opens up the scope for diverse meanings. Scott would not replace experience by language. She would rather seek for a discursive construal of experience that is conditional, contextual and contested.

Scott states that the experiencing individuals are constituted as subjects through experience. This is not merely a sleight of hand that overturns a causal schema, but is actively related to the project of anti-essentialism. Perhaps the strongest statement of this project is contained in Judith Butler's article "Contingent Foundations".

"There is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context; that cultural context, as it were, is already there as the disarticulated process of that subject's production, one that is concealed by the frame that would situate a ready-made subject in an external web of cultural relations" (1995:46).

Such a constructivist notion of subject is never a refusal of agency. It is to remember that agency is produced through situation and statuses bestowed on the subject. S/he is given with alternatives that work in the social, political, economic, ethical or other fields of signification. When experience denies the discursive mediations of its conception it reifies the self and effaces its subjectivity. The self is now derived and defined through experience. The distinctiveness of the self as subject, one who can take decisions negotiating the structural and experiential determinations, is thus obliterated.

Considering the mutuality of discourse-language and experience, the presupposition of experience as real could be problematized. But to think experience as solely a linguistic event is extremely problematic. Linguistic reductionism could be a logical consequence of the denial of any extra-linguistic materiality. Butler in her theoretical schema would not deny materiality but emphasize on its linguistic derivation. The material would be evident as 'material' only within the language, she would say. Linguistic essentialism that ignores the co-constitutivity of the linguistic with other elements would undermine the significance of the extra-linguistic (social), the unconscious (psychoanalytic), or the ontic (phenomenological). This mediation is a complex process involving ideology, authority, power and other categories. All these categories in their turn are mediated by the broad system of signification called language.

Experience is interceded by discourses and histories. And it is via experience that we come to know about discourses and histories. However this does not institute experience as the foundation of knowledge. This turn to experience is not an essentialist turn I must concede. Unless a concept, e.g. that of experience, is assumed to bear an existence not arbitrated by the forces of discourses and histories it would not demand a point of departure. Discourse - history- experience, within wider linguistic systems, work as ideologically correlated complex structures of over-determination. Language here is also not given. The constructed nature of language renders it incomplete, contingent and conditional. Conceptions of experience in terms of a full presence fail to remember the linguistic mediations of

experience. Scott reminds us of such mediations. However she herself does not ‘work through’ (if not forgets) the provisionality of language¹⁰.

Here someone like Sarukkai might argue that the mediated notion of experience is particular to the Western systems of theorizations grounded on the binary between the knower and the known. Eastern knowledge forms being fundamentally phenomenological works beyond the knower-known duality. He talks about two modes of experience: immediate (not mediated by concepts: experience subject) and conceptual experience (experience of self already judged). The standpoint feminist theorists strive to work beyond this knower- known divide. They do not privilege a knower. Whereas scientific discourses begin with the concepts or schema of that discourse and turn towards the actual to find its object, “the standpoint of women never leaves the actual. The knowing subject is always located in a particular spatial and temporal site, a particular configuration of the everyday/every night world. Inquiry is directed towards exploring and explicating what she does not know – the social relations and organization pervading her world but invisible in it” (Smith 1992:91).

There are yet other modes of addressing the question of experience. Feminists like Sonia Kruks thoroughly critiquing Scott’s position probes the possibilities of respectful affective relationship of identification with the experience of the others ‘radically’ different from oneself. Commonness of feminine experience as such does not adequately justify assertions of shared sisterhood even within national boundaries. Yet feminists from diverse backgrounds come together imploring not to abandon the ‘token’ of shared experience. Commonality of experience, though always brittle, is still significant for feminist politics. “Even though common experiences of feminine embodiment do not offer a basis for “sisterhood”, I believe they can furnish what I will call an *affective predisposition* to act on behalf of women other than and different from oneself: a predisposition toward forms of feminist solidarity” (Kruks 2001:151)¹¹. For Kruks “affective predisposition” invokes ‘our’ bodily anxiety, angst and anguish for the ‘others’. Individuals having a moral responsibility to know about others develop “sympathetic bodies.” Comprehending female embodiment as a “world-travelling” praxis, substituting “sisterhood”, facilitates feminist cohesion in terms of “respectful recognition”. She holds up affect as a phenomenological mode of engagement against the discourse oriented post-modern orientations. “Feelings of concern for others must develop, and forms of inter subjective embodied experiences that are not discursive

10. Shari Stone in her essay “Chandra Mohanty and the revaluing of “experience”” (1998) marks out the limits of Scott’s poststructuralist critique of experience. Scott allegedly pays a greater attention to the role of language and textuality in the construction of reality than to specific histories, and detailed local contextualizations of concrete instances. She assumes the ‘universal’ and leaves it unquestioned. Mohanty (1988) on the other hand, although aware of the problems of unmediated experience, focuses on ‘struggle’. Struggle emanates from specific locations and is thus not amenable to the rule of the universal. To problematize the universal notion of experience, Mohanty invokes the notions like struggle and solidarity to hint at the collective nature of the experience of the hegemonised not traceable in terms of the model of individual experience. She thereby treats the differentiating moments of “subalternity” almost as given and natural. To talk about the marginal one has to talk about their everyday living, their loss, pain and resistance. I respect this view without surrendering the theoretical query of how experience and universality is co-constituted.

11. The force of Kruk’s argument reminds me of my conversation with Professor Vibhuti Patel (after she had commented on this paper I presented at a TISS conference). One among the first generations of the feminists in India, upholding the cause of the dalit woman across the streets- railway stations-universities-parliament of India, Prof Patel holds on to the possibilities of ‘shared sisterhood’. With all my pride and pleasure I derive out of their real achievements, being an inconsequential one among several of their successors, I submit the significance of problematizing ‘shared sisterhood’. Feminism defined in such a way undoubtedly calls attention to the multiplicity of women’s social and political reality. Yet, at the same time it centralises the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least talked about, understood, or altered by political movements. Women’s movement now becomes elite, upper-caste women’s affair which without taking responsibility for its inherent casteism decides on behalf of dalit women. After the initial step of ‘facilitating’ the ‘other’ woman, performed with much sincerity by her generation of feminists, the reality was slowly dawning that women of different caste, class, race backgrounds did never experience society in the same way. Diversity of experience implies a diversity of theories addressing not patriarchy, but patriarchies, doing not feminism, but feminisms. Conceding this, we are left with the perennial task of working through newer modes of thinking. I do not say that Prof. Patel remains unaware of this. I rather remember that ingenuity of activism sometimes eclipses the criticalities of the theoretical exercises or renders them less significant.

sively the matized may be important to develop such feelings” (155). Kruks argues that the immediate apprehension of experiencing the pain of the ‘other’ occurs not by conscious thinking or discursive deliberations but through ‘sentience’. And this according to her does not involve an appropriation of the other in which one claims ‘her’ suffering as one’s own, or claims to have fully entered ‘her’ experience.

Acknowledging the veracity of this position I raise a few points. First, the question here is not merely about appropriation of the ‘other’ in terms of the degree of identification with her. Rather the issue is of speaking for the other and of taking decisions on her behalf. “...[T]he practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise”(Alcoff 1991:29). When the elite feminist, out of her ‘sentience’, tends to experience the pain of the ‘dalit woman’ does she also tend to take decision on her behalf? What are the implications of such decisions on the life of the ‘other’ woman? While she intends her dalit ‘sister’s’ to get a better life the underlying effects of her discourse might, reinstating casteism, quieten the possibilities of her speech and perceptibility. Second, the question of “affective predisposition”, ‘beyond’ discursive mediations, is problematic. “Affective predisposition”, it appears, simultaneously involves spontaneity and a processual element. However the immediacy of the nature of response, a fit of feminist enthusiasm, cannot get it laundered of discourses. The discursive does not necessarily bring in thought out or calculated response. The discourse of the elite (like any other discourses) involves presuppositions, commonsensical beliefs, sub-conscious dispositions towards the ‘other’. Even when “affective predisposition” works as praxis or a moral responsibility to be evolved how could one think of an unadulterated flicker of response, outside the domain of discourse? The experience of the subject is implicated within multiple ideologies including the presumptions about identities, ‘otherness’ and ‘selfhood’ that lie within, beneath or over the available discourses. Ignorant of these mediations, “affective predisposition” of the experiencing subjects would inadvertently eclipse and perpetrate the discriminatory processes they want to fight against.

Third, Kruks holds that an experiencing subject is not a passive recipient of discursively produced reality. Following Marleau Ponty she invokes an actively knowing sentient ‘body-subject’ (allegedly lacking in Scott’s post-modern theorization of subjectivity). She thinks of feminist praxis evolving not out of discourse or cognition but of an affective realm of embodied experience. Kruks makes her point with an interesting example. “.... [I]f I am walking along the street and I see a child fall down on the side walk in front of me, in one simultaneous rush of perception, bodily motion and emphatic understanding of her pain and fright, I will rush forward to pick her up and comfort her” (148). In whatever goes on in her mind and body, witnessing the child in distress and moving out to help her, I do not see anything logically beyond the domain of discourses. How can one forget that the whole decision of helping out the ‘other’ (a child in this case), in synchronized mind-body sensitivity, brings one credit and admiration? How can it surpass, however prompt the reaction (an outburst of compassion) could it be, the sub/conscious considerations regarding the child’s class, colour and also perhaps gender? What is remarkable, at the end of this section, she writes about an “inter constituency of the physical, cognitive and cultural/discursive is at play in ... experience – and the lived-body is its site” (149). Why then does she talk of ‘going beyond discourses’? Is it merely to critique the over emphasis of the linguistic or the discursive in the postmodern theorizations like that of Scott? Why does Kruks need to undermine the significance of discursive mediations of experience to work it out?

The significance of the discursive, while considering the dalit experiences of atrocities, has been critically addressed by Debjani Ganguly (2005). Her attempt to read caste as discourse is not grounded

on the abjuration of the lived experiences of the 'South Asian people'. Rather she argues for an "... awareness that the agony and anguish of the victims of caste violence are intimately connected with the ways in which the varied discursive productions of caste circulate in social spaces as 'common sense' and 'popular belief'" (Ganguly 2005:10). Beyond the western labels – 'atypical', 'pre-modern', 'insidious' – she thinks of caste as a performative category linked to everyday living. The "non-conceptual and non-ideological" (24) everyday caste experiences of the people rip apart the solidity of the rational discursive labels produced by the western knowledge systems. Yet there has been a consistent reliance of the post-colonial academic, activist and political strands, occluding the performative traces, on the rational-western discursive formulations. Exceeding this she tends to glimpse at a life-form, which outlives the forces of colonial rule or the global capitalist modernity, through the performative notion of caste. Though both the notions of the non-ideological and persisting forms of caste experiences appear problematic let us follow her logic for a while.

Ganguly distinguishes between two modes of discourses: i) the rational western – sociological and philosophical and ii) the affective performative – mythographical and literary. She purportedly holds on to the discursivity of caste as she displaces the centrality of western academic knowledge in its understanding. Ganguly focuses on 'counter-modern' mythographies and affective histories delineating the "...singularities that exceed the circumscription of the sociological and philosophical categories" (25). Taking recourse to dalit creative writings plunging into the "vicissitudes and pleasures of daily living on the slums and streets of Mumbai" she gets a glimpse of an urban way of life "particularly the dalit's own" (27). Her attempt of theorizing the particular (dalit) is based on "the ethics of dalit everyday different from the macro ethics of nation building and modernization" (27). The specificity of the subaltern is again sought in terms of the exclusivity of their abject experience allegedly uninterrupted by the marks of the hegemonic modern! Unbearable anguish of living everyday, disrupting the emancipatory promises of modernism, is evidently central to dalit experience. Yet, how can one forget 'dalit experience' is always also mediated: identified, named and documented also challenged flouted and altered through specific technologies of modernity. How can one overlook how the experiential angst has reacted to the forces of modernity? And also how the processes of such negotiations have transformed 'their' and 'our' everyday lives? How and why can one not read the elements of co-constitutivity of the 'rational western' and the 'affective performative'?

Way back in 2001 V. Geetha wrote a short response article problematizing Aditya Nigam's (2000) remark on the epistemology of the dalit critique of modernity. Much in Ganguly's vein Nigam maintains that refusing to be pigeonholed either into nationalism/ colonialism or secularism/communalism dalit politics represents a resolute opposition to the binaries constructed by modern politics. Dalit politics "...represents in its very existence, the problematic 'third term' that continuously challenges the common sense of the secular-modern" (2456). Nigam views the critique of modernity, as he thinks of the possibilities of the knowledge produced by the dalit scholars, as an 'absent presence' in a large body of dalit writings. He associates the absent presence of dalit epistemology to the experience of oppression. "[B]ut the relationship between dalit epistemology and experience" Geetha holds "is neither causal nor mimetic. Instead, it is mediated: felt notions of pain and injustice grapple with ideologies of protest and theories of oppression and liberation to constitute new knowledge To account for dalit epistemology through the invocation of an unmediated notion of experience is problematic in another sense. It produces a strange mirroring of the Gandhian notion of the ineffable 'inner voice', whose truth claims are self-evident. Further, experience, when deployed in substitution of argument and analysis sometimes fudges the very field of one's critique..." (163). In this context she cites the

instance of feminists' engagement with experience. And goes on to explicate that, pointing at the inadequacy of experience as a foundational concept of theory and praxis, strands offeminism question the alleged authenticity of feminine experience. Geetha argues that the category of experience needs to be considered contextually within the inter-sectional associations (of class, caste, religion, ethnicity, language) and discursive mediations.

THE POLITICS OF SELF-REFLECTION

The experience of the dalit woman, like others as well, is constituted by discourses (that are often the dominant ones) and histories. Remaining oblivious to these mediations, narratives of the experiencing subjects would unintentionally obscure and entrust the inequitable practices that produce them. This is not to reduce the experiences of the dalit woman in terms of discourses. Her phenomenal presence—her own names, faces and histories—would always animate, with the force of her bearing and resisting pain, whatever one writes or thinks about her. What then is the efficacy of this theorization? Invoking a deconstructive gesture this is an attempt to critique the 'full presence' of experience. It is to think of the simultaneity of knowledge being produced through experience yet not reduced to it (the element being produced through experience). There are elements of knowledge, other than experience, hinting at some generalities. I do not give up the theoretical question of how experience and generality¹² is complicated. Rather I suspend the question of generality of experience, across hierarchies, for this moment¹³. I deploy the question of the experience of the particular/dalit woman for a different politics.

Once again I take up Rege's point of non dalit feminists reinventing themselves as dalit feminists (1998:45). Yet, I do not take it in her terms. I rather return it to the elite feminists. I ask for a critique of the 'self': thinking of the implication of non-dalit feminism in the making of dalit woman. To consider how the elite woman posed herself as against her. I tend to read how the dalit woman has been produced, as an 'other' (of the non-dalit woman), through the experiences of the non-dalit woman. How the everyday living of the non-dalit woman—her excitement and ecstasy, burden and suffering—touches upon and inflicts pain onto the 'other' woman. Keeping in mind the inevitability of this other in gone needs to think of a 'responsible' move. This could be understood in terms of the Derridian notion of 'eating well' (Derrida 1991)¹⁴. The economy of eating well is a metonymic mode of encountering the other. His ethical move is to keep alive the otherness of the other. 'Eating well' tries to go beyond cannibalism while continuing to be interrupted by its traces. Derrida is aware of the inevitability of this cannibalism yet tends to be ethically responsible to the cannibalized other.

Self-evaluation is imperative in understanding the constitution of the self as well. One can think how c/overtly misogyny is practiced by women against other women and also against themselves. Self-reflection is not a confessional exercise to ventilate the guilt of the dominant woman. Guru (2012) rightly points at the limitations of this confessional mode in the field of theory. Such reflections do not stand

12. It involves a critique of the universal-particular system of identity formation where the universal hegemonizes the particular. It is rather to ponder on the im/possibility of the generality-singularity (Deleuze 2004) relationship where the singular cannot be fully conceived from the norms of general. It bears elements of unanticipatability. Unlike the particular the singular is not a mere repetition of the universal. The 'singular' reiterates the 'general' with a difference. So it is not fully reducible to the logic of the general. Unlike the universal-particular system predicated on know-ability, the generality-singularity engagement talks about the im/possibility of knowing. Yet, the singular is not foreclosed. It is amenable to calculation and to politics.

13. For a detailed discussion of the question of generality of experience and its implications in the realm of ideology see Das 2010.

14. A reviewer's report to the paper suggested an engagement with Francois Laruelle's theorization of 'One' so as to understand the heterogeneous modes of interactions of the dalit and the non-dalit woman. However Laruelle's 'non-philosophical' scheme of 'unilateral duality' (transforming the philosophical One-Other into a radically autonomous One-in-One mode) beyond the work of deconstruction does not convince me as such. I explore the ethico-politics of deconstruction as I think of the multiple possibilities of negotiations between the dalit and the non-dalit categories of women.

for the empathy of the dominant liberal. The liberal stance, presuming violence against dalit woman as something repeatable, works to prevent its recurrence (through reformatory means) and provide her a rightful place in the society. Impeding recurrence of violence is absolutely necessary yet there is another urgent task of reflecting on the 'self' – understanding how the self is implicated within the system of violence. Breaking through the maze of misogyny there remains the task of thinking through abstract categories. Self-critique is an engagement – an act of recounting the lineaments of the self and the other, through theoretical-fictional, narrative-conversational reflections.

Let me clarify my point further against a question which, I think, could be raised against the idea of self-reflection and its consequences. Focusing on the constructions of the otherness of the dalit, in the lived experiences of the dominant, I talk about self-reflection of the dominant as an ethico-political move. One might argue, in the pretext of self-reflection, I presuppose and even confirm a unified and totalising impact of the dominant life worlds. Non-dalit life worlds purportedly mark the conceptual limit of the dalit presence and identity. This brings us closer to the elite-subaltern relationship debate.¹⁵ In response to the question, keeping in mind the nuances of the subaltern-elite relationship, I would draw attention to two things. Accepting the fact that the living and discursive practices of the non-dalit constitutes the category of the dalit does not necessarily cannibalize her identity as an inalienable part of the dominant. This does not even lead to the production of an unadulterated domain of marginal experience. My point here is not to make a choice between binaries (experiences of the dominant or non-dominant as valid entry point of feminist politics). I rather tend to see how each turn of phrase conceived in an opposition is mutually constitutive. Possibly this would rupture the structures of opposition that keep them apart. Perhaps this would bring in an element of plurality into the event of experience. The awareness of this plurality as a political move is enabling for the non-dominant whose experiences had never attained the alleged authenticity. I recall an interesting point raised by Sarukkai: in spite of being the 'owners' we are not the 'authors' of our experience. The dalit can neither control the oppressor nor the 'larger categories' analysing her/his experience. What could be a responsible move of a feminist in this situation? Would it merely involve the remembering of the dalit life-worlds (involving only a fraction of a larger story)? Would not the life practices of the dominant still be considered imperative to be dismembered? Why?

In opposition to the dominant/Brahmanic trends of feminism effacing the distinctiveness of the experiences of the dalit women, this paper refers to other possibilities of feminist politics. Arguing against the 'authenticity' of lived experience the concern remains to think of responsible feminist positions traversing the geo-political space of India. I consider self-reflection, of the dominant, as a moment in thinking of a nuanced strand of feminism. I tend to reflect at the undecidability that preoccupies experience, the inherent multiplicity of the immanence of experience, without denying the unity and the expectable construction (through discourse, power, history and so on) of the event. I try to bring in eventuality, unknowability and chance into the calculable world of experience. Not remaining cir-

15. Questioning the elitist mode of historiography the subaltern study group refers to multiple positions regarding the elite subaltern relationship. Some initial attempts attribute an independent substantive domain to the subaltern – a space that the dominant discourses could never hegemonize – as something to be retrieved. Other moves were to situate subaltern consciousness in the place of a difference rather than an identity. The logic could finally be extended to the extent of suggesting that subaltern consciousness is an integral part of the elite, constituting its defining limit. The subaltern is the necessary other of the elite and so is "never fully recoverable". The space of the subaltern is so displaced that it finds no space to locate itself – it can thus only be a discursive category – "it is irreducibly discursive". The school sees domination as a relational concept where both the elite and the subaltern become meaningful in terms of each other. They do not preclude historical heterogeneity in either elite or subaltern categories – they only make the difference contextual and contingent. For an elaborate discussion on this, see Gayatri Spivak 1985.

cumscribed within the antagonistic confrontations it hints at the heterogeneity of the engagement of the dalit woman with the non-dalit. And this is from where one may continue a conversation, I guess.

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