

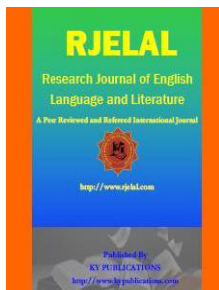


**PROBLEMATIZING THE METONYMY OF REPRESENTATION IN GOPAL GURU'S ESSAY  
'HOW EGALITARIAN ARE THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN INDIA?'**

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**ABSTRACT**

The article focuses on the political theorist Gopal Guru's essay 'How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?' in an attempt to demonstrate how the practice of theory and empiricism is divided on racial lines in the Indian academic scenario. It stresses the significance of bringing Dalit experience into the centre with reference to the practice of social theory by following the trajectory of Guru's arguments. While social theory has become the prerogative of the upper classes, the so-called top of the twice-born, the marginalised sections of the society like the dalits have to content themselves with the pursuit of empiricism in social science disciplines. Guru's essay critiques the cultural hierarchies that operate through academic institutions and analyzes why sections like the dalits assumed to be intellectually indigent are deprived of the opportunities to do theory at a more abstract level. The essay also speaks about the epistemic violence perpetrated on dalits by the non-dalits who take up the cudgels for the former. Guru argues that in the end, by a kind of reverse orientalism, these elf-proclaimed messiahs end up doing more harm than good because of the amount of condescension they subject the dalits to in the name of uplifting them. The article, in short, delves into the lack of intellectual representation of dalits in social sciences. It argues that the present representation they are given is merely metonymic in nature, i.e., they are given a semblance of representation from outside when what they actually want is total representation from within themselves, and seeks to redress it through the adoption of a liberal ideology which would make social theory accessible to all.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Gopal Guru's seminal essay 'How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?' explores the intricate relationship between experience and theory in Indian social sciences. It focuses on question of Dalit experience and untouchability. Thematically divided into six sections, the first part of the essay discusses the problems associated with theory in the social sciences in the Indian context;

the second makes inquiries into the socio-cultural context of intellectual hierarchies; the third explores how the hegemonic past which has made theory the birth right of TTB still survives in the present; the fourth examines the moral prerequisites necessary for reflectivity; the fifth presses the need for theory as an inevitability for the dalits; and the last one focuses on how freedom of mobility in social sciences can make it truly egalitarian.

Guru begins his polemical essay by discussing how cultural hierarchy has created a yawning divide in the practice of social sciences in Indian academic circles over the past fifty years. Guru identifies the practice of theory as an emancipatory tool that can help surmount the impoverishment of the theoretically star-crossed dalit who has to ensure his representation in academic circles through the vainly charitable eyes of the non-dalit theorist. Guru problematizes the polarization of theory and experience of the dalit question in order to bridge its gap by an inclusionary praxis that would promote dalit scholars languishing in empirical cesspools to the echelons of theoretical fecundity. The only way to resolve the implacable oppositionality between theory and lived experience, Guru argues, is by the rearticulation of a Hegelian dialectics of unrepresentable representability, which awaits the reddeming touch of an untouchable dalit for its organic synthesis. The polemics that Guru activates here is redolent of the perfunctory representation of Jews under the Nazi regime by Heidegger who had no lived experience of the Jewish suffering as against the immediately gripping one by Levinas who had direct knowledge and experience of Jewish oppression. But Sunder Sarukkai deflates the exigency of Guru's argument with the contestation that there is a certain ubiquity to human experience, regardless of segmentations into geographical terrains existing vis-à-vis a particular racial or casteist ideology. Sarukkai refutes Guru's argument that the dalit experience can't be subsumed under the rubric of the collective transgression of human rights in general. Sarukkai's argument can be read as a plea for the revivification of a Marxist ideological formulation comprehensive enough to slot into its prefigurations of class, proletariat, master, etc. the dichotomy between the theoretically well-endowed TTB and the empirically-confined dalit.

#### DISCUSSION

In his essay 'Commitment to Theory', Bhabha asks: "Is the language of theory merely another power play to the culturally privileged Western elite to produce a discourse of the other that reinforces its own power-knowledge equation?" (29) In a similar vein Guru dithers about

the generosity expressed by non-dalit academicians to extend the range of their representational universe to the underprivileged dalits. He sees in such an offer the insidious intent of a colonial master offering his hand to the pariah as a tokenistic sign of his magnanimity to redeem the latter's iniquitous plight. The pouvoir-savoir paradigm as enunciated by Foucault serves the role of a formal determinant here to gauge the complicity implied in the act of the naive dalit grovelling before the messianic non-dalit to emancipate him. The binarism that the metonymy of representation entails is both pornographic and detrimental as it happens with the borrowed intensity of spurious interiority and also because it "museumizes" the dalit as the Other. As Baudrillard puts it in *The Ecstasy of Communication*:

Today we have entered into a new form of schizophrenia- with the emergence of an immanent promiscuity and the perpetual interconnection of all information and communication networks. No more hysteria, or projective paranoia as such, but a state of terror which is characteristic of the schizophrenia of the schizophrenic, an over-proximity of all things, a foul proximity of all things which beleaguer and penetrate him, meeting with no resistance, no halo, no aura, not even the aura of his body protects him.

The problem then as Spivak laconically states is one of "epistemic violence" that has become the legitimate mode of making amends for the dalit's reflective vacuity and its concomitant of the lack of representational freedom.

The egalitarian principle proposed by Guru aims at weeding out exclusionary practices followed across social sciences in our country. It would question the prerogative of TTB to do theory on the conventional grounds that they are intrinsically entitled to it. The present scenario is one in which even the intellectual universe of the dalit/advasi is monopolized by TTB in a way that caricatures the dalit/bahujans as epistemologically dumb. Guru adds that most dalits lack the proclivity to do theory because of certain socio-historical reasons which have proved inordinately advantageous to TTB in our country. The foremost cause is that dalits are pushed into manual spheres like scavenging that

hinder the development of theoretical potential in the social sciences. Guru argues that in spite of having profound reflective and critical faculties dalits have not been able to nurture them because of their constant struggle for survival which impairs their freedom to make vigorous forays into social sciences.

TTB have consolidated their theoretical brahminism as a result of tacit valorizations of their intrinsic right and ability to do theory right from the time of classical thinkers like Manu himself. Foreign scholars who have only been too eager to jump on the bandwagon of the Manu-clan made further depredations on the dalit's zeal to venture into theory. Guru goes on to say that TTB have a cumulative advantage over the dalits in many respects. They have had the privilege of being entitled to British education which helped them internalize a set of codes and protocols of language which the dalits are at large alien to. Further, they have greater prospects waiting for them in the field of research because of the foreign universities they can seek admission in and the number of fellowships they can avail themselves of. On the other hand, dalits have neither any proper training in the codes and conventions that govern language use nor any orientation in theory without which they can never gain entrance into institutions like Oxford or Cambridge.

According to Guru, a major hindrance confronting the dalits is the moral stamina required for serious theoretical endeavours. Doing theory requires some kind of intellectual rigour and prioritization of the spiritual over temporal gains. But most dalits sidetrack their interest in practising theory in favour of the glamour of the temporal growth they can otherwise achieve. Guru opines that Dalits make amends for their inability to do theory by writing poetry that depict their historic oppression at the hands of the upper classes. But the downside of poetry, he argues, is that, being more metaphorical in nature, it lacks conceptual clarity and dialectical power which theory possesses. It is sceptical whether Guru is fully conscious of the reactionary force of Dalit poetry to activate a discourse around material reality. He seems to conclude blatantly that theory is the aphrodisiac

that can stimulate the dalit scholar into intellectuality without considering the effectiveness of poetry over abstract theory in communicating a long history of dispossessions and arbitrary alienations. If theory becomes the preferred vehicle for Guru to speak of subaltern alterity, then it must be remembered that theorization as such has a very low appeal to the dalit section, and if the principle of egalitarianism and liberal utopia in social sciences should not prove self-contradictory, the deconstruction of a totalitarian discourse should follow the trajectory of popular forms of dissemination rather than a vain exercise in theoretical obscurity. Theorization should be subsequent or at least simultaneous with consciousness-formation. Whereas both Guru and Sarukkai talk vehemently about the concreteness of 'lived experience', they keep a stiff upper lip when it comes to the consciousness of it. Lived experience as such is no guarantee of emancipation, and unless it is coupled with a transversal line of consciousness drawn from the periphery of experience to the centre of theoretical transgression, it can do little to palliate the squalor of the dalit scholar who is exsibilated out of seminar halls.

Dalits themselves justify their reticence in the field of theory by arguing that their lived experience is more powerful than any theoretical formulation to give them due representation. In addition to this, some dalits contend that doing theory can make them intellectually conceited and socially alienated in a fashion similar to TTB while empiricism helps them stay rooted to their reality. But Guru argues that it is imperative for the dalits to move beyond empiricism into the realm of theory in order to subvert the notion that dalits are theoretically inferior to TTB. Dalits should strive to become the subject of their own thinking rather than being objectified by messianic non-dalits in their condescending thought. It is indispensable that the dalits start representing themselves and do away with the element of charity that is invidiously implied in the non-dalit's rallying cry to offer epistemological empowerment.

#### CONCLUSION

Guru concludes that only an intervention at the theoretical level can restore voice and

respectability to the devalued dalits who have a long history of being intellectually humiliated by TTB. The epistemological enthusiasm of the non-dalit loses its edge as soon as the question of interiority of experience arises. For a non-dalit who remains outside the purview of dalit experience, constructing a dalit epistemology will not only be experientially non-representative but will also be ideologically ludicrous. It is also not possible to deploy the Marxist notions of class, proletariat or labour in relation to the dalit situation as it has evolved in an altogether different context. Alternative categories are required to represent the dalit experience of class oppression. The solution that Guru proposes to the 'dalit condition' is that they earn more mobility and freedom to move out of their confining past into a future driven by intellectual triumphalism and the conquest of new epistemological territories. Though it is possible to laud Guru for the militancy of his rhetoric deployed in the act of reinstating egalitarianism in social sciences, Guru himself fails to take stock of the lack of empirical foundation of his study. Rather than having exceedingly romantic conceptions about dalits doing theory at large in the hallowed portals of Oxford and Cambridge, he should have talked about the accessibility of theory to the dalit community in general. Will a few dalits doing theory be potent enough to dismantle the strictures that bulwark the prerogative of TTB as regards theory? Will the proliferation of dalits in hallowed academic circles mean a displacement of TTB's totalitarian ideology? If so, won't it be a reiteration of the same vice that egalitarianism set out to surmount? Won't the non-dalit academic then become a new Other in relation to the theoretically-upgraded dalit? These are questions that need to be addressed before raising the war cry for a radical redistribution of intellectual capital in social sciences.

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