ICPR-TISS National Conference

Caste in India: Presence and Erasure

January 20-21, 2014

Organised by
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL THEORY
School of Development Studies
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Venue
New Conference Hall
TISS, Main Campus
This Conference seeks to address the integration and empowerment of individuals and communities in India by addressing the question of caste. The colonial and post-colonial project of the idea of India had had a constant engagement with the question of caste as one of the foundational parameters of Indian society. Too often the narratives on caste have addressed the social, political, economic, and even the ideological underpinnings of caste. However the fundamental ontologies of these narratives often lie subsumed in the entire discourse. This prevents a deeper theoretical comprehension of the role that caste plays in the process of communal integration in India. This Conference shall therefore deliberate on the understandings of what kinds of fundamental things are there in the world in the narratives of progress and development, revolutionary and evolutionary transformation, and social justice vis-a-vis the question of caste. Considerable discussion shall also be devoted to the ontological premises of the narratives of change and practice in the domains of science, revolution, religion, and postcoloniality. It is hoped that the Conference proceedings shall contribute in a modest way to the socio-political framing of policy with special reference to communal integration in India.

There is no gainsaying that one of the ‘defining’ narratives of Indian society has been that of caste. Submerged in the political, bureaucratic and nationalist discourse of Nehruvian ‘socialism’ for the decades immediately following independence caste has re-emerged in the national imagination as a crucial dynamic largely through the labours of Dalit intellectuals, politicians and activists. This has included both an historical exegesis in the contours, manifestations and shapes of caste in the past of India and its mobilization in the contemporary rough and tumble of electoral politics and intellectual debate. This process has long left national shores and has become an important
ingredient in area studies, comparative politics, cultural studies – nay, the grasping of the very idea of India.

A fulsome body of work already exists in the examination of caste either as the basic existential truth of Hinduism in the annals of classicists and orientalists or as the cultural glue which inheres in all Indians irrespective of their religious persuasions in the intellectual-political discourse of the cultural nationalists. Drawing a historical continuity from pre-colonial to post-colonial times is evident in these approaches. Somewhat aligned to this literature is the work of anthropologists and sociologists - of colonial, national and ‘scientific’ mind – who have laboured hard to show the nosological and nomological operations, internal structural complexities, regional and linguistic nuances, and interfaces with the post-independent nationalist development project of the caste question.

The interface of caste with development has been furthered substantially by the anthropocentric work in the context of contemporary governance. There is already a huge pile on the exertions of the Indian government on taking forward the welfare state to the margins of caste and tribe at the central and state levels – legislations, policy documents, approach papers, action plans, evaluation reports. Intricately intertwined with this corpus is the disparate work of politicians, activists, party workers and organic intellectuals who have sought to craft an agency out of Dalit lived reality in the domain of mobilization, struggle, rebellion and revolution. Scattered throughout in pamphlets, party manifestos, media artefacts and monographs this body of work challenges the view of caste as a remnant of ‘tradition’ or as a colonial ‘invention’.

This plethora of literature and the multiplicity of perspectives - often mixed up, chaotic and tortured – is indeed a welcome augury in the unfolding of India in the world stage. However there is either only an uncertain and hesitant recognition of the master narratives at work or almost an aversion to the owing up and discussion of the deepest ontological premises at work in these narratives. Our ontological commitments to material substances, persons and events – understandings of what sorts of kinds or things there are in the world – are either lost in the cacophony of politicized socio-historical discourse or in policy or political confabulations. The same difficulty dogs the challenges thrown to the master narratives by ‘postcolonial reason’.
This is a lacuna in discursive analysis – its rigour is seriously compromised when the philosophical presuppositions are not examined threadbare. This is especially so because the question of caste is intimately tied up with identity which strikes at the very core of the vital, of the human. Ignoring to examine the ontology of caste would then be tantamount to violence on being and becoming. What is at stake here therefore is the very ontology of the ontology of caste – the often unsaid, assumed, hidden episteme of the narratives, counter-narratives and non-narratives. Excavating therefore the ‘vague’ discourses on the ontological commitments of these narratives and non-narratives constitute one of the chief objectives of the Conference. Much of the duplication, mistiness and tortured nature of caste governance arise from the utter lack of understanding of the ontological commitments of the enormous body of work on caste.

The Conference proposes therefore to begin by a discussion on the ontology of the three narratives on the problematique of caste, namely that of progress, dialectics and social justice. The dawn of modernity in India is marked by the engagement with the Enlightenment – progress and development becomes the basic categories within which the metaphysics of the idea of India is enveloped. What are the ontological premises of the discourse of Enlightenment and progress when it is recognizing, conceptualizing and taking in caste in its tight and beguiling embrace? How do we see this logic unfold in travelogues and missionary visualizations, orientalist discourse, anglicizing tendencies, German romanticism, colonial administration?

The central modernist challenge to the narrative of liberal and Christian progress is the dialectical understanding of caste. What are the ontological presuppositions when the asiatic is traced on the shores of class struggle in the quest for a more forceful argument for the modern in Europe, the nature of Indian society is being debated at the Comintern in Royist-Leninist terms, when the fabrication of the leftist project is taking place in post-independent bourgeois India, when the CPI(M) is at its wits end with the caste question today?

The avant-garde reply to this classical Marxist narrative has been the oeuvre on social justice. From the cloisters of Oxbridge to the corridors of Indian judiciary there has outpoured a voluminous and complex debate on justice which would secure for citizens of a post-Soviet world the basic commitments of democracy and development. What then have been the metaphysical foundations of the purveyors of analytical marxists, of
Ambedkar and his ilk, of those who seek to draw Rawlsian premises on the soil of Indian inequity? In their engagement with caste what is the understanding of the fundamental things that exist of the socio-theological reformers and leaders of the peasantry?

A sustained deliberation on these issues would inevitably lead us to a detailed consideration of the logic of praxis which these issues have generated. The narrative on progress has invariably led to the question of development. Science and technology have been the central handmaidens of the development project in the post-colonial world and India. The logic of science in the developmentalist project has been complicit in the objectification and rationalization of caste. How has this been achieved? What have been the ontological commitments in the process of scientific and technological objectification of caste in colonial and pre-colonial India? What are the logical rules, fundamental categories, axiomatic truths which the scientific and technological narrative deploys to engage with caste?

This mainstream has been challenged by the transcendental project, often expressed in revolutionary or religio-cultural terms. The revolutionary project in India seeks to transcend caste through class struggle and religious transcendentalism seeks to address caste through cultural nationalism and the ahimsa-moksha complex. What are the ontological presuppositions of the extreme revolutionary transcendence (e.g. Maoism) or of Hindutva and Srisri Ravishankar? In their engagement with caste what is it for things of fundamental kinds to be the kinds they are? How do these responses to caste reveal what these narratives understand about what the real nature of things, of what there really is in the world?

However the most radical and formidable challenge to the scientific and transcendental narratives on caste has been the logic of difference. Post-structuralism has questioned the very fundamental process of categorization in Western and modern thought leading it to question in no uncertain terms the issue of identity itself. The basic and fundamental project of metaphysics and epistemology, central to the modernist understanding of itself, has been displaced by the logics of a schizoid life. Drawing from this deep well of radical reformulation a ‘subaltern’ and ‘postcolonial’ articulation has taken place on India and, naturally, on caste. How does then one approach caste when one is seeking to find out if the subaltern can speak? How does one ‘know’ caste in the mela of difference? What to make of caste in a nation and its fragments or through the
process of provincializing Europe? Do the categories of the occident go away in the subaltern and the postcolonial? Whatever happens to caste when universality, generality, identity evaporate?

Therefore the chief issues to be addressed by the Conference are:-

• How has the problematique of caste been framed through the narratives of the Enlightenment and progress, the dialectic of capital, and liberal social justice?
• What have been the main ontological premises of these narratives?
• What have been the ontological logics of the notable praxiological responses to the meta-narratives?
• Whilst engaging with the caste question what do science and technology, bureaucracies of extremism and transcendence, and radical democracy of postcolonialism say about what kinds of things there are in the world?

It is hoped that a thoroughgoing deliberation on the above issues would help to foreground the fundamental aspects of caste and contribute to better policy-making and governance in India. In the event therefore the Conference shall try to be an intensive discussion over two days with the serious scholars of caste. An attempt shall also be made to come out with an anthology after revision of selected papers.