
Me Marx, You Foucault... continued

Post-modernists criticise modernists (Marxist, liberals alike) for their belief in objective knowledge. This means that phenomena can be correctly observed and analysed by an individual mind outside the system.

Postmodernism argues that what we call knowledge is only a story, which uses words and pictures specific to a particular culture, or a dominant section of that culture.

Thus we see through tinted glasses - tainted by our language, culture, meaning system etc.

This view has been used to explain many contemporary issues like colonialism, feminism and caste. This is particularly true where earlier simple class-based analysis proved inadequate to motivate some of the new social movements like the dalit struggles, tribal movements against the onslaught of 'modern' development, anti-consumer movements and the women's movement.

In her article, **Nalini Rajan** argues that the "extreme anti-modernists" insist on the assertion of autonomous, fragmented group identities, rather than see it within the larger framework. That's why we have not been able to present a united front against rising communal forces.

In the first part of this article, Nalini Rajan outlines the theoretical context of what she calls the third category in the tradition versus modernity debate.

She analyses this category's view of caste, by grouping them into "moderate anti-modernists" and "extreme anti-modernists", both of whom play into the hands of the right.

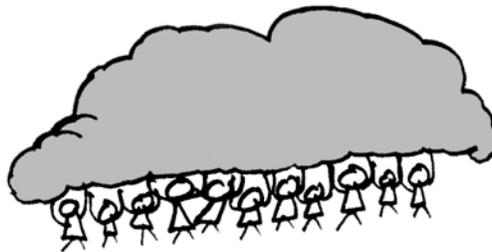
With great timing, **T Kannan** reviews a collection of articles on Dalit

Identity edited by Ghanshyam Shah. The volume provides a wide range of reading on the politics of dalit identity for those who wish to go deeper into some of the issues raised by Nalini Rajan, and for those who wish to probe the further relevance of these issues of identity politics.

Apart from the range of theoretical perspectives that the editor has managed to collect, Kannan adds, **'The book assumes significance for its amazing range of empirical data on the state of Dalit politics in India.'**



Left-liberalism and Caste Politics, by *Nalini Rajan*. Economic & Political Weekly, Vol 38, No.24, June 14 - 20, 2003.
<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2003&leaf=06&filename=5917&filetype=html> [C.ELDOC6007176]
Differing Boundaries by *T. Kannan*. Deccan Herald.
[C.ELDOC6007069]



Left-liberalism and Caste Politics

Nalini Rajan

In the ongoing debate on tradition versus modernity, there is a new 'third'. At the time of Indian independence, group categories like caste were regarded as anti-modernist when considering the relationship between the state and the citizen. Today, for post-modern theorists, the enemy is secular, universalising modernity rather than community-centred tradition. Their critique often leads to bringing back the pre-modern.

The Extreme Anti-Modernist

The extreme critique of modernity positions itself as the dalit-bahujan (lower caste) opposition to radical secular politics. From this perspective, since upper caste intellectuals occupy most positions in public institutions like universities, any inquiry into issues concerning the lower castes is suspect. (*Post-modernists call it anthropologism, which is that a subject who stands outside the 'object' cannot 'know' authentically, because the outside subject is biased to his own culture, language, experience - Ed*). Extreme anti-modernists would argue that authentic knowledge may only be produced by the experiencing subject when she is allowed to speak for herself and to record her own history.

In a sense, by insisting that only dalits can represent dalits, extreme anti-modernists tend to freeze (hypostatise) the dalit identity within a closed, airtight box.

In fact, the actual writings of dalit-bahujan leaders like Bhimrao Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, and E V Ramaswamy ('Periyar') show that dalits themselves need not take such an anti-modernist or narcissistic view. For instance, for firmly positioning himself on the side of scientific rationality and opposing all manner of superstition and religious dogma, Periyar may be dubbed a 'modernist'.

Be that as it may, for the extreme anti-modernist, there is no significant difference between the caste-blind nationalist and the class-conscious Marxist, or even the upper caste conscious Hindutva ideologue. The anti-modernists concede that 'brahminical' secular-modernists and left intellectuals have shifted from a state of plain embarrassment ('the unspeakability of caste') to accommodation and flexibility with regard to caste-based reservation and caste group politics. Left-liberals today accept the fact that, along with the citizen and the state, a third category of community should be taken into consideration in the discourse on rights. However, the anti-modernists perceive that such an attitudinal change signifies the typical wily pragmatism of the upper castes.



Extreme anti-modernists are also likely to uphold 'positional' ethics – that is, only a dalit can represent other dalits. When any upper caste intellectual tries to do so, his views would be dismissed as brahminic or engaged. Thus cultural boundaries become ethical boundaries. By making a case for extreme group relativism, the extreme anti-modernist can then defend anything that happens or is articulated within dalit groups without confronting the issue of accountability. The phenomenon of embodied experience as a dalit provides the licence for doing anything.

(The above arguments mainly address the views in Aditya Nigam's 'Secularism, Modernity, Nation – Epistemology of the Dalit Critique', Economic and Political Weekly, November 25, 2000 - Ed)

The moderate anti-modernist

Debates among dalits themselves, reveal that there is a concerted move among many towards rigorous and rational debate, and away from just the kind of ideological polemic without responsibility that the extreme anti-modernist endorses.

Moderate anti-modernists, like the extreme anti-modernists, lump together the state representatives, right-wing libertarians, left-liberals, orthodox Marxists, and even Hindutva ideologues. The moderate anti-modernists see a grand conspiracy on the part of supporting the modern nation-state, against Dalit attempts to universalise the dalit issue, particularly at the Durban Conference on Race, 2001.

Left-liberals are likely to be sympathetic to the idea of internationalising the dalit issue. However, since they are considered as secular and rational modernists, their motives will be suspected by both extreme anti-modernists and moderate anti-modernists. While the extreme anti-modernists view left-liberals as being unworthy of consideration, the moderate anti-modernists hold a more optimistic view regarding the latter's redemption.



The moderate anti-modernists say that in order to understand why dalits wish to see caste as being analogous to race, it is important that left-liberals do not employ 'brahminical' or academic categories, but consider the question from the perspective of 'lila' or play. Rationalism itself must be bent to accommodate the irrational. Apparently, one now needs "***a theory of rationalism that can account for the magical***". Creative storytelling is the order of the day.

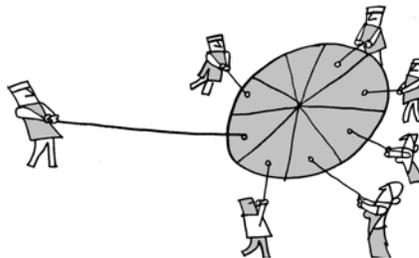
A light-hearted, liberating sense of play is now pitted against the left-

liberal's dreary, staid manner of finding solutions to problems, with or without the help of the State. Thus is the dalit discourse pitted against Mandalism. The former sees politics as witchcraft, symbol, rage; the latter boringly and painstakingly “works within the paradigms of Indian democracy, the Constitution, Socialism, the Nation State, affirmative action and electoralism”. The possibility that the dalit discourse can – and indeed must – coexist with so-called Mandalism, as posited by left-liberals, is not even considered. Having said this, moderate anti-modernists and left-liberals are capable of joining hands for a common cause.

(The above arguments mainly address the view expressed in Shiv Visvanathan's 'The Race for Caste – Prolegomena to the Durban Conference', Economic and Political Weekly, July 7, 2001 and 'Durban and Dalit Discourse', Economic and Political Weekly, August 18, 2001)

Splitting the left, radical and subaltern

We have reached a situation in this country where both the state and civil society are ravaged by communal forces – the most egregious illustration of which is Gujarat in 2002-03. Instead of devising ways and means of confronting this scourge by presenting a united front, radical, subaltern, left and liberal forces are engaged in bitter ideological battles among themselves. While there is some possibility of a dialogue between left-liberals and moderate anti-modernists, there is none with extreme anti-modernists, at least as long as the latter cling doggedly to the notion of group-centred embodied experience, to the exclusion of everything else.



For the extreme anti-modernists, the overriding need of the day is not a broad secular front, but the assertion of autonomous, fragmented identities like the dalit's, without contextualising them in a larger socio-economic framework. No doubt these identities are important for reasons of self-respect and self-worth. But, it is also true that where there have been significant lower caste movements – where Hindus as a community have been made conscious of definite divisions among themselves – communalism has also taken a back seat.

When the lower castes together struggle for their rights against the upper castes, there is little possibility of looking for "otherness" in other lower caste groups (which mainly serves to make a scapegoat of the other groups). It is precisely in those states like Gujarat, where there have been no strong dalit-bahujan leaders, that the lower castes themselves are divided, even stratified into upper caste and lower caste dalits! Against this backdrop, it is fairly easy to mobilise some dalit and shudra-dominated other backward castes (OBCs) against minority communities like Muslims and Christians.

The point that I am trying to make here is that caste – or more specifically the dalit issue – is not isolated from broader issues concerning the community or the nation. In other words, the emergence of the third category of group-centred embodied experience, in order to bypass the tradition-modernity or communalism-secularism dyad, may turn out to be without much substance.

The extreme anti-modernists are convinced that for dalits, secularism is not an overriding consideration – which is why Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mayawati is apparently perfectly justified in aligning with an upper caste, communal party like the Bharatiya Janata Party. But the issue may be more complex than that. When the OBC-dominated



Dravida parties in Tamil Nadu vie with each other to forge alliances with the Hindutva forces, we perceive this phenomenon as the politics of expediency. When Mayawati's Bahujan Samajwadi Party does so in UP, why should it be any less opportunistic than the Tamil Nadu case? These issues of accountability must be pondered over – but this would imply some commitment to truth claims and normative claims.

Anti-modernity – playing into the hands of the Right

When Indian anti-modernists posit that there is no difference between right-wing individualist libertarians and left-liberals, we may recall an analogous situation during the 2002 French presidential elections. The cynical claim being made just before the elections began was 'Jospin, c'est Chirac' – which is why most radical intellectuals did not even bother to go out and vote for the socialists. Why should anyone, indeed, if Jospin is Chirac? The unintended consequence of this cynicism on the part of the radical and left forces was the emergence of the fascist and crass racist, Jean-Marie le Pen, and the elimination of the socialist, Lionel Jospin, in the first round of the presidential elections. Thus during the second electoral round, we witnessed the singular phenomenon of French radicals and leftists shedding their apathy and desperately voting for an eminently right-wing politician like Jacques Chirac, in order to eliminate the fascist forces.

In India, we were faced with a similar situation before the Gujarat state elections. ***If we cynically believe that the left front is the Congress, and the Congress is the BJP, why should we be surprised when Narendra Modi gets a massive electoral mandate?***

But the alternative is only slightly better. In the face of fragmented left and radical forces, are we ready to accept a corrupt, effete political party like the Congress as a viable alternative to the agents of communal violence?

Faced with such sorry options, is it not time that left and liberal forces put aside their differences and built a common, unified front to confront



the scourge of communal forces?