

Workshop on Emerging Dalit Studies: Problems, Potentials and Challenges in Higher Education

An Overview

A two-day workshop on 'Emerging Dalit Studies: Problems, Potentials and Challenges in Higher Education' was organised at Patna, Bihar on 30-31 October, 2004. The workshop was participated by eminent intellectuals and scholars from Delhi, senior civil servants, vice-chancellors and teachers of various universities in Bihar, researchers, social activists and development practitioners. The discussions in the workshop centred around two central questions— i) what should be the focus of Dalit Studies; and ii) what should be the reference point of such studies. These were the key questions around which most of the discussions took place.

Two major trends of arguments emerged in the course of discussions about the prospects and possibilities of integrating Dalit Studies in the curricula of higher education. The discussants supporting and vying for the establishment of Dalit Studies as an independent mode of knowledge, an autonomous discipline within the larger framework of social science, argued that the very resistance to establishment of Dalit Studies is a kind of politics from above within the field of social science. This argument found reflection in the papers presented at the workshop, particularly while critiquing the existing boundaries and rules of disciplines like History, Sociology and Literature.

It was argued that in the discipline of sociology, there had been always a tendency to naturalise critical issues like caste system because of Western and Brahmanic dominance of knowledge. The same was the case with history. The way historiography has developed in India, it is replete with mere historicism. One finds total absence of critical issues like caste in the Indian historiography. Caste seemed to be a gift to the discipline of sociology. Besides, one finds subaltern knowledge (e.g. the knowledge about different views on Indian nationhood) in the field of history being subjugated and marginalised under dominant discourses. In the field of literature also the western classics have constituted the dominant knowledge, and the Indian writings have always remained in the margins of English literature in India.

On the other hand, strong arguments supporting the establishment of Dalit Studies as a new perspective also emerged during the workshop. From this point of view, Dalit Studies should not be treated as a mere body of knowledge, rather there is a need to construct a new perspective that cuts across all disciplines in the Social

Sciences and Humanities to comprehend the Indian reality. As a separate discipline, Dalit Studies poses imminent danger of ghettoisation and appropriation. The demise of Gandhian Studies and Women Studies initiated in the field of Social Science were put forward as burning examples in this regard. It was argued that the post-colonial condition characterised by Western dominance of knowledge leaves almost no space to establish Dalit Studies as a separate discipline.

Social Science has a different historical trajectory in the Third World countries. When the West was developing its cities, economy, democracy, liberalism and bourgeois freedom, the Third World was losing everything. Enlightenment for one half of the globe was imprisonment for the other half. In this context we can neither condemn the West nor keep our innocence intact. This criticality of the post-colonial condition offers possibilities for developing a new perspective, a new lens through which we can look at different disciplines within the Social Science field rather than the establishment of Dalit Studies as a separate discipline. Besides, to establish as a separate discipline within the wider framework one needs to identify, define and develop the very structure of knowledge. What is the Dalit structure of knowledge? Are we in a position to answer this question? Since the very Dalit point of view is coming under different contestations, it will be premature, it was argued, to imagine the establishment of Dalit Studies as a separate discipline.

The Question of Methodology

The question of methodology, i.e. how one goes about understanding the Dalit structure of knowledge, also dominated the discussions throughout the workshop. A strong opinion in this regard was the need for recovering of history and culture of Dalits by undoing the hegemony of the dominant knowledge system; preparing enough ground for understanding the history of suffering of marginalised groups; and critiquing the dominant system from this viewpoint. One of the efforts in this regard could be looking critically at the anti-colonial movement as a kind of instrument to appropriate the movements from below. This rereading of the texts needs to capture the inter-subjectivity of the concrete. In terms of praxis, Dalit Studies needs to focus on teaching the students by promoting critical thinking and self-reliance (Apna Deepak Khud Bano/Satya Ki Talash Karo) as an alternative to the destructive 'guru tradition' which leaders such as Ambedkar and Phule had criticised so thoroughly.

Another point of view in this regard was creating a universal that will subsume all the knowledge systems from below. According to this view, if the objective of the proposed Dalit Studies is to inscribe the multiple and at

times even contesting concerns of the worst victims of caste, there is a need to go about it differently than the current practice. Updating colonial ethnography would only serve to reinforce existing untouchability and ghettoisation. One needs to put together anew elements of what potentially could constitute an emancipatory epistemology, an ethnography that is simultaneously an empowerment. However, there is a danger in pitting this reconstructed knowledge against culture and aesthetics, leading to sharp differentiation between questions of identity and interests. If caste has crept into history it can also go from it. There is a need to correct this pitfall which could be teased out from the emancipatory struggles of the Dalit castes themselves and the ideological articulation of its leadership in recent history.

Besides these two major viewpoints, there were also other viewpoints based on the immediate material upliftment of the marginal communities since, in their everyday life, poverty looms large beyond which the marginal communities fail to see. They become a commodity in terms of their labour power in circulation in a capitalist system. Therefore, any effort vying for their effective participation in the reconstruction of their knowledge system needs to liberate them first from the clasps of poverty. Under the capitalistic system they have undergone painful separation from their means of production. They have lost their lands and crafts, the pivot of their life. Another variant of this viewpoint calls for inspiring the marginal communities to develop the desire to accumulate and develop entrepreneurship which will increase the social mobility of these communities to rise up the ladder of social hierarchy.

The Linkage of Dalit Studies with Employment Generation

There was a major concern expressed in the workshop with regard to linking Dalit Studies to employment generation. Most of the questions asked in this regard were:

- Who is going to study Dalit Studies in the globalization era where there is a rat race for management and IT-oriented courses?
- How will Dalit Studies ensure employment generation for the future youth?
- Why Dalit Studies in higher education, why not at the primary level?
- Won't Dalit Studies face the same fate as Gandhian Studies?

The arguments against weak linkages between the proposed Dalit Studies and the demand of modern education in the age of competition is that the course is not made exclusively for Dalit students, but is to be universally integrated within all the disciplines of Social Sciences to encourage critical thinking by decolonisation of the mind. It is not to be a mere academic exercise but is to be directly linked to the issues of society, culture and politics. Dalit Studies alone cannot take the responsibility of improving material condition of the Dalits. The question of employment generation is one that Social Science itself faces in the present era of globalisation. There are various efforts being undertaken in the government and non-governmental sectors to uplift the material conditions of the Dalits. However, Dalit upliftment or Dalit empowerment cannot be a linear and static process since the question is also related to the psyche of the mainstream society. Another viewpoint along the same lines was that there was politics behind resisting Dalit Studies by dangling the dangers of all these impossibilities. The post-Independent Indian government initially introduced the concept of vocational studies at the secondary school level for all the marginal communities to hone their technical expertise and in the process generate employment for them. This very project of Brahmanic division of labour in knowledge production left no space for marginal communities to learn their history, art and culture.

Suggestions for Experiments in Curriculum Building in Higher Education

There were serious exchange of views and comments on experiments done towards establishing a Dalit Studies or Dalit perspective in various disciplines of social sciences. One prominent view in this regard was that since the marginal people are the frontier people, the making of frontier curriculum needs to be a carefully balanced process building theoretical and practical skills. This would include a combination of fieldwork, lectures, discussions, seminars, presentations and library work; a regular interaction with the larger social context, which includes the community and institutions of civil society; a system for critical reflections in place of assessment and evaluations; and a network of libraries. It was opined that while building up curriculum for Dalit Studies there was a need to emphasise upon the development of organic link between academics, intellectuals, student communities, organizations working at the grassroots level, and communities.

The major suggestions that came up during the discussion on development of curriculum were:

- Dalit Studies should be introduced as an innovative project through a step-wise process;
- Dalit Studies should be introduced in the Open University curriculum since IGNOU introduces new courses every year.

- Dalit Studies should focus not simply on the Scheduled Castes but on the entire system of exploitation and on providing an alternative to this.
- There is a need for serious thinking in understanding the Dalit structure of knowledge. One way to do this will be keeping different vantage points to see the reality in totality.
- The debate between establishment of Dalit Studies as a separate discipline and as a new perspective needs critical evaluation in the perspective of lessons learnt from Black Studies, Women's Studies and Gandhian Studies.
- The establishment of a new discipline needs to address not only inspiring of critical thinking and developing scientific temperament but also its linkage with employment generation in order to be sustainable in the future.

The participants in the workshop also felt that there was a greater need for exchange of ideas and views, discussions and debates among academicians, bureaucrats, planners, non-governmental organisations working at grassroots levels, students and communities to further concretise the Dalit perspective of Social Sciences.