Theory as Elite: The Phenomenological Dilemma of Dalit Critique

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Abstract

In recent debates on the theoretical framework of social sciences, Indian political scientist Gopal Guru mounted a critique that Indian social science is not representative and egalitarian. In the same breath, Gopal Guru sought to rationalise this lacuna. Guru claimed that the works of Dalit scholars and thinkers are more performance-oriented and less theoretical. This paper would raise several issues with reference to Gopal Guru's claims: Does theory belong to an elite category? Does the lack of representation of Dalit scholarship present a theoretical conundrum for Indian social sciences? Is Gopal Guru falling into the trap of hierarchical complementarity between theory and performance/praxis? And, is there an intractable dilemma among the Dalit scholars between the politics of representation and the politics of ideas? This paper demonstrates that Guru's insistence on the moral, existential and social necessity of the Dalit theory is valid. But he is wrong in what he denies.

Keywords: India, Gopal Guru, Dalits, theory, philosophy, social sciences

Introduction

Gopal Guru is a respected voice in the Indian social sciences arena and a powerful scholarly proponent of Dalit social and political theory. In an interesting article published in *The Economic and Political Weekly,* "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?" Guru (2002) develops an argument that social science research in India harbours an entrenched notion of cultural hierarchy. (This article analyses the role of theory in the professional and social life of the marginalized groups in Indian social science establishment; it has been included in the book *The Cracked Mirror*, see Guru / Sarukkai 2012). He further proceeds to state that this cultural hierarchy manifests in the dichotomisation of the social sciences into empirical and theoretical research silos. This divide is likened to the pernicious divide between the empirical shudras and the theoretical brahmins (Guru 2002: 8). Guru gives a long list of reasons for the aforementioned pernicious divide. The arguments advanced by Guru interweave social, political, economic and cultural aspects, which have institutionalised the dep-

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rivation of the Dalits and other marginalised communities. Guru argues that in order to obviate the aforementioned pernicious division, there is a need to create an egalitarian conception of Indian social sciences. This is the central theme of Guru's article. Thus far, no one would disagree with the formal or substantive aspects of Guru's argument.

Guru's argument enunciates the problems in the domain of Indian social sciences from normative, social and moral perspectives. But Guru attempts to theorise the dichotomy between formal/abstract theory, as the twice-born brahmin (*dvija*), and the empirical as the outcaste (*avarna*). In this context, the current social science paradigm is the *agrahara*[1] in which theory continues to lord over the empirical. Guru thus problematises the whole edifice of the epistemic structure on which Indian social science is founded (ibid.: 9).

While Guru's arguments trace the trajectory of the socio-economic and cultural emaciation of the deprived classes and the attendant moral turpitude of the dominant classes, it is not limited to an analysis of the stultifying and self-abnegating effects of the caste system. Rather, it is a demand for the re-orientation and re-negotiation of the norms of intellectual discourse in the realm of Indian social sciences. But Guru's project for an egalitarian social science discipline in India is not based on the resurrection of the empirical alone, which is considered merely functional and consequential by those whom Guru calls the gatekeepers of the citadel of the Indian social sciences (Guru 2002: 10–11).

Guru's objective is to revisit the role of theory, which is used as a tool of discrimination in the domain of Indian social sciences. Guru claims that by privileging the theoretical, the experiential is elided. A deliberate chasm between the theoretical and the experiential is created in a manner of verisimilitude. The labyrinthine corridors of academia reverberate with the jargon of theory, which is the lingua franca of authenticity. Hence, there is an absence of egalitarian discursive theoretical framework in the Indian social sciences. Guru suggests a more democratic and egalitarian environment conducive to the theorisation of the experience of the marginalised, in the voice of the marginalised. Guru feels that there is a need to construct an ontology of the marginalised in counterpoint to the traditional ontology of the Indian social science disciplines.[2]

This exploration in search of a Dalit ontology is viewed as authentic and legitimate by Guru's interlocutor Sundar Sarukkai. Sarukkai adopts a phenomenological approach in order to analyse the ontological expedition of Guru (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 46–70). For both Guru and Sarukkai, authenticity and legitimacy emanate from the phenomenological experience, that is, the first person experience. Guru and Sarukkai have the onerous task of deconstructing the

1   An *agrahara* is a traditional brahmin quarter with rows of houses often next to a temple.
2   This is a far cry from the politics of rage and identity politics in 1970s Karnataka that D. R. Nagaraj, Devanuru Mahadeva and Siddalingaiah exemplified. But Guru's critique of social science theory is also nuanced in its intent since it deepens and broadens the framework while standing on the shoulders of decades of struggle by Dalit intellectuals throughout India.

essentialist metaphysics of the traditional social science research approaches in India and proposing a new mode of doing social and political theory, more so in the case of Guru.

Guru's critique of theory, which is simultaneously a theoretical critique, is the purported voice of authenticity, whereas Sarukkai's attempt is an epistemological and methodological validation of the former. Yet there is an inherent tension between Guru's and Sarukkai's respective theoretical positions. The first point of tension could be analyzed in two parts:

1) Guru's call for an egalitarian social science theory is connected to moral stamina, social necessity and the inner necessity for the Dalit thinkers to engage with theory. Could such an enterprise be termed a phenomenological understanding of the Dalit/marginalised self? How does the Dalit self theorise its experience?

2) How is Guru's politics of presence compatible with his politics of ideas? How does a politics of rage transform into a politics of affirmation, which Guru is attempting to do with a critique of inegalitarian social science theory?

The second point of tension is: Can Sarukkai's phenomenological exegesis authentically explain Guru's critique of social science theory in which the Dalit/marginalised self is alienated? How are intersubjectivity and reciprocity guaranteed?

Guru's critique of traditional knowledge systems and his critique of the theoretical framework adopted by the Indian social science establishment are connected. The privileging of theory, in terms of *episteme* (knowledge), *doxa* (opinion), *techne* (technical knowledge), mode of communication and newer forms of knowledge, denies access to Dalits (Parry 2014). On the other hand, the functional empirical approach is also uncritical of the overt emphasis on modeling social sciences on the methods of the natural and technical sciences (Horkheimer 1972: 188–192). The predominant academic discourse in the Indian science domain is Marxist and liberal in interpretation. Marxism wants to create a classless society. Liberalism emphasises a rights-based democracy. Therefore, both Marxism and liberalism should be able to address the problems in the Indian social science framework. However, many Dalit thinkers contend that economic equality and individual equality guaranteed by law would not be able to deliver social justice. This is where a phenomenological approach to theorisation of the Dalit experience comes in.

In this article, I would argue that the theoretical fore-understanding, to borrow Heidegger's terminology, of Guru's critique betrays a contradiction. On the one hand, Guru wants to make theory morally situated, self-actualising and socially empowering, especially with respect to the lived experience of the

Dalits. This is the phenomenological and existential aspect of Guru's critique of social science theory, in which the Dalit experience is outsourced to non-Dalit scholars, as participant observers (Guru 2002: 26). Guru's assertion is that the Dalit voice should be heard on its own terms, contexts and experiences and should not be abridged. On the other hand, is there a tacit acceptance of a Habermasian ideal speech situation? Otherwise, in an asymmetrical theoretical framework, as Guru himself argues tirelessly, a more sophisticated, communicatively and linguistically competent interlocutor would always have an upper hand in a speaker-hearer situation. Hence, as Habermas asserts, it is imperative to have a dialogical process governed by communicative ethics.

I would argue that there is a tension between the phenomenological construction of the Dalit self, which is an inward-looking first-person experience, and Guru's demand for a liberal public sphere based on the modern understanding of theoretical and practical reason. The egalitarianism of modern reason is premised on the public self (Habermas 1991). Guru does not clearly explain how the phenomenological self would transform itself into an intersubjective or public self. This tension is also reflected in the debate on the politics of presence versus the politics of ideas (Phillips 2000).

Ontology of theory: Essentialist to humanist

Theory evokes an atavistic fear and is also hailed as a panacea. This spasmodic fear immediately followed by fascination is the story of theory. Guru's, and to some extent his interlocutor Sarukkai's, exploration of the architectonics of theory, in general, and in the context of Indian social sciences, in particular, are based on a conception of theory contra praxis or episteme contra techne (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 50–52).

Guru's supposition is that theory, in consort with episteme, was a weapon of the Indian elites, thus ineluctably linked to social domination. Hence, the original sin is attributed to theory and its contribution to the hypostatisation of ideas and their further ossification. For example, many religious ritual practices, social beliefs, customs and manners have become frozen in time. All customs and manners are not regressive. But some others, such as child marriage, gender discrimination and animal sacrifice, have become obsolete.[3] Social institutions such as the caste system have had a debilitating effect on the lives of millions of people. Such a process of reification has had social, political, cultural and economic ramifications in that a corresponding hierocracy of

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3   In this context, the critique of Indian philosophical practices by Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Charles Sanders Peirce refer only to the latter, though imbued with Western prejudice against non-Western systems of thought. It is interesting to note what Cornelius Castoriadis says about Roman law. The rituals that surround the legal process in Roman law have little bearing on the actual legal process. But without such a ritual display, the public might recognise neither the form nor the substance of the law.

disciplines has evolved. Interestingly, while metaphysics was attempting to resolve the conflicts in the social and the political spheres in the lifeworld by abstracting from experience, it was theory that constantly foregrounded the incongruency.

To borrow Guru's own terminology, before we embark on an archaeological excavation of the buried structures that bespeak of epistemic erasure of the marginalised/Dalit experience, there is a need to survey the site of the dig (Guru 2002: 10–11). There are four components to Guru's critique: the methodological critique of the social sciences; the need for an egalitarian framework of social sciences; moral obligation to a just process of theorisation; and the authenticity of the theorisation of the lived experience of the Dalits (ibid.: 202–203).

The first two components of Guru's critique of social science theory, namely, the methodological framework and perspectival inequality, have a clear philosophical basis. In both ancient Western and Indian philosophical systems, there is a very strong connection between metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. Guru's methodological critique of social science theory is also connected to the essentialist metaphysics of the traditional systems of knowledge, both in India and the West. In India, such essentialist metaphysics is characteristic of the orthodox Vedic systems of knowledge. In accordance with essentialist metaphysics, therefore, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics were systematised into interlinked categories. But some texts such as the *Manusmriti*, an ancient book of Hindu laws, while appearing to be constitutive of social institutions such as the caste system, could be classified as explanatory or descriptive. This is not to say that such a descriptive enterprise could not have morphed into an ascriptive form, however.

Guru's critique of the traditional Indian approach to social and political institutions, such as the entire structure of caste system and its collateral damage on all spheres, is typified by his analysis of the archaeology of untouchability. Here, one can deduce how theoretical categories (the categorial) were translated into categorical social stratification.[4] The commentarial and argumentative Indian tradition constantly challenged the status quo, at least in the theoretical-philosophical realm. The sramanic[5] traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism and the Carvaka fervidly questioned the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical assumptions of the asrama tradition (Gupta / Padmanabhan 2014: 251–253). In this process, theory played a very important part. The system of Indian logic known as the *Nyaya* school was highly developed (Matilal 1986). All the students of various schools of Indian thought had to undergo rigorous training in the *Nyaya* system to master *tarka* or the "art of reason-

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4   Guru makes this argument in *The Cracked Mirror* when he explains how the *panchabhuta*s (five elements) are snatched away from the experience of the marginalised by a definition of purity and impurity in the Indian tradition (pp. 205–212).

5   Heterodox philosophical schools like Jainism and Buddhism are referred to as sramanic as opposed to the *asrama* system that derives validation from the Vedas.

ing". But, what is known as the system/lifeworld distinction in the modern sociological parlance, was also prevalent in ancient Indian tradition, akin to Plato's World of Forms and World of Objects, respectively denoting reality and appearance.

In Plato's theory of the divided line in the *Republic,* the immediate knowledge of the intelligible (Forms), *noesis,* is considered to be the highest form of knowledge. The ascending order of preference is towards this theoretical knowledge of the good, which is also the highest knowledge requisite for politics. Plato's schema looks prohibitive and many would fall by the wayside in pursuit of the Forms. Plato's conception of the Forms or Ideas, which is completely abstracted from the political, is not for all but only for a chosen few. Hence, it is clearly neither egalitarian nor democratic. Plato, in many ways, wanted to rescue politics from the demagoguery of Athenian democracy. Hence, the question that arises in this context, as Guru himself concedes, is whether theory that connects the universal with the particular and vice versa could ever be egalitarian? On the other hand, is Guru trying to create a correspondence, ironically, à la Plato, between a politics of presence/representation and a politics of ideas? Interestingly, Guru also accepts the social and inner necessity of theoretical understanding for the Dalits. But both Plato and Aristotle resolve the contradictions in the realm of the political only in their metaphysics. In Aristotle's ethics, which is a clear departure from Plato's emphasis on the universal, the contemplative life is still the best life. *Phroenesis* (prudence) is not a moral virtue, but an intellectual virtue. It is a political virtue. Hence, political life is a level lower than the life of a seeker of true knowledge.

Herbert Marcuse, in *One Dimensional Man,* states that theory or an idea can never be anything but abstract: "Abstractness is the very life of thought, the token of its authenticity" (Marcuse 1964: 100). Marcuse also refers to how Aristotle's formal logic is estranged from the empirical whereas his ethics and politics deal with the everyday life of the polis. (Sarukkai also makes a similar point with reference to the difference between Indian and Aristotelian logic, Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 40). The dialectical relationship between opposing concepts is eliminated in Aristotle's logic while it continues to remain in his ethics and politics.

In the Indian context, orthodox systems feel a need to have a grand narrative of cosmogony, which requires justification in terms of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. The world of affairs (*vyavahara)* has to be justified in terms of a cosmogony, a scheme in which most of the inconsistencies of the lifeworld cannot be explained realistically. Hence, everyday issues either have to be explained away as of lesser importance, and major social, political and economic crises would be explained away in terms of karma theory as a cause-effect relation. Many scholars question the claim that the doctrine of

karma is a theory of causation. The karma doctrine is about justifying the present as an inescapable consequence of past karma. Since the karmic past is untraceable, the future has no guarantees. Only those people who are fortunate in the present seem to have had a blessed past and, therefore, a plausible good life in the future. Hence, there is no causal explanation in terms of a logical connection between an antecedent past and consequential future.

Contemporaneously, Buddhism and Jainism, which also believed in karma, created systems that were more horizontal and less hierarchical. The major reason for the heterodox systems like Jainism and Buddhism being less hierarchical was due to their emphasis on humanistic ethics as a way of conquering the effects of the cycle of birth and death (*karma samsara*). In both Jainism and Buddhism, the metaphysics and epistemology follow ethics. Also, their ethics is futuristic: how to overcome the past karma by one's current ethical conduct. Buddhism advocates an eight-fold path (*ashtanga marga*) whereas Jainism advocates the "five great vows" (*pancha mahavratas*)[6] (Basham 1999: 83–99, 100–110).

In the case of Mahayana Buddhism, it is based on *pratitya samutpada* (dependent origination – that exists, this is produced.) The empirical cause-effect relation is easily explained. According to the theory of dependent origination of Nagarjuna, "causation is thus simply dependent arising: a certain kind of effect invariably comes into existence following upon or as the result of the existence of a certain set of relevant conditions" (Chinn 2001). Both Jainism and Buddhism are anti-essentialist. Buddhism questions even the existence of *atman* (the self or soul) and in Jainism the knowledge of reality is always limited and qualified because reality has innumerable facets. What cannot be explained easily are the causal characteristics in the rarified realms of metaphysical theorising, because it is about essence (*en soi*) and not about existence (*pour soi*) (Flynn 2004).

Guru attempts to de-essentialise social science theory. Thus, in other words, theory has to be deracinated from its cultural hegemonic and hierocratic foundations based upon the metaphysics of the *atman*. In Nagarjuna's parlance, this would be a critique of metaphysical realism. Dependent origination, for Guru, would be the identification of relevant conditions in the social science domain that propagate and reify theoretical and metaphysical assumptions. Nagarjuna's interpretation of the Buddha as propagating the truth of dependent origination, aids Guru's philosophical critique of the essentialisation of theory. Nagarjuna's method is neither metaphysical nor *a priori* but conditional.

Now we have two theoretical frameworks: one Buddhist-nihilistic and the other transcendental phenomenology. Both lead to different paths in terms of

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6   The five vows of Jainism are *satya* (non-lying), *ahimsa* (non-injury), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-coveting).

ethics. The latter is a legacy of Descartes, Kant and an attempt to answer Hume. Interestingly, by way of answering Hume, transcendental phenomenology is also trying to answer the question that Buddhistic nihilism poses, *anatta* (*anatman* or the "non-self"). Sarukkai gives a detailed analysis about the self-projection of untouchability among Brahmins, which is institutionalised in various practices and austerities. This is known in the traditional parlance as *achara* or conduct (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 137). Now we are at a fork, leading towards either the ethics of intersubjectivity of phenomenology, which privileges first-person experience, or the ethics of Buddhism, which is humanistic. Guru, himself, gives a detailed description of an alternative Indian spiritual tradition that shuns theory, which is identified with the Brahminical mode of thinking (Guru 2002: 24). This is an illustration of a denial of the phenomenological-existential projection of Dalit subjectivity in philosophy, poetry, prose, music and other forms of creative-intellectual activity (Nagaraj 2012). Sarukkai's phenomenological critique of theory in traditional Indian thought will be discussed later in the article.

Let us look at Guru's arguments as advanced in his article on "Egalitarianism and the Social Sciences in India" (Guru 2002: 8–14):

1) Guru's first argument is that there is a lack of egalitarian tendency in the Indian social science establishment. This would entail a detailed critique of institutional structures and cultural hierarchies.

2) The second argument involves a dearth of conducive environs for enabling and enhancing the intellectual capabilities of the historically deprived groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes.

3) The third argument is about how to do theory ethically (in Guru's words, "Moral stamina as the necessary condition for doing theory.").

4) The final part contains a critique of arguments made by non-Dalits on behalf of Dalits. One could even claim that the theorisation of the Dalit lived experience by non-Dalits is a theory of estrangement of authorship. The more the Dalits are theorised by non-Dalits, the more they are estranged from their own lived experience.

Guru's critique begins with a direct indictment of the system of higher education in India, institutional bias against Dalits and other marginalised communities, inequities in the academic environment, and a lack of enabling environs for intellectual development of the Dalits. Guru lists several institutions of higher learning and elite academies that have little representation of the Dalits and the marginalised segments of Indian society. What Guru demands is not only formal representation such as reservations or affirmative action programmes, which are already legally promulgated. He wants what could be

termed as a capability-enhancing environment, to paraphrase Amartya Sen's capability approach vis-à-vis John Rawls's emphasis on formal notions of justice, which guarantee political, social and economic rights to the individual (Sen 1999). Even the Rawlsian difference principle, which favours the least advantaged, is grounded in formal notions of justice (Rawls 1999). As Sen avers, the formal right to pursue life, liberty and happiness does not enable everyone to pursue the good life. Here there is a need for enabling capabilities for realising substantive freedoms (Anthony / Padmanabhan 2010). But Guru's claim is not just about social and political theory in this context. For Guru, the institutionalised stunting of reflexive capabilities denies authorship of social and political theories.

As a first step, Guru emphasises an egalitarian approach to social science theory, methods and processes. Let us list Guru's points in order (Guru 2002: 10–12):

1) Any practitioner of social sciences ought to have a moral responsibility to justify why one form of social science language, in this case, theory, is privileged over empirical investigation.

2) A notion of natural disposition or stereotypical cultural beliefs based on traditional conceptions of hierarchy should not be the yardstick for judging the quality of one's competence in theoretical understanding.

3) Dalits and Adivasis should not be subjected to an "epistemological imperialism" in an attempt to conquer their "intellectual universe."

Guru's attempt is not to provincialise theory but to sensitise the process of theorisation in the realm of social sciences to the embedded arbitrariness. Without moral sensitivity, theory becomes hegemonic and intimidating to the hitherto excluded groups who are new entrants into the halls of academia. An egalitarian approach opens up the field of knowledge (ibid.: 12). Guru argues that scholars have been remiss in dealing with the social and psychological ramifications of perpetrating the idea of the superiority of theoretical understanding over empirical understanding. Guru calls for the democratisation of the social science discipline. He asserts that after India's independence, conditions necessary for variegated labour processes were created for the Dalits. But what was sorely missing was the sufficient condition, a conducive environment for imagining themselves in theory (ibid.: 14–15). There are three parts to this epistemological demand:

1) Equal opportunity in intellectual enterprise in various fields of social sciences

2) A fair system of ground rules in meta-theoretical norm formation

3) Freedom from the domination of hegemonic epistemological categories

The aforementioned expectations form the nucleus of Guru's second claim about the nature of theorising in the social sciences (ibid.: 12–13). Guru also looks at the subversive potential of theory.

Guru's critique of theory in this context becomes a critical social theory. His critique of the obsessive emphasis on theory also exposes the divorce between an organic understanding of labour (praxis) and reflection (theory). This is a case of the estrangement of *techne* from *episteme*. Dalits were allowed access only to unskilled forms of labour specially based on their supposed lack of reflective abilities. Since the Dalits did not have access to institutions of higher learning, they were forced to do menial work. This was a vicious circle. There was no possibility of vertical mobility. Guru also mentions in this context that certain groups were assigned creative labour due to which they were able to develop theoretical and professional skills. But their understanding still remained as technical understanding (*techne*) and not knowledge (*episteme*) per se. As Guru argues, labour is the activity that gives rise to knowledge, in which both *techne* and *episteme* function in consort. Specialised labour processes enable reflective capabilities. Guru contends that the Dalits were not given access to any form of innovative, imaginative or interesting labour processes (ibid.: 14).

M. S. Valiathan, one of India's earliest and most famous cardio-thoracic surgeons, who has worked extensively on Ayurveda and is the chairman of the Valiathan Committee Report on All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), wrote in his work on the ancient Indian physician Sushruta that there was a divorce between the mind and the hand that led to the decline of various indigenous systems of medicine in India (Valiathan 2007: V-VIII). Such a divorce was institutionalised in the case of the Dalits. The rigid caste stratification has created many such false dichotomies even among the higher castes, with deleterious effects. As Sarukkai writes while tracing the phenomenology of untouchability, the false dichotomy between *episteme* and *techne* exacerbated the fear of the pure and impure, leading to even further withdrawal of the Brahmins from the empirical world. Thus, *episteme* has also become untethered due to its estrangement from *techne*.

Ambedkar: Alternative theorisation with emancipatory intent

Ambedkar, argues Guru, understood the need to transcend the suffocating environs of social hierarchy. Hence, he saw the need to acquire knowledge from elite institutions outside India (Guru 2002: 15–16). While Ambedkar would have witnessed the discrimination against the African-Americans in the US, in Britain he would not have encountered caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar, both in Britain and America, had the freedom to pursue any discipline. Inter-

estingly, he chose Law, Economics and Political Science as his subjects. All three required abstract reasoning and also an understanding of the connection between universal and particular categories. Ambedkar utilised his first-hand experience of caste discrimination. He attempted to unearth the foundations of caste discrimination in the canons of religious and philosophical thought in India. Ambedkar wanted to uproot the entire edifice of the caste system. He therefore studied the ancient texts of India on philosophy, religion, dharma, statecraft and law. His trenchant critique of the Hindu religion as the fountainhead of the caste system led to the mobilisation of the deprived classes of India (Ambedekar 1936).

As D. R. Nagaraj argues, Ambedkar, who clashed bitterly with Gandhi on the question of untouchability, desisted from pursuing a politics of rage and instead chose a politics of affirmation. Ambedkar attempted to create an alternative narrative and a Dalit imaginary in which they would not be beholden to the tradition of hierarchical complementarity, to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase (Taylor 2004: 11). Since he understood the need to imagine oneself in history and culture, Ambedkar, while repudiating Hinduism, chose Buddhism as his spiritual *marga* (path). Buddhism envisaged a horizontal access society, a *sangha*. There was no godhead; even the Tathagata was not one. Metaphysics was not important. The Buddha was silent on metaphysical questions. The problems of suffering (*dukkha*) and cessation of suffering (*dukkha nirodha*) were identified. The path for solving the suffering (*dukkha nirodha marga*) was also given. This path is the noble eight-fold path (*arya ashtangika marga*), which is based on an understanding of dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*) (Kalupahana 2004: 84–86). Hence, Ambedkar's alternative narrative and theoretical critique eschews the essentialist and metaphysical vestiges of the orthodox systems. An unswerving emphasis on tolerance, equality, integrity and humanistic ethics forms the fundamental ethos of a democratic society (Nagaraj 2012: 162–163). In Buddhism, social service becomes a spiritual quest. For Ambedkar, a community of people whose moral order is undergirded by a principle of horizontal access society is a powerful contrapuntal social, philosophical, political, economic and cultural model to the caste-riddled Hinduism, which institutionalised hierarchical complementarity.

In both liberal and republican political models, there is an attempt to subsume the particular under the universal. Thus, justice or equality is based on an understanding of a generally accepted shared public moral order. Governments in the Western world are expected to ensure an environment where justice and equality as fundamental principles are reflected in institutional practices and public policy. But postcolonial and developing world democracies did not have the luxury of fashioning a public sphere based on the values of equality and justice. Notions of the social, political, cultural, economic, public and

national were being constructed and imagined all at once (Guha 2008). The values of old traditions had to be reinterpreted or reconstructed with reference to emerging ideas, practices and institutions. A new understanding of what is public and private became necessary. Yet, the social and economic status of the Dalits and marginalised groups, while part of the politics of ideas, were seldom a voice of presence.

Guru credits Ambedkar for awakening the Dalits and other marginalised groups to the myriad issues faced by them in their lifeworld in spite of constitutional guarantees. Political democracy governed by the Constitution, for Ambedkar, was only a blueprint for an egalitarian and humane polity. But the change of mind and heart has to happen in the individual and social realms. Gandhi wanted to transform traditional structures of domination, through a process of immanent critique, to be more humane, inclusive, non-violent and truthful (Iyer 2000: 5–12). But Ambedkar was not convinced that people steeped in the traditional hierocratic structures were capable of moral transformation. Hence, he wanted complete transcendence of traditional customs and manners and emphasised a new beginning inspired by Western ideas of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – freedom, equality and fraternity.

America's individual freedom and procedural democracy appealed to Ambedkar as well. In America, the individual was respected for her/his labour, not for pedigree. Thinkers such as Tocqueville and Weber have written about how voluntary associations in America play a very important part in representing the interests of various groups (Turner 2004). Weber also pointed out the paradoxical relationship between the Protestant puritanical ethics and flourishing capitalism, the former forbidding ostentation and profligacy yet the latter deriving its oxygen from consumption (Weber 1958: 181). In an advanced capitalist society, as Marcuse writes, the relation between capital and labour ceases to be dialectic and hence becomes much more complex, as does the traditional Marxist opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marcuse 1964: 10–12).

Ambedkar, while admiring liberalism and republicanism, and mindful of the excesses of capitalism and its powerful Marxist critique, was much more concerned about the existential issues of his people, the Dalits. His struggles, though informed by the ideas of freedom and equality, were a struggle for everyday existence, for water, jobs, food and basic amenities that were denied to millions of people due to caste injunctions. Ambedkar was fighting for equality at all levels. Thus, spiritual upliftment, access to modern education, political office, legal recourse, economic opportunities and cultural space were all part of his agenda. Guru's reference to *muknayak* ("leader of the dumb people") pertains to the condescending attitude of the elite, who anoint themselves as the leaders of the unsophisticated Dalits (Guru 2002: 25). While caste relations were much more adversarial during Ambedkar's time, he was defi-

nitely strongly opposed to being represented even by Gandhi (Nagaraj 2012: 43–47). While there was a grand narrative of traditional Indian philosophy, society, culture, religion and arts, Ambedkar sought to reimagine a culture and tradition that would break the cycle of life and death, the samsara, to use the Buddhist phrase (Ambedkar 1957). Ambedkar converted to Buddhism to forswear the tradition that disowned his people. But this would not solve the issue of the social and economic backwardness of the Dalits and other marginalised people. There was a need for an egalitarian and free political system that would enable the Dalits to represent themselves as free and equal citizens of India and also to participate in the political process. Thus the Indian Constitution was envisioned to ensure equal rights and opportunities in what would be a modern India (Austin 2012: 4–10).

Ambedkar's gargantuan efforts were possible only through intense reflection on the inequalities and injustices institutionalised over several centuries. A thorough theoretical examination of the reason and logic of the social, political, economic and cultural institutions of India was undertaken by Ambedkar in order to begin a process of unlearning for the Dalits, in particular, and Indians in general. Such an opportunity arose when he was appointed the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. This is where Nagaraj's understanding of the Gandhi/Ambedkar debates becomes germane to our discussion. While the Dalit imagination needed to be nurtured, a democratic and free India was indispensible for the nourishment of the Dalits. This was a shared and collective enterprise in which the Dalits had to strive together with the larger Indian population. Here, the Dalit imaginary and the imagining of India as a nation manage to, if not coalesce, at least rendezvous. In this way, Ambedkar was able to convert the politics of rage into a politics of affirmation (Nagaraj 2012: 207).

The Dalit self as phenomenological and existential: An examination

In a phenomenological understanding, there is a difference between experience and lived experience (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 33). Experience is a combination of the subject, the structure of experience and the content of experience. Hence, objectification of experience is not possible; there is no materiality of experience to be considered independent of the experiencer. Therefore, experience cannot be replicated. Sarukkai argues that while the subject has the choice of experience, lived experience has no element of freedom of choice. He mentions three kinds of choices associated with experience, namely, the freedom to be a part, freedom to leave and freedom to modify. Lived experience is thus a necessary experience (ibid.: 34–35).

> Lived Experience = Subject + Context + Content
>
> Dalit Lived Experience = Dalit Subject + Dalit Context + Dalit Content

There is no role for participant observers. Sarukkai writes: "To be a Dalit is not to share all that they have but to share what they cannot have" (ibid.: 36). Thus, the Dalit lived experience signifies the lack of freedom in an experience. Guru wants lived experience as the final validation of theory (ibid.: 36–37). By establishing the unbreakable and necessary nature of lived experience, theoretical reflection can only be an extension of the Dalit lived experience. Guru demands not only ownership but also authorship of the theorisation of the Dalit lived experience. Sarukkai, while recognising Guru's line of reasoning, asks whether only owners of experience can become authors or vice versa (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 38). Sarukkai illustrates the ownership versus authorship debate with the example of the owner and author of a book. The owner has little control over the contents of the book. The author controls everything. But Guru's claim appears to be an extreme case of Husserlian *epoché*. Guru's claim is an absolute claim, both formally and substantively. Sarukkai's claim is more contextual. Formally, it recognises the legitimacy of Guru's claim. But can the Dalits be the sole owners of their experience (ibid.: 38–39)? If that were to be the case, any claim to phenomenological intersubjectivity is denied.

While discussing the need for a conducive intellectual and academic environment to foster reflective growth among the Dalits, Guru's critique of the "twice-born" theoretical and the menial empirical research is not unique. Hannah Arendt, and a large number of illustrious Marxist, para-Marxist, feminist and post-structural theorists, including Jürgen Habermas, have discussed this in great detail (Marcuse 1964: 102).[7] In Hannah Arendt's writings, the distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* is a recurring theme. But Arendt emphasises the *activa* as much as she does the *contemplativa*. Plato's *Republic* effectively settles the dispute in favour of the *episteme* against the *techne*. But this dispute is resolved metaphysically and not in the realm of the political. And *episteme* is only a stage beyond *techne*. The challenge posed by Glaucon and Adeimantus to Socrates to create a polity that embodies justice still towers over political theory like Shelley's Ozymandias, as the sands of time pass by (Farrar 1993: 33–34). Guru does not want to engineer a violent insurrection against the episteme or in this context, theory. He wants to question the metaphysical resolution of the ancient tension between the *episteme* and the *techne*. For this struggle is waged on the turf of the political. Guru claims that when the political is elided to theorise justice in the polis as in the works of Plato, and even Aristotle, so is the moral/ethical. In the Greek

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7   Herbert Marcuse (1964) writes in *One Dimensional Man* the following: "Logical abstraction is also sociological abstraction. There is a logical mimesis which formulates the laws of thought in protective accord with the laws of society, but it is only one mode of thought among others."

polis, the *demos* is well-defined and so is *res publica* in the Roman republic (Hornblower 1993: 12–15). There is no separation between the political and the ethical, especially in Greek thought (Aristotle 1893). The Dalits in pre and post-colonial India fall in the liminal space. How does the Dalit self project itself? What is the role of Dalit subjectivity in theorising about their experience? Hence, there is a need for a phenomenological exegesis.

It is understandable that Guru, on the one hand, needs to retain the project of enlightenment, which is equality and rationality, and, on the other hand, to de-hyphenate theory from rationality, the formal component, and re-hyphenate it with equality. Normally, in liberal social and political theory, rationality and equality are the founding principles. Reason is the fount of liberty, fraternity and equality. In Marxist theory, praxis is the substantive principle. Here, what Guru terms as functional-empirical social science seems to have the upper hand vis-à-vis theoretical social science.[8] This is also true of the utilitarian method, which is severely criticised by Marx. But this theoretical/empirical dichotomy or the domination of the one or the other is dependent on various disciplinary factors. Guru, however, is addressing a very specific and particular socio-political context and the theorisation that emanates from the said context. In this case, the Indian social science framework is the theory that arises out of the caste- and class-conscious intelligentsia and the dominant socio-economic structures. As a corollary, this translates into cultural and political hierarchies as well. Furthermore, the Dalit/marginalised subject is completely invisible. Therefore, is Guru's attempt a case of reverse engineering of theory as praxis, à la Marxism, a de-elitisation of theory? Guru is not prepared to confine his archaeological excavations to the marked area of liberal or Marxist theory. This is thus a problematic analysis of Guru's project, since he is not interested in the de-elitisation of theory. Guru's target is theory itself, that is theory that is elite. Thus, he constructs a phenomenological account of the Dalit experience as a theory of lived experience.

The term "phantasy" is used by Edmund Husserl to refer to "merely intuitive imagination". Guru's analysis of the Dalit poems, stories and other artistic productions fits neatly into this term in reference to the merely representational and not ideational (the Husserlian ideal types; Beyer 2015: 6). This representationality is in stark opposition to the singularity and intentionality of the phenomenological Dalit lived experience. Guru's charge is that in the

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8   In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between *vita contemplativa* (thinking, willing and judging) and *vita activa* (labour, work and action). "Although Arendt considers the three activities of labor, work and action equally necessary to a complete human life, in the sense that each contributes in its distinctive way to the realization of our human capacities, it is clear from her writings that she takes action to be the differentia specifica of human beings, that which distinguishes them from both the life of animals (who are similar to us insofar as they need to labor to sustain and reproduce themselves) and the life of the gods (with whom we share, intermittently, the activity of contemplation). In this respect the categories of labor and work, while significant in themselves, must be seen as counterpoints to the category of action, helping to differentiate and highlight the place of action within the order of the vita activa." (D'Entreves in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

realm of Indian social science theory and in social life, there has never been an opportunity for the Dalits/marginalised communities to theorise their experiences. In the social sciences, someone always speaks for the Dalits and the marginalised. Their presence is only in the ideas of others and they are to partake in the world of Forms. Hence, the gates to the theoretical paradise, that is, the world of Forms or Ideas, are barred. The leitmotif of Guru's argument is the *agrahara* of theory as the sanctum of the twice born, which he refers to by the acronym TTB (Guru 2002: 16). Dalit artistic productions, whether poetry, plays, dance, craft or prose, are only a speck in the realm of ideas; as a product of the Dalit experience, the artifacts are part of the world of opinion, which is a particular representation of the universal world of Forms. Phenomenologically, it would appear as if the artistic endeavours of the Dalits would be bereft of intentional content (Beyer 2015: 6–8). Guru argues that the correlation between the politics of presence and the politics of ideas that happens organically among the TTB is also beyond the socio-cultural horizons of the Dalits for the aforementioned reason (Guru 2002: 22–24).

The next point of Guru's critique is the most problematic claim in the context of Guru's phenomenological epistemology, which is utilised to critique the formal character of the theory, to explicate the sociology of *Umwelt* or "homeworld" and to emphasise the primacy and immediacy of lived experience, as well as the politics of presence vis-à-vis the politics of ideas in disavowing participant observation. Guru's theoretical claims are based on the lived experiences of the Dalits as a basis for authentic Dalit experience in authorship vis-à-vis what Sundar Sarukkai calls the ownership experience (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 33). For Guru, the Dalits are not just owners of the lived experience, which is a necessary experience, but also the authors of the lived experience. Guru's emphasis on the egalitarian principle that is at once normative, interrogative and suggestive is not based entirely on notions of formal justice (justice as fairness as political). Guru wants to effect an *epoché*, which is to say that "any phenomenological description proper is to be performed from a first person point of view, so as to ensure that the respective item is described exactly as is experienced, or intended, by the subject" (Beyer 2015: 15). The *epoché* or bracketing of first person experience, as intended by the subject exactly to be experienced, is a methodological constraint. It does not depend on the extramental world for a represented object (ibid.: 15). Edmund Husserl's famous work on phenomenology posits the bracketing of first person experience or *epoché* from any existential assumptions regarding the external world. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is based on intentionality, singularity of indexical experiences and intentional horizons. Thus far, Guru's theorisation is on sound phenomenological footing. But Husserl's phenomenological perceptual experience also involves concepts such as empathy, intersubjectivity and lifeworld. In all these concepts, the subject is the author, whether

in terms of reflective self-consciousness or pre-reflective self-consciousness. "In fact, one of the most important aspects of transcendental phenomenology is intersubjectivity" (ibid.: 21). Intersubjectivity constitutes our selves in three ways – as objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects and the objective spatio-temporal world.

Beyer writes about the concept of lifeworld, which is very important in the context of lived experience used by Guru and others, who justify the intensely personal intentionality and singularity which is governed by one's intentional horizons. For Husserl, the subjective-relative lifeworld provides the foundation for natural sciences and a court of appeal for them as well. The concept of *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) and *Umwelt* (homeworld) is explained as "already pregiven and generally unreflected intentional background", which is the bedrock of one's belief system (Beyer 2015: 22–23).

My reference to Husserl's phenomenology is to show that Guru's theoretical framework is phenomenological but that his moral framework does not follow from this. The reason is that Guru stops with the first part of his phenomenological analysis and does not take it to its logical conclusion. If he accepts transcendental phenomenological framework then as per his project of moralising theory it should encompass what Husserl calls the "iterated empathy", intercultural understanding, and categorical imperative (ibid.: 26–27). One has to remember that Husserl's analysis suffers from the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy and he tries to utilise the concept of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which authenticates intersubjectivity (which is literally between subjects in the Husserlian context). The concept of lifeworld and world-horizon are intersubjective in the aforementioned sense. Hence, homeworld (*Umwelt*) is an understanding of the surrounding or environs. There is a localised intersubjective understanding (pertaining to particular groups), and a broader understanding of the lifeworld is based on an understanding of *a priori* general structures that are common to all cultures (Beyer 2015).

Conclusion

Husserl's definitions of the *Umwelt* and *Lebenswelt* are very important for our analysis of Guru's critique of theory. The first point about *Umwelt* or homeworld is restricted to a particular culture. This understanding of the *Umwelt* has been utilised brilliantly in Guru's critique of theory. But the second point about the "a priori general structure unconditionally valid for all subjects" of the lifeworld is conveniently ignored by Guru. This denial of intersubjectivity, which is founded on the "respective lifeworld" that is the crucible of "pre-delineated world horizons of potential future experiences of given

groups under given time and conditions" (Beyer 2016) is in favour of the *Um-welt* or homeworld.

From this theoretical assumption emanates Guru's stand against a politics of ideas in favour of a politics of presence. Here there are no horns of a dilemma for Guru, as a politics of ideas necessarily emanates from the politics of presence. There is no concept of Buddhist silence here. Ironically, Guru's silence seems to deny the ontological status of the other as an interlocutor. The introjection of the archaeology of Brahminism that Guru has sought to disavow seems to be complete. In Sarukkai's words, for the Brahmins the highest form of purity is untouchability, exemplified by a complete withdrawal and insulation from the world. This code of conduct (*achara*) is governed by extremely strict codes. This understanding of purity-impurity was projected as impurity on to the Dalits (Guru / Sarukkai 2012: 189–195). But Guru's emphasis on the moral hegemony of the Dalits and phenomenological ownership sans discursivity might end up creating an insular Dalit self formally resembling the Brahminical self (Guru 2002: 127). Thus, there seems to be an asymptotic relationship between the Brahminical and Dalit theoretical enterprise. It seems to be a mirror image. Guru is right in what he affirms, that the rationale for the caste system was theoretically established and justified. Hence, Guru's insistence on the moral, existential and social necessity of the Dalit theory is valid. But he is wrong in what he denies. Guru denies the importance of the discursive process (ibid.: 26–27). Hence, contestation of validity claims through the process of communicative action is forsworn. As Nagaraj argues, the grand narrative of Brahminism was not a monolith. It was constantly challenged within and without. Brahminism succeeded in making people believe in the infallibility of its grand narrative (Nagaraj 2012: 144). Ambedkar deliberately constructed the Buddhist grand narrative to create a rival approach to social and political theory. This theory was also not a monolith. But Ambedkar's sole agenda was the emancipation of the depressed classes. He thus did not want the dissipation of the energies of the depressed class movement. This theoretical enterprise is uncannily similar to Plato's *Republic* in form. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar, until his Chairmanship of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, steadfastly adhered to the principle of phenomenological exclusivism sans intersubjectivity. Franz Fanon (1978) also denied any form of humanistic relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. But Ambedkar's involvement in the Round Table Conferences, the Lothian Commission and Constitution Drafting Committee was due to his belief in legal and political due process, a core liberal belief (Ambedkar 1949). His openness to discourse was based on the Constitutional ethos of justice and equality (ibid.).

Guru does not evince any such keenness on discourse. Both in the case of Brahminism and the emancipatory narrative of Ambedkar, the theory reaches its completeness only in metaphysics, not in politics or ethics. Guru refuses to

acknowledge this. In Plato, the philosopher-king exemplifies the marriage between theoretical wisdom and empirical power. In Aristotle, the relation between the happiness of the individual and that of the *polis* is based on a *telos*, that people have an inherent motivation to be good. Guru's exhortation for an egalitarian theory in the social sciences ends up only as a theory qua theory, *sans* polis. The correspondence that Guru tries to establish between the Dalit experience and theory resembles Plato's schema. Perhaps at its apogee it has a philosopher-king, Ambedkar. Therefore, it becomes the converse of a social theory – metaphysics. It is no longer about the political, but politics. Is it no more an idea, no more elite?

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