

UNDERSTANDING INDIGNITIES

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Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that it is seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. *I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down.*

Virginia Woolf's Diary Sunday, 8 March 1941¹

In his latest book, *Beyond Belief*,² V.S. Naipaul has depicted travel writers primarily as managers of narratives. Social Scientists also deal with narratives but very few are content with such a reduced ambition. Often, they tend to see themselves not as managers or custodians but as creators of narratives, authors of complex but credible stories. However, this particular self-definition does not cohere with an idea of social science colonized by the spirit of scientism that feels diminished by the finitude of and the imponderables in human lives.

There was a time when this idea of social science and the ambition of 'modernity' traveled together. Anything that is slippery and unwieldy was kept outside the fold of social science for the sake of precision and prediction. Instead of transforming the methods to illumine the messy social reality, they tend to make social reality shrink to appear neat and fit the methodology at hand.³

Objectivity per se is not an unworthy ideal except that when overrated it becomes an unnecessary burden on the social scientists. This obsession has reduced the social scientists to poor story-tellers and mere specialists in documentation. Years ago this had prompted Alfred Cobban to comment that political science had lost its grasp of politics as well as of science. I hope it does not appear that I am merely rehashing some of the distrustful views associated with the postmodernists where truth is a mere conspiracy to keep dissent at bay. Nor am I arguing that relativism is the only answer to the misplaced certitude of the moderns. I am concerned with understanding, not truth. My objective has been to stretch our methodology to an extreme so that it can better negotiate the reality.

'Modernity' might have freed us from vices of the past but it has not prepared us to escape from its own scientist hubris. As a consequence, this has not helped us to understand politics better, and worse, many significant aspects of social realities have remained beyond our grasp. The incapacity to understand, particularly the experience of indignities, and humiliation of persons, constitutes the entry point of this essay.

It all started with a raw feeling of dissatisfaction with the ways in which political scientists tend to analyze social indignities and humiliation. I hope scholars belonging to other disciplines, though unaware of the problems specific to political science, will still recognize this feeling. Empathy or lack of it, though crucial, is not

what I have in mind here. Why is it that our representation of indignities arising out of political violence, caste hierarchy, class inequalities, dispossession and rejection of various kinds appears a dry, statistical enumeration? I am not against statistics nor am I arguing against their usefulness. Why is it that Gopinath Mhanty's *Paraja* offers us a compelling account of the lives of *adivasis* in India which we do not find in the most competently written reports by the state or non-state institutions? Why is it that the autobiographical extracts of *dalits* in Arjun Dangle's⁴ book on *dalit* writings give me more insight into their indignities than what I find in the reports prepared by the specialized departments looking into the welfare of the 'scheduled castes'.

One may say that the varied reception is due to the differences in 'genres' between fiction, an autobiography and a report. If this is true then my question is, what do we do with these writings? How should we respond to these genres? Why is it that while analysing or reflecting *dalit* politics or the lives of *dalits* in India, their intense experiences (personal and collective) are not taken seriously? Is it due to our methodologies?

I do not have the answers but I raised these questions with my graduate students last year while teaching a course on Methodologies of Social Sciences. *Dalit* autobiographies/biographies provided an exciting frame to discuss some of these issues. The texts discussed were Hazari's autobiography, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste*; D.P. Das' *The Untouchable Story*; autobiographical extracts from Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread*; and finally James Freeman's much celebrated work, *Untouchable: An Indian Life History*. These texts were collectively read following the methodological considerations outlined earlier.

As soon as the 'reading' began we were overwhelmed by the personal experiences of the individuals who had undergone numerous instances of indignities and humiliation in their lives. Quite expectedly these narratives were 'first-person' accounts that were suffused with affective elements. An autobiography is primarily a subjective document, a confessional narration, although one can discern in it an objective structure of experiencing. Our first inclination while discussing these texts was to transform the first-person narratives of the autobiographies into third-person accounts. It was not difficult to utilize these materials to bolster up our argument against the pernicious impact of the caste system on the *dalits* of our society. Without being fully conscious, the intense experience of humiliation of the *dalits* became transformed into a series of data.

It was easy to see that many students laboured under the impression that their task as social scientists was to privilege the third-person account vis-a-vis the first person ones. For them the deeply personal narration in the autobiographies needed to be transformed into

social science materials in order to be used for explanations. Attempts to obtain views from nowhere exact their own price; without personal viewpoints social science becomes an anchorless enterprise.

In a significant sense, these writings embodied the painful attempts of the authors to grapple with their experiences of humiliation and indignities. How do we understand the emotional outpourings that came out of the memory of humiliation? It does not take us too far if emotion is kept at bay, both as an attitude of the interpreter and the nature of materials. The argument is that without the interference of emotion reality can be brightened up by, to use a Cartesian phrase, "the natural light of reason". According to this view, both the interpreter's emotion as well as the emotion of the subjects to be studied are impediments to be removed for a rational understanding of reality.

Another point of view is that emotional outpourings should be taken less seriously for they are mere subjective feeling lodged in human hearts and as such can only be explained in terms of individual psychology. Sometimes the impression is that it is impossible to access the deep hurt hidden in the heart of human beings. At any rate neither helped us acquire a purchase on the materials intended for discussion.

In order to understand the texts better, we adopted a strategy that jettisoned an anti-cognitive understanding of emotion. The experiences of indignities/humiliation, often expressed in a personal idiom, exude knowledge and display epistemic value. The idea here is that emotional outpourings embodied in these autobiographies did throw light on their placements in the larger society and helped bring their contexts into a sharper focus. Let me quote from Hazari's autobiography, arguably the first *dalit* autobiography in English, dealing with his life during the colonial period:

Although I accepted the low wages and the long hours, I did not keep the job for more than a few weeks. One day, my mistress called me to say that I had deceived her with regard to my caste. She had found out that my father was working as a sweeper, while, by my name, she had thought I was a Hindu of the caste of a water-carrier. She gave me my wages to date and dismissed me. This was a great blow to me in more than one respect. She had never asked me about my caste, and I had thought her intelligent and educated enough not to bother about her servant's caste or creed. Did the words of Congress mean nothing? It simply did not make sense to me. But I was not there to argue, and I came out of her room *with feeling of loathing* not only for my caste but for all men. The only thought that came to my mind was a couplet, which was a kind of motto in our family: The one everlasting who provides for the living/also provides for the burial of the dead. But the *memory of my shame* was not easily washed away, even by mother Ganges.⁵

One can excavate many a moving passage from Hazari's autobiography which carry an amalgam of emotion and understanding. Though analytically separable they are fused together. The 'feeling

of loathing' and the 'memory of shame' brought his social context to the foreground, including the half-hearted faith in the Congress party and 'modernity' (particularly the link between education and liberal values). The emotional turbulence in Hazari, one can argue, energated knowledge about his own contexts and the larger frame of a caste-ridden society. In it one can also discern a voice of a critic. Let me quote a longish passage from an interview I conducted with a *dalit* student at the Jawaharlal Nehru University⁶.

Student: My father was a constable in a small town called Salem. As long as I was there in the police quarters I was not much aware of caste. My father took care of cleanliness because he did not want somebody to blame the children on that ground. From three I came to my village school. The school was not very far from my locality. First day my father admitted me in the school and left immediately. I was attending the class and suddenly I felt thirsty and asked the teacher to go outside by raising my thumb. (You had to show different fingers to express different reasons for going out of the class.) The teacher said I can go but did not tell me whether I can have water. Immediately another fellow followed me and I was about to take the glass. It was a cement tank with a wooden lid and it was clean water. This fellow took the glass from me and told me to cup my hands. I asked him why and told him to give the glass to me after drinking the water. Then he said that I should not touch the glass. I asked again why and he immediately told me that I am a pariah. Then I asked him what did he mean by this?

Interviewer: Do you mean to say that you have never heard of the term pariah before?

Student: No, never. I told this boy why you are talking like this to me. I wear clean clothes, I take bath in the morning, I am clean. But when he insists that I should not touch the glass I gave him a blow on his face. Immediately the boy howled and I also cried. He went to the class teacher and told him that I had beaten him. She asked me why and I told her that he told me to cup my hands because I am a pariah. She disappeared. I can very well remember the situation. I cried for a long time and after that I did not talk to anybody and nobody talked to me. The old aayah of the school took me home.

Interviewer: Then...?

Student: When I saw my father I broke down again and shouted: 'Why did you bring me here? Why here?' My father told me many things later but at that point of time he said nothing, absolutely nothing.

This is what happened to him when he was eight years old and the feeling of humiliation, which time has not been able to erase, remains with him. At a seminar where I presented this, somebody asked whether this really happened to the interviewee or whether it was a later construction of an event in the light of contemporary political stirrings. I had no reason to doubt the integrity of my interviewee. That memory is a construction did not disturb me. I

realized that the relationship between humiliation and the language needed to express it is always complex and often nourishes ambiguities. But this is no reason to despair as one is not really looking for a unique route to reach the pure source of such feelings. I was interested in mediations, not pure transparency. The question of the student, 'what brought me here' while going through the traumatic experience brings into focus the knowledge of a contrast as well as a larger context. The silence of the teacher, as of his father, were indeed loaded with cognitive elements.

Emotional experience not only processes information pertaining to a concrete setting but also provides coherence to them. It makes visible certain relationships and helps several morally important features of a situation to emerge.⁷ It is not surprising then that moral theorists have developed a greater appreciation of emotional experience and its contribution to moral and cognitive growth. This understanding of emotion, needless to say, militates against the view that treats it as either purely private or cognitively empty.

In the process of reading the texts I was convinced that understanding indignities and humiliation is only possible once we confront these experiences frontally. It is no surprise that the representation of humiliation and pain is such a problematic issue of our times. As social theorists and citizens our responsibility lies in listening to the inchoate and muffled voices of humiliation. Why should we listen? What do we achieve when we pay attention to these experiences? This connects me to the next issue I am about to raise.

When somebody listens to the experiences of indignities of others a connection is established between the listener and the sufferer. A shared space is thus created, which is described in different ways by people. We as children of God, members of a political community are capable of repentance and transformation - all these are different articulations of the notion of a shared space mentioned above.

Kant, however, had a different emphasis. As bearers of 'reason', Kant argued, we deserve respect as well as owe it to others. Within the realm of ends he distinguished between two sets of things: one set which has a price and therefore can be exchanged and the other which is above all price and therefore cannot be exchanged.⁸ In his discussion of dignity, Kant's accent is not really on the shared space that people inhabit but on the separateness of individuals. To the extent solidarity among individuals is posited, it is abstract in its nature. The experiences of humiliation that the autobiographies so vividly represent are instances where the authors are wrenched away from a shared space. In other words, the presence of indignities forces the larger world to shrink. By listening to the voices of pain we allow the larger world to re-emerge. This has been pithily put by David B. Morris writing on pain: "Suffering, in short, is not a raw datum, a natural phenomenon we can identify and measure, - but a social status that we extend or withhold. We extend or withhold it depending largely on whether the sufferer falls within our moral community".⁹

Humiliation, as I have pointed out earlier, fractures a shared world. It also forces the victims of indignities to fashion new solidarities. In the short term there is no doubt that the new solidarities have a

positive impact on the political processes of our society. What happens in the long run to the victim's new-found solidarity is difficult to say. Although not discussed, it is important to remember that an understanding of indignities will be incomplete without discussing the violators of dignity. Due to a lack of space it has not been explored here. To map the collective dimension of indignities without obliterating the individual voices is the real challenge facing us. It also implies that our social science must change.

In his book, *The Decent Society*,¹⁰ Avishai Margalit defines a decent society as one in which institutions do not humiliate people. In contrast, a civilised society is defined as one in which people do not humiliate one another. The fine distinction drawn by the author may be of some analytical value but in most cases the line that separates the two is rather thin. In a decent society, according to Margalit, the institutions do not rob people of their honour. They do not diminish a person's reason for self-respect. Finally they do not reject persons from the human commonwealth. This is not the place to discuss the book at length. Yet the author's attempt to put the issues of decency and humiliation at the center of our concern (both as intellectuals and citizens) is indeed laudatory.

In different ways Ambedkar and Gandhi had raised the questions of dignity and decency in their writings. With hindsight one can say that Ambedkar's main objective was to create a decent society in India with the help of new institutions and by refashioning old ones. In contrast, one may locate Gandhi's enterprise primarily as one of creating a civilised society.

My purpose here is not to put these two complex thinkers in two neat boxes. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism towards the end of his life and Gandhi's disillusionment with the social reality in the midst of the postpartition communal carnage show that in different ways both have articulated the need for a decent and civilized society. Humiliation does not disappear just because social scientists do not talk about it. I am sure that through the act of writing one can 'gain a hold' over it. This I consider as a crucial beginning.

Notes

1. Leonard Woolf (ed.), *A Writers Diary*. UK, 1978.
2. V.S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*. Delhi, 1998.
3. I am aware that my comments will not apply to social science in all its modern guises. Nevertheless, I think they capture a dominant streak.
4. Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread* (translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature. Orient Longman, 1992.
5. Hazari, *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste*, New York, 1969, pp. 14-141.
6. During the course of the last year I interviewed a few *dalits* regarding their experiences of humiliation and indignities. These interviews have been full of theoretical as well as empirical insights. I am grateful to them for sharing some of their intimate and hurtful experiences with me. This particular conversation took place in early 1997.
7. For discussion on emotion, see Ronald de Sousa. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987. Justin Oakly. *Morality and Emotion*, London, 1992.
8. Immanuel Kant, 'Metaphysical Foundation of Morals', in *The Philosophy of Kant*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich, The Modern Library, New York, 1949, pp. 180-183.
9. David B. Morris,
10. Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Translated from Hebrew by Naomi Goldblum), Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996). For an interesting discussion on the book see *Social Research*. Spring 1997. (*Seminar 471, November 1998*)