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Caste, Common Sense and the Neoliberal Paradigm

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Abstract:

Caste, as a system and political formation, has historically left many imprints on the nation, both in the political and cultural senses. Post-independence discrimination on the grounds of caste was heavily influenced structurally, in terms of its manifestation and reproduction during the colonial period. The structures and formations that resulted from such a process came to be internalised through certain notions of 'common sense'. Within South- East Asia, and more specifically in India, common senses like caste became integrated within the fabric of post liberalism. Our belief in half-baked feudalism as well as our notions of the divine right to rule, largely shape what Gramsci described as 'stratified deposits' within our very ideas of India, Indianness, caste and difference. What then, happens to our common sense, within the framework of neoliberalism and globalisation? Is the market as obvious in its discrimination as Brahmanical feudalism? In this paper, I look at the four axes central to the neoliberal project, i.e., meritocracy, sexuality, consumerism and militarisation in the context of common sense. Using methods of critical discourse analysis, I will look at the articulations of the market in order to question whether the maintenance of such a structure is possible without a system of inequitable power relations fueled, in turn, by notions of common sense.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, common sense, market, caste, meritocracy, sexuality, consumerism, South Asia, India, consciousness

Introduction

This paper tries to intervene in the ways in which caste and neoliberalism are conceptualised in the framework of common sense. Rather than approaching these concepts as separate entities, the paper tries to examine their interlinked qualities. Peck and Tickell (2002) state that

> *There is more to be done, both theoretically and empirically, on the specification and exploration of different processes of neoliberalisation. This would need to take account of the ways in which*

> *ideologies of neoliberalism are themselves produced and reproduced through institutional forms and political action, since 'actually existing'; neoliberalisms are always (in some way or another) hybrid of composite structures (see Larner 2000).*
>
> (Peck and Tickell 2002:383)

Thus, it becomes necessary to unpack the processes through which neoliberalism is actualised with common sense in terms of caste within the realms of meritocracy, sexuality and consumerism. By building interlinkages, the paper aims to observe and analyse moments of eruption of caste discrimination from the processes of neoliberalisation.

Articulations of the market, neoliberal or otherwise, are not in themselves entrenched in caste but are instead operationalised through common sense (not an obvious fact as the market deals in labour rather than human beings), the functioning of the global market economy within India is deeply enmeshed in the history and politics of caste. The market that functions is always formed within unequal power structures. Maintenance of a structure of inequitable power relations as far as possible has been a key concern of the global elite in India throughout the post liberalisation period. The construction of common sense becomes a key act of oppression in such market structures. The continuation of the notion of the dominant caste having power is taken to be a natural. This includes ideas of who is entitled to speak on behalf of the concerned parties. The concerned communities embody a kind of moral set of nationalistic values. All this forms important aspects within the process of securing consent for these unequal relations (Rustin and Massey 2014).

Such ideas that relate to commonsensical notions of being Indian play a key role within this process. For example, there are key differences that are generated between who is a barbarian and who is not. Similarly, a complete lack of democracy is seen as an acceptable choice to the loss of hegemonic power (often invisible) when it is part of the Stateist narrative: thus we can see that, the complete absence of democracy in places like Bastar are forgotten in the current debate about the lack of democracy within Kashmir or elsewhere .

The ways in which we come to understand migration is also under a similar rubric of common sense. This is structured by a hierarchy and shaped by a sense of entitlement. It is within this kind of an articulation that we see that people of privilege find themselves to be freely mobile within the country while the not so privileged are expected to stay within designated social spaces. The supreme example is the way we analyse the waves of Aryan migration, which led to the dispossession, subordination and eradication of complete populations (Phule 1873), with all

the resultant inequity that it brought on to the mainland and then on the other hand the way we look at migration in the senses of the Namashudras of Marichjhappi (Jalais 2005). At present, as the stranglehold of global capitalism strengthens, its wings spreading all across the world in search of both raw materials and ready markets, it produces levels of deprivation and displacement even greater than those caused during the nineteenth and twentieth century spatial transformations.

Pure market is a myth. Liberals may theorise that people and goods move freely, but difficulty arises when we see that such a movement in turn requires a huge investment and intervention. This is why liberals and conservatives have so often become part of very similar ideological clubs. Their alliance, although quite uneasy, requires the necessary law and order to be secured through the populist/authoritarian wings to enable the pursuance of free trade by the liberals. The seduction of cheap labour is balanced against the need to make coalitions of populists and conservatives which in turn ensures that the system of notions and common knowledge stays afloat. The ideas of caste and the nation that are articulated under this debate hopes to stitch together the alliance between the wealthy and the proletarian. This is addressed within the rhetoric of the nation rather than class and is usually a fact that is unspoken but nevertheless necessary to mention. Within India we see both the major parties including Congress and the Bharatiya Janta Party being enthusiastic about liberal policies such as the support for globalisation and privatisation, but within local regional parties, the division between conservatives and liberals become more pronounced, an example being Shiv Sena or Trinamool Congress.

Discourses on Savarna/Indian/Hindu superiority can be seen as a strategy deployed to help secure cross-class alliances between apolitical wings of the working class and the authoritarian populist right. This also goes on to secure neoliberalism as a basic structural framework at the global level, it is therefore seen to be playing a key role in domestic politics.

Conceptualising Common sense

Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea clearly state in their Soundings manifesto, that common sense is a form of everyday thinking that gives us the adequate framework of meaning that helps to make sense of the world:

> *It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of 'the common people' for practical guidance and advice.*
>
> (Hall 1982: 8-9)

The concept of common sense in itself is central to understanding the mechanics of culture. Gramsci (1971:419) proclaims it to be the core dynamic of social change: why has a particular kind of change taken place? How did it take place? How can it be brought out again in the future? He gives considerable attention to the complexities and contradictions inherent within the concept of common sense and how it helps, not only in reproducing and maintaining power regimes, but also on how it carries seeds of change. Resultantly, we see that 'Common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything that one likes' (ibid: 422).

Ambedkar recognises the problematic situation that would arise from collective consciousness contributing to common sense and feeding from a supposed cultural memory. He diagnoses these problems to be chauvinism and majoritarianism, among others. In the preface to 'Pakistan and the Partition of India', he writes thus:

> *Nationality is a social feeling. It is a feeling of a corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those who are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin. This national feeling is a double edged feeling. It is at once a feeling of fellowship for one's own kith and kin and an anti-fellowship feeling for those who are not one's own kith and kin. It is a feeling of 'consciousness of kind' which on the one hand binds together those who have it, so strongly that it over-rides all differences arising out of economic conflicts or social gradations and, on the other, severs them from those who are not of their kind. It is a longing not to belong to any other group. This is the essence of what is called a nationality and national feeling.*
>
> (1945)

As Ambedkar points out, there are no real bases for this notion of group solidarity between Hindus and Muslims. The way they come to view their worlds (and in turn viewed) is determined by the dynamics of their specific religions, histories and so on.

The common sense that society professes is one that is informed by a combination of historical elements and its inherent prejudices and ideas: every antecedent age informing the way the present think in terms of the popular (Gramsci 1971). Every preceding political formation drawing on a collection of elements to in-turn, manufacture its own set of hierarchy and inherent notions of inclusion and exclusion. In South-East Asia, more specifically India, the common sense that is caste is integrated with elements from our colonial past, as well as from other elements such as beliefs of half-baked feudalism as well as notions of the divine right to rule, a Brahmanical celebration of the happy few right from ancient times. These ideas have largely shaped what Gramsci describes as 'stratified deposits' within our very ideas of India, Indianness, caste and difference. Discrimination on grounds of caste in contemporary India remains heavily influenced structurally from the colonial period, when notions of Indianhood were put through legal frameworks and caste as a notion became a structure of the State.

The national narrative gets integrated with the global narrative, in turn creating invisible inequalities. Openly casteist ideas are rarely, if ever, expressed within our post liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation discourses, but caste nevertheless is an ever-present actor within the culture (most notably in articulations like 'ban on beef', 'reservation' etc). Images circulated by the Press further reinforce ideas of such articulation, those gruesome visuals from Khairlanji, war-torn Chattisgarh or one of the hundreds of atrocities committed against Dalits every single day reproduce the image of Dalit victimhood. These are, if ever, presented overtly as being 'about caste', but they become carriers of what can be thought as the common sense idea of the natural order of the world.

Ideas about Indian values and the general inferiority of Dalits are often mobilised in news debates by furthering the nothing that our nation is overburdened by the non-meritorious, dependent lot, which poisons our notions of progress. One of the important reasons that this view is articulated is because we have had a long history of populist politicians and an increasingly corporatised media that draw from a treasure trove of Puranic stories of the good old days – the days before the Mughals, of imperial adventure, of springtime, of *soma* and *apsaras*. These also include a healthy supply of horror stories about people who went against the system – of beheadings, of boiling oil, of cannibals and men from unknown lands.

The broad outlines that we can draw within these stories is that 'they' are not like 'us', they are criminals, they are a threat, they will swamp us, they will take things that rightfully belongs to us and these strategies have been deployed in every attack at migrants (driven by the city's need for cheap labour) or at subaltern citizens when they are perceived to be voicing their concerns.

These stories take particular configurations at the specific periods, but they go back at least as far as the transitory phase of pre-Turkish feudalism, and start with the concerns of Dalits and Bahujans occupying a space very close to Savarnas (Patil 2006). Migration, in fact, is seen as a compendium of tales of people who are not even considered completely human, or at least those who do not have the same rights as us.

The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in Gujarat's Una district following the brutal assault on them by caste Hindus for allegedly skinning dead cattle has stirred anxiety among India's liberals. The reason that unites the liberals and the conservatives is the fact that the structure of common sense does not help them to rationalise this act on the part of the Dalits.

Blindness to caste realities and framing the narratives according to one's location results in the rise of phrases like 'Hinduism is respectful to all', seen all too frequently in newspaper op-eds, books, public discussions and everyday conversations. These convictions, steeped in the notion of common sense, go into a tizzy when Dalits choose to opt out of Hinduism, resisting and asserting that it is a system that has systemic inequalities.

Broadly speaking, it can be said that the upper caste status is to be associated with higher status and wealth, while a Dalit or a Bahujan identity is connected with poverty and abjection. In this manner, we can see that caste forms an important part of what might be called an ideological repertoire feeding into common sense that seems to assert a kind of rightness and wrongness that are associated with specific positions of power. Caste is as much about ideas of fit or unfit and Brahmin superiority as are most, often expressed these days in terms of a mainstream national narrative, hidden amongst its tales of superiority.

Neoliberal Meritocracy

A third way in which we see caste playing the role of common sense which helps in sustaining notions of neoliberal hegemony is through the naturalising of privilege. The active encouragement that we are continuously bombarded with is to not notice the kind of privilege one is born into. Caste based thinking is thus a close relative of a key aspect within the pedagogy of neoliberalism - meritocracy. The basic idea is this - those at the top are there because of merit which would logically imply that those at the bottom, those that are underrepresented in merit, lack it in some way. (The necessary corollary being that those who lack success must be

responsible for it, must not have worked hard enough through personal flaws like laziness, criminality or parasitism.)

This failure to understand the structures of advantage, privilege, patronage and power that is actively maintained through this is damaging for those whose lives are structured around inequality be it connected to caste, class or gender or any other form of structural inequality. David Theo Goldberg defines meritocracy as that which refuses to acknowledge the role of racism in everyday structures of society, it masks race through the stringent espousal of the normative need for opportunity for all. I think the same can be extended to our understandings of caste as well (1993).

Within the current political discourse, where we see that exclusion is a dominant form of the language that is spoken (which is also used as a means that is necessary to do away with any or every kind of welfare provision) feeds into this kind of institutionalised and structurally casteist commonsensical framework including the assumptions of who ought to be like us and who are not. It harms leaders who are deemed to be unfit for a particular post. It also includes assumptions of who does and does not belong in the top institutions.

Caste and Sexuality within the Neoliberal Paradigm

Cultural and social theorists like Wendi Brown (2005) have helped us widen our understanding of neoliberalism as a project, not just of an economic paradigm but also one of culture and common sense, in a way that all values becomes deductible to an economic, quantifiable value. We see that caste, within the subcontinent, functions as an important form of capital that is seen to emerge post the worldwide liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century.

Neoliberalism's relationship to sexuality is one that is characterised by accumulation of various caste projects, creating political and economic conditions for inciting and controlling caste-based gender and sexual formations of consciousness. In other words, neoliberalism becomes an extension of the recognition, validation and legitimacy in certain processes that include parallel increases in death and devaluation. Yet, rather than generalising neoliberalism as a totalising project, we view it as a contradiction that produces conditions that elaborate and negate contemporary processes of disenfranchisement and alienation. In the resultant process, neoliberalism becomes a process that is surrounded by anxiety and insecurity that is especially active in fields of culture, common sense and among the project of casteist hegemony.

To start off, Duggan (2003) calls neoliberalism a project that shows the distortions built within the social movements of the 1960s, exploiting the grammar of the language of social justice found within these movements calling for upward rather than downward redistribution of resources. On a very similar note, Hong (2011) argues that "In the contemporary [neoliberal] moment, certain aspects of 1960s and 1970s social movements have been mobilised for the aims of power and rendered legitimate, albeit in contingent and constantly vulnerable ways". As Hong tries to look at the process, he sees legitimacy and creation of structures of common sense as one of the main strategies of neoliberal mobilisation. Ferguson, in his book The Re-Order of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Difference, affirms that distorted forms of subjectivity become the mainstay of this apparatus of power. He puts into view the emergence a new kind of power structure that he describes as a "political entity and object of love, a new article called minority culture" (2012:111). Yet, this not a sign of power receding but its transition into a very different form: "the arrival of this new object did not usher in a season of unbridled liberation but provided the building blocks for a new way to regulate" (ibid). The anti-caste rhetoric of post-liberalisation India rationalised the process of privatisation and consequent dismantling of the welfare State through the notions of individual achievement, merit, responsibility and the higher order notions of free trade and free markets. In other words, the Brahmanical state sponsored casteism is actually erased from popular memory. Its exacerbation of caste based atrocities, alienation, dispossession, exploitation and impoverishment, helped facilitate the caste capital as much, in a much more efficient and brutal manner. In a similar vein, neoliberalism's project of upward redistribution and legitimacy have been undercut by the processes of violence and social death, processes that inequitably affect marginalised communities based on caste, class, gender and sexuality.

Within the very specific context of Dalits, Bahujans and Adivasis' exclusion from the material privileges of citizenship, hegemony is seen to be working within the realm of sexuality. Sexuality becomes an important indicator of the Indian State's benevolence and its legitimation of casteist practices. Conjured up as a sign of the modernising times, sexuality becomes the rubric through which the Indian identity and history become symbols for liberal progress and tolerance. A hegemonic deployment of sexuality within the State facilitates the persecution of Dalits, Bahujans and minority groups is seen.

Caste in times of Consumerism and Anti-Insurgency

India currently occupies a time in history when the amalgamation of private interests, neocolonialism and resurgence of Hindutva forces that bring into question the structure, if not the very process of a democracy, and consequently, paradigms of consciousness and common sense. Political culture organises around the modalities of privatisation and commercialisation (Brown 2005). The body thus becomes one that is seemingly devoid of caste. When the champions of the new neoliberal regime invoke their politics, they replace 'ideological certainty for reasonable doubt', and drain the nation of its political intelligence. Under attack is the social contract which has been slowly whisked away; services such as access to adequate health care, housing, employment, public transportation, and education- which were both a safety net and precondition extremely important for the functioning of democracy and critical citizenship. Liberal politics is further characterised by an active movement of anti-insurgency and cultural conservatism that has been practiced by both the Congress and the subsequent BJP regimes. These acts of an all-consuming anti insurgency totalises the politics of the citizens to moral absolutes, thereby robbing them of their politics and a consciousness of resistance is removed from the realm of State power, it also excludes certain groups or communities based on what it considers to be corrupt habits of those immoral actors. The appeal to such moral absolutes of consciousness have an effect where the culture of fear is created which reconfigures politics on very similar Brahamanical lines, but this time hiding its various alliances with particular ideologies and diverse relations of power. Politics becomes an empty shell, shaming the marginalised voices who make power to be accountable, eventually choking the voices of dissent (Giroux 2004).

The militarising of public space at home, leads to a narrowing of Dalit voices, to shrinkage of community space, increasing suppression of Dalit protest at very local and national levels, a growing escalation of concentrated, unaccountable political power which threatens to move the very foundations of the democracy. Authoritarianism moves forward with the political consciousness becoming one of fear based on national security, surveillance and control rather than critical questioning. Militarisation is increasingly not one that is directed outwards but something that is becoming the driving force for social change at home. Catherine Lutz articulates that the multiple registers and complex processes of militarisation have consequently shaped social life and common sense during the twentieth century. She states:

> *By militarisation, I mean ... an intensification of the labour and resources allocated to military purposes, including the shaping of other institutions in synchrony with military goals. Militarisation is simultaneously a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs*

> *and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organisation of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them. Militarisation is intimately connected not only to the obvious increase in the size of armies and resurgence of militant nationalisms and militant fundamentalisms but also to the less visible deformation of human potentials into the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and to the shaping of national histories in ways that glorify and legitimate military action.*
>
> (2002:723)

When Lutz looks at militarisation, it is an all-inclusive look at the discursive, ideological and material relations that power has in the service of hegemony and a consent building war. But militarisation also plays the role of a powerful apparatus of cultural control that works its way through everyday life spawning particular notions of purity, masculinity, creating a spectacle which helps in mobilising an affective investment in militarisation. In other words, we see ourselves being part of politics of militarisation, through a naturalising of the order by means of common sense that emphasises "social processes in which society organises itself for the production of violence or the threat thereof" (Kraska 1999: 208) and which in turn creates certain notions of militarisation that "inject[s] a constant military presence in our lives" (Duggan 2003: 40). This culture of profit and militarisation seeks to eliminate democratic spaces from the public sphere where self-reflection and self-interest become legitimised by a new and ruthless social Darwinism that is played out every night on the night time news as a metaphor for genocide, the celebration of structures of oppression and the promotion of war against the marginalised and their collective notions of solidarity and struggle (Bourdieu 1998).

Conclusion

The question that I posed at the start of this essay, about the seeming anomaly between the progression of neoliberalism and the deepening of the caste hierarchies, undoubtedly points towards the necessity of reading caste within different registers to help in accommodating the processes of neoliberalism and caste simultaneously. Members of marginalised communities have not had it easy with the incessant race for transnationalisation.

Thus, we see that caste becomes an important rubric through which we need to analyse globalisation and privatisation. We might add here that Brahminism could be thought of, not just as a creation of Manu, but a legacy of colonialism as well. If we see the power relationship

between the coloniser and colonised being clearly demarcated, the distinctions are to be seen just as clearly within the broad paradigm of globalisation, and an inertia within the continuation of colonial spaces in human motions.

Neoliberalism is to be seen with all its fascinations since the 1980s, as a project of transformation in the structuring of capitalism and emergence of new centers of both power and capital have made new in-roads within the notions of cultural practices in the subcontinent. Neoliberalism is then to be thought of as a historical product.

Further to this, the issues that are created at these crossroads through the contradictions which define modernity as it is globalised makes things more nuanced and make the geography of the phenomena increasingly complex. Caste becomes an issue, not of India, or South East Asia or even Asia, but a globality as notions of social and material become more blurred with a reification of the categories of nation, ethnicity, civilisation and culture. It also becomes clear to us that while casteism is globalised, its material conditionalities draw from very similar sources of both power and knowledge.

It is important in the struggle against casteism, to be reminded that the conceptualisation of caste should not be overdetermined by concepts of class, as we see caste to be seeping into the concept of class. The struggle against Brahminism is not just an intellectual struggle but a material project steeped in consciousness. Our discourses are of consequences where ideological and social formations are concerned and putting neoliberalism in its place is an important step towards this end.

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