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UNDERSTANDING INDIAN SOCIETY :
THE RELEVANCE OF PERSPECTIVE
FROM BELOW

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PREFACE

This is the fourth monograph in the series launched under the UGC Special Assistance Programme Phase II in the Department of Sociology. The author Professor T.K.Oommen was invited to deliver his inaugural address at the National Seminar on the theme Understanding Indian Society: Perspective from Below which was organised by the Department on March 7 & 8, 2001. This monograph is the revised version of his address.

In the study of Indian society, sociologists/social anthropologists have largely used indological, structural-functional and Marxian approaches. The indological approach focuses on certain ideals such as dharma (duties), karma (deeds), belief in punarjanma (rebirth) and moksha (salvation), Hindu traditions, caste system, monogamy as a value and the like. This approach was used to understand the idealised life of Hindu society. In the third quarter of the twentieth century, the structural-functional approach of Parsons and Merton was used in which the aspect of integration was emphasized. The Merton’s reference model was popular especially in the studies of social mobility. After independence, as a result of land reforms and wage legislations dynamic relations in the agrarian society were observed to be dialectical and so the Marxian approach was found to be appropriate. Since the protest/reform movements have taken place in the last two centuries, the impact of those on the life of oppressed segments has been studied. In the studies on social movements the theory of relative deprivation, value conflict theory and the later subaltern approach have been used. But these above mentioned approaches are not adequate to comprehend the complete
reality. While launching the social reform movements the non-Brahmin social reformers not only critically examined the Brahmanic order of Hindu society but developed their philosophies and ideologies also. They questioned the historical writings and offered interpretations to the Brahmanic production of knowledge. Their thought has provided the base to develop the formulation of non-Brahmanical perspective. Fortunately, in Maharashtra, Sharad Patil and Gail Omvedt have evolved the non-Brahmanical perspective. But it requires to be systematically formulated. In addition, there are certain issues of defining/questioning great tradition, little tradition and counter tradition, mainstream, Brahmanism - a system of oppression, gender inequality, identities of several underprivileged groups, social justice, methodology of oral traditions and interpretations of myths etc. In this background of sociological knowledge of Indian society, the publication of Professor T. K. Oommen's paper has been considered significant.

In the process of production of knowledge, since social scientists are predominantly drawn from the twice-born caste Hindus their biases are reflected in their studies. While expressing the need of the perspective from below Oommen mentioned what Marxologist D. P. Mukherji said in the first presidential address to the All India Sociological Conference held in 1955 that all our Shastras were sociological. The counter view is featured out in the address of Oommen. Opposition of the Dalitbahujans to subscribe the notion of all India or Pan-Indian Hinduism, absence of sharp sexual division of labour, gender relations in the Dalitbahujan society - largely open and equalitarian, the undervalued occupational knowledge of Dalitbahujans associated with production of wealth - a conspiracy of caste
Hindus, neglect of the contributions made by the Dalitbahujan intellectuals, and the incorporation of revolt against the Brahmanic order in the Hindu system are some of the facts mentioned in the address justify the need of the perspective from below.

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Indian society is a product of long and complex historical process. The seven major events contributed to the formation of this process are Aryan ‘advent’, the emergence of Indian Protestant religions — Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, the entry of non-Indic religions into the sub-continent as immigrant religions, the Muslim ‘conquests’, western colonialism, anti-colonial freedom struggle and the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 on the eve of the British exit (Oommen 1998 : 229-40). The product of this long process is a four-in-one society.

Like all societies Indian society too is stratified based on age, gender, rural-urban differences and class but unlike many of them Indian society is marked by considerable cultural heterogeneity too, particularly because of a large number of speech communities counting more than one thousand five hundred including some six hundred tribal communities. But India’s religious plurality complicated by the uneasy co-existence of religions of Indic and non-Indic origin is a rare phenomenon in most contemporary societies. However, what is unique to India is the all pervasive caste hierarchy legitimised through the Hindu doctrine of Karma and Reincarnation.

As one observes the complex creature called Indian society at the turn of the century four major trends of social transformation are in evidence (Oommen 1998 : 229-40). First, a transitional trend from cumulative to dispersed dominance. If status, wealth and power were earlier concentrated in the hands of the twice-born caste Hindus — Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya — accounting for a mere 15 to 20 per cent of the population, now there is an incipient trend towards dispersal of political power
to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) together constituting the vast majority of Indian population. This is the resultant of universal adult franchise introduced in India with the arrival of independence.

In addition to the dispersal of political power there is also a limited dispersal of wealth among the above categories heralding the birth of a middle class among them. But the reasons for the emergence of middle class vary across these categories. The policy of protective discrimination reserving seats in educational institutions and government service are primarily responsible for the emergence of a bourgeoisie among the SCs and STs. The Kulaks among the OBCs are a product of agrarian reforms which abolished absentee landlords and transferred land to the tenants and share croppers drawn from among them and the Green Revolution which provided subsidized inputs and assured minimum prices for agricultural products to owner cultivators.

The changes in power and wealth are not matched by change in status, that is, weakening of the importance of ritual dimension. Inter-dining, inter-marriage and social interaction between the twice-born and the SCs are still rare particularly in rural areas. This results in status incongruence, that is, their upward mobility in wealth and power is not matched by status mobility. In the case of OBCs status incongruence results from their low representations in the high echelons of bureaucracy and professions even as they became politically powerful.

The second major trend in social transformation manifests in the gradual movement from hierarchy to equality resulting in the decline of traditional collectivism and emergence of individualism. With the emergence of individualism the salience of traditional collectivities manifested through joint family, jati, village etc.
are being relegated to the background. While there is no neat and tidy displacement of collectivism by individualism the birth of the Indian individual is clearly in evidence. I am stressing this point because conventional wisdom upheld the view that individuals do not exist in Indian society unless one becomes an ascetic (Dumont 1970). This is not true any more.

The third important trend in social transformation in India is the simultaneous demands for equality and the assertion of collective identity. The Indian constitution unambiguously assured equality and concomitantly social justice to all individuals irrespective of caste, creed or class. Initially, most of the traditionally disadvantaged groups believed that the implementation of constitutional promise will automatically follow and the maintenance of their group identity is irrelevant. At any rate, the stigma associated with their identity prompted them to abandon it and plumb for assimilation, as the process of sanskritization implied. But gradually it dawned on them that individual equality per se will not emancipate them and they need to re-invent dignity in their collective identity. The expressions such as Dalits and Adivasis in the place of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes clearly point to this trend.

While the Constitution does not clearly recognise the identities based on religion, caste, language and tribe, it does not completely overlook these identities either, if these are disadvantageous to the collectivities concerned. This ambiguity is evident both from constitutional provisions and administrative measures as exemplified in special rights conceded to religious minorities (e.g., upholding their civil codes), the policy of reservation in the case of SCs and STs, the recent steps taken to provide representation to OBCs and women in selected contexts, the special treatment extended to tribal communities and the linguistic
reorganisation of Indian states as administrative units. All these steps have inevitably given fillip to the relevant collectivitites to assert their identity when it pays off.

The fourth transition that I am referring to is the movement from *plural society to pluralism* (Oommen 1997(a) : 259-71). Plural society as initially conceptualised by J.S. Furnivall (1948) alludes to an arrangement in which different social and cultural segments uneasily co-exist interacting in the economic context but prohibiting legitimate transfusion of blood (intermarriages) or transmission of culture. This arrangement prevailed within the Hindu society through the operation of jajmani system for centuries. Latterly, the twice born castes interact with the OBCs and SCs both in the political and economic contexts but have very limited interaction in socio-cultural contexts. This description also fits in the mode of interaction which prevails between Hindus, particularly the upper castes, and those who profess the non-Indic religions in the rural areas.

I suggest that the four trends of change that I have listed namely the movement from cumulative to dispersed dominance; from hierarchy to equality and the consequent birth of individualism; the simultaneous demand for equality and identity and the gradual transition from plural society to pluralism (the dignified co-existence of different socio-cultural segments as equals in the polity) have tremendous methodological implications for the study of Indian society. However, I do not propose to discuss all the dimensions but shall confine my attention to those which are relevant for the present theme, namely the perspective from below.
II

The ‘view from below’ is an old and persisting issue in social science, particularly in Sociology and Social Anthropology. But concomitant to the emergence of the traditionally oppressed and stigmatized collectivities, as partially emancipated and empowered ones, their conventional silence is being replaced by audible New Voices. In turn, the need for their representation in the process of knowledge production is grudgingly being recognized. That is, the very framing of the issues and terms of discourse have changed over time. The demand for a perspective from below is an indication of this massive change in society. If earlier those who occupied the bottom of society were invisible due to the cognitive blackout perpetuated by upper caste, middle class, urban, male researcher, today they are in full view and demand their legitimate share of representation in the production and representation of knowledge.

All societies have their bottoms. Thus the bottoms of societies which are homogenous and merely stratified are occupied by women, youth and proletariat. These categories have questioned the knowledge produced by their counterparts — men, adults and bourgeoisie. Over a period of time, the specific role of each of these disadvantaged categories in the production of knowledge has come to be recognised.

In the case of culturally heterogeneous societies if the constituted segments are unequal either because they are numerically small or economically weak or culturally ‘backward’ or all of these, the tendency is to ignore them in the representations of reality. There are numerous instances when these ignored or marginalized communities demand to be represented in the process of knowledge production. A familiar example in India is the neglect of the numerous less developed linguistic communities.
Their emerging identity assertions are also indicative of the clamour for their representation in the context of knowledge production.

In plural societies the unrepresented bottom categories are invariably viewed as outsiders to the society as in the case of followers of non-Indic religious categories in India. Voices of protests from them have gradually led to the provision of space to their experience in the context of knowledge production. For example, the distinctiveness of religious minorities is increasingly recognised in studies of Sociology and Social Anthropology in India.

The bottom layer in hierarchical societies is constituted by the cumulatively deprived section of society. Unlike women, youth, proletariat, culturally backward or alien segments, which are deprived in one of the contexts, the cumulatively deprived are subjected to multiple deprivations. They are found only in hierarchical societies. The ex-untouchables of India afford an ideal type example of this category of bottom.

For the reasons listed above I shall confine my attention to the most ‘oppressed bottom’ found in hierarchical societies. It is also necessary to indicate here what the perspective from below is not. First, the view from below should not be confused for the study of other cultures, the conventional avocation of anthropologists (Bettie 1964). Anthropologists did not consider other cultures, at least by definition, as inferior but only as different. It is another matter, however, that the colonial context in which Anthropology was practised did create an inferior-superior dichotomy between native tribes and western anthropologists. However, once the native anthropologists started investigating their co-citizens who were tribals this dichotomy became irrelevant. At any rate, the rise of anthropologists from
the tribal communities rendered redundant the original distinctiveness of anthropology as the discipline which studied other cultures.

The specificity of anthropological 'method' is the distinction between etic and emic approaches, both of which entailed the technique of participant observation which is often mystified (Oommen 1969: 809-15). But the demystification of participant observation was bound to happen when anthropologists started investigating their own societies. The point of interest for the present is that in hierarchical societies the anthropologists drawn from upper castes were invariably reluctant to 'participate' at the bottom rung of the society given the norms and values associated with the practice of untouchability. Should an effort to participate in the life-world of the 'untouchables' were to be made by a savarna anthropologist it will be disapproved not only by his own jati peers but also by the untouchables themselves given the grip of the doctrine of Karma and Reincarnation on them.

Even the distinction between etic and emic approaches remained problematic. The etic approach identified and studied social reality independently of the natives' cultural judgements. The emic view, in contrast, is an insider's view. However, there can also be different emic views in so far as different cultural segments within a society have their own constructions of social reality and value-orientations about them. The researcher should not appropriate the monopoly of defining the people, nor can he uncritically endorse the self-definitions advanced by the people. Having said this I should insist that self-conceptualisations such as Dalits are emancipatory as contrasted with terms such as exterior castes, panchamas, harijans, scheduled castes, etc. What is required is resorting to double hermeneutics to incorporate both the emic and the etic perspectives.
The different cultural segments in heterogenous societies may have differing insiders' views. Further, the lack of co-terminality between political boundaries and cultural boundaries creates problems. This is exemplified in the difference between an Indian Bengali anthropologist studying the Bengali society spread across India and Bangladesh and his investigating Tamil society, divided between India and Sri Lanka. While in West Bengal he is both a political and cultural insider (that is, a citizen and a national), in Bangladesh he is a cultural insider (national) but a political outsider (non-citizen). In Tamilnadu he is a political insider (citizen) but a cultural outsider (non-national) and in Sri Lanka he is both a political and a cultural outsider (non-citizen and non-national) (for an exemplification of these concepts see Oommen 1997(b)). It is difficult to believe that these differing identities of the investigator will not affect the process of investigation. But yet it is important to insist that the etic-emic distinction is an insider-outsider distinction and not an inferior-superior distinction.

Second, the perspective from below should not be confused for the much heralded subalternist perspective. Subalternists focused their attention on the circles of elite politics and have emphasised the insurrectionary activities and potentials of the ‘subaltern classes’ (artisans, poor peasants and landless labourers which are essentially economic categories) who according to them possessed self-conscious and coherent conceptions of resistance that were directed against rich peasant, urban traders/merchants or the colonial revenue administrators. Subalternists claim to have unfolded the incapacity of nationalist historiography to incorporate the voices of the weak into the project of history writing (see Guha and Spivak (eds.), 1988).

The setting for ‘subaltern history’ was provided by colonial India and the freedom struggle. If nationalist historians were
macro-holists who ignored the "voices from below," subalternists are micro-individualists who missed the view from above (Oommen 1985). But both confined their attention to different dimensions of and actors involved in the freedom struggle. The perspective from below goes much beyond this. It focuses on the implications of the nature of social structure and the location of researcher in the process of production of knowledge. Hierarchy as a feature of Indian society existed much before colonialism arrived and freedom struggle started.

Third, the view from below is different from the proletarian, feminist or generational perspective. Class in the sense of social gradations exist in all societies and there are no immutable boundaries between classes. Both embourgeoisement and proletarianisation are perennial possibilities. Indeed, de-classing has been advocated and successfully attempted by many investigators. There was a time, say in the 1960’s, when the widespread belief prevailed that the youth alone had the capacity to cognise truth; those above thirty were adjudged to be incapable of perceiving truth (Feuer 1969).

The extremists among feminists seem to take the view that only women can understand and analyse issues concerning women. The corollary of this is that only men can understand their problems. Even as one conceives the existence of differences between men and women, those who belong to the same class within a society and share the same culture have many things in common irrespective of gender differences. But as I have noted above differences based on class, age-groups and gender exist in all societies, including homogenous societies. And, both age-groups and sex-groups are distributed across classes. To a large extent method verstehen advocated by Max Weber will help one to cope with the problem.
Fourth, in plural societies the segments even when are equals remain cultural strangers. That is, even as they interact in the economic and political contexts which results in interdependence, culturally they are insulated. To the extent socio-cultural insulation persists, hostility could develop between them. But they could be and often they are, equals. What strangers suffer from is stigmatisation. Following Simmel’s notion one can even accept the advantages of doing research among strangers (1950). The point I want to make for the present is that the perspective from below is the specific need of hierarchical societies, such as that of India, wherein the society is so tightly compartmentalised that one segment cannot penetrate into the other.

Having said the above I need to add a caveat here. If one were to take a position that there is no possibility of an outsider ever investigating a segment of society to which s/he does not belong, then each segment will have to produce its own set of researchers. This will leave some segments uninvestigated for ever. For example, who will study children, invalids, imbeciles or insane people? At any rate, there is an advantage for those segments which can be studied by its own representatives and by outsiders also. None of these preclude the need to have a perspective from below.

III

The need for a perspective from below is inextricably interlinked with the hierarchical nature of societies such as those of India. All the available evidence suggests that Indian sociologists and social anthropologists, predominantly drawn from the twice-born caste Hindus, at least until recently, have largely neglected the social realities of the lowly placed and oppressed — the OBCs and the SCs. This is not simply a matter of praxiological aberration but also that of theoretical blackout.
I propose to pursue this argument invoking the first presidential address to the All India Sociological Conference held in 1955 delivered by D.P. Mukherji. There are several reasons why this address is used as a case in point. First of all, it happens to be the first presidential address. Secondly, D. P. Mukherji was not aligned with or sympathetic to the Hindutva ideology. Thirdly, many thought that he was a Marxist, although he preferred to call himself a Marxologist. Fourthly, there was no doubt that he was a ‘modernist’ and a ‘progressive’.

In his address, which was pregnant with fertile ideas, Mukherji insisted that it is not enough that an Indian Sociologist be a sociologist but be an Indian first. And, how does sociologists acquire Indianity? By situating himself in Indian lore, both high and low. But, ‘unless sociological training in India is grounded on Sanskrit, or any such language in which the traditions have been embodied as symbols, social research in India will be a pale imitation of what others are doing’ (Mukherji, in Saksena 1961:23) Although Mukherji wanted sociologists to be familiar with Indian lores both high and low he thinks that our traditions are embodied in Sanskrit. There are several problems with this advocacy.

First, only the twice-born caste Hindus were allowed any access to Sanskrit, the traditional texts of knowledge. By insisting that Sanskrit is the route through which Indian sociologists can cultivate originality Mukherji is narrowing the recruitment base of Indian Sociologists. Second, by the time education became a constitutional possibility to the vast majority of Indians, Sanskrit ceased to be a live language. Which is to say, if one is not traditionally privileged to learn Sanskrit he can scarcely have the opportunity to learn it. Third, the reference to ‘such other languages’ may be an allusion to Pali and Tamil, but does it include Persian too? If indeed all the four languages — Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil and Persian — are under reference, one cannot talk
of tradition in the singular; indeed there is a multiplicity of traditions in India.

Fourth, even if one takes such an accommodative view, still all the traditions under reference are Great Traditions. And, the traditions of the vast majority of the peoples of India are Little Traditions confined to folk-regions. No sociologist can afford to neglect this rich variety of traditions and remain authentic. In fact, there is greater possibility of cultivating sociological originality by familiarizing oneself with these grass-root and ground realities. Fifth, it is difficult to comprehend why training in sociology grounded on Sanskrit and/or other such languages can inform sociology of originality. By Mukherji's prescription - an overwhelming majority of Indian sociologists are pale imitators. On the other hand, those handful of Sanskrit-knowing sociologists hardly demonstrated any originality: they invariably indulged in exegetical analyses. In turn, this would blur the distinction between Indology and Sociology.

Mukherji in his presidential address entitled, 'Indian Sociology and Tradition', made another curious observation pertinent to the present discussion. He said: 'All our Shastras are sociological'. There is an interesting link between the need to anchor sociologist's training with knowledge of Sanskrit and the observation that the Shastras are sociological because the latter are in Sanskrit. But a few uncomfortable facts may be noted here.

First, our in the observation stands for Hindus. But, Indian Sociology cannot be equated with Hindu Sociology, for the simple reason one out of every eight Indian is a non-Hindu. Second, Hindu Sociology necessarily implies Muslim Sociology, Buddhist Sociology and the like, the very anti-thesis of sociology as a humanistic and encapsulating enterprise.
Third, *our* does not stand even for all Hindus, the majority of the Hindu population (the OBCs and SCs) have no role in the making of these Shastras and they are treated as congenital inferiors by twice-born Hindus. In fact, the *Panchamas*, those of the Fifth Order (the ‘untouchables’) are not even accounted for in the *Chaturvarna* theory which deals with the Hindu Doctrine of Creation. Not only that, the Shastras also assign a marginal position to the women of even the twice-born varnas. To put it pithily, the Shastras privilege upper caste males and treat the vast majority of Hindus as inferiors. Can they be sociological? Sociology cannot ignore the experiences of any segment in society much less treat them as inferior. The mission of sociology is all embracing and ought to be humanistic.

While the Shastras are theological, they cannot be sociological. Theology deals with the issues of Ought. The concern of sociology is primarily with Is. That is, Shastras are prescriptive and normative. True, Sociology cannot ignore the normative and it should take into account the Ought, but its primary concern is with reality as it exists and operates in society. To anchor Indian sociology to Hindu Shastras is to undermine sociology’s secular and humane foundations. Finally, I may recall here that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his debates with M.K. Gandhi already in the 1930s insisted that only if the Puranas and Shastras and all scriptures that supported caste (i.e. inequality and injustice) were disowned can he call himself a Hindu. As is well known, the challenge was not admissible to caste Hindus and Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956.

Indeed the ‘book-view’ of sociology in India was/is excessively in favour of projecting the view from above. To counter this, the field-view would have been greatly helpful if executed with care. But that was not to be. Almost all field
studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology until recently were undertaken from the perspective of twice-born middle class Hindus. For example, there is hardly any study of village, a much celebrated theme in Indian Sociology, which views the village reality from the perspective of Cheri, Maharwada or Chamar Mohalla. And, in field studies as in texts those below the pollution line are designated as Chandals, Mlecchas, exterior castes untouchables etc., if they are referred to at all. Even the designations such as Scheduled Castes proffered by the state and Harijan coined by Narasinh Mehta and propagated by M. K. Gandhi are not acceptable to them. That is, the very labelling of these categories has been debilitating and stigmatizing. The compelling need for a view from below will have to be situated in this context.

But let it be noted here that the bottom layer of Indian Society itself is no more uniform and homogenous. The upwardly mobile, urban educated Dalit elite are qualitatively different from the cumulatively dominated rural, illiterate, economically stagnant Dalits. While it is the rise of the former which eventuated in the plea for giving proper space to the voice of the latter, embourgeoisement of the urban Dalit elite should not be allowed to endanger the cause and interests of the cumulatively oppressed rural Dalits. That is, the perspective from below is the epistemological privilege of the cumulatively oppressed. Those who are incorporated into the establishment often get disembodied from their roots.

IV

It is time that I indicated the theoretical foundation of the approach designated as the ‘perspective from below’. If experience and knowledge are inextricably interlinked in social science, then the location of the knowledge producer, the researcher, in social structure is crucial from the perspective of
production of knowledge. That is, the perspective from below is necessitated due to the politics of location. The process of production of knowledge and the advantages and disadvantages emanating out of one's location in social structure are inevitably linked. One can dismiss this formulation as excessively ideological, indeed political, and hence harmful to the generation of 'objective' knowledge, only at the cost of ignoring the quality of knowledge produced. And the proof of the quality of knowledge is in its content and orientation.

There has been a cognitive black-out in Indian social science, at least until recently, as far as knowledge regarding the life-world experiences of Dalitbahujans. The fact that the life-styles of upper castes and Dalitbahujans vary dramatically in terms of food habits, worship patterns or gender relations is tacitly acknowledged. But instead of squarely recognizing these variations and explaining why they exist, the dominant tendency in Indian sociology, at least until recently, has been to suggest that the Dalitbahujans are abandoning their way of life in favour of the life-style of caste Hindus. This is what sanskritization is all about. In this perspective, not only the norms and values of caste Hindus are privileged but they are also christened as norm-setters and value-givers for the society as a whole. Conversely, the norms and values of Dalitbahujans are knocked out, ignored, stigmatised and de-legitimized. Indeed, the field-view has made Indian Sociology more authentic compared with the book-view, but its authenticity has been largely partial. To correct this imbalance we need the perspective from below.

If the white anthropologist indulge in the 'invention of primitive society' to invoke the felicitous phrase of Adam Kuper (1988) the twice born sociologist of India projected and idealised picture of Hindu society mainly based on classical texts. Even
the field view has not covered this deficit entirely. That is why, we need a counter view even if it is an idealised version of Dalitbahujans. I shall attempt to present such a view based on the recent ones of Dalit intellectuals (see, for an example, Ilaiyah, 1996). What is important about this view is not its facticity but its promise. Such a view was non-existent and considered to be inadmissible in the lexicon of savarna social scientist of India.

First, the Dalitbahujans do not subscribe to the notion of all India or Pan-Indian Hinduism, not even regional Hinduism, ideas widely accepted in Indian sociology (see, Srinivas 1952). In fact, the Dalitbahujan identity is essentially a localized caste identity and a series of mini-traditions, not even a Little Tradition. Their religion does not admit patriarchal Hindu gods and absence of professional priesthood is a pronounced feature. In the Hindu pantheon as and when the Dalitbahujan gods are acknowledged, they are assigned a low status matching the status of their worshippers in the social structure.

Second, the Dalitbahujan women enjoy considerable economic independence and sexual equality. Absence of sharp sexual division of labour is a prominent feature of Dalit society. These traditional values of Dalit-bahujans are actually much acclaimed values of modernity and even post-modernity. But they tend to lose these values as and when they get sanskritised.

Third, in the Dalitbahujan society gender relations are largely open and equalitrian: the parent-child interactions, including father-child interactions, are intimate; widows are respected and not stigmatised; widow remarriages are practised. The incorporation of patriarchal values into their society is changing these norms and values.
Fourth, while there is an over-evaluation of the occupations of caste Hindus (priesthood, administration, trading) there is a studied lack of respect for the occupations of Dalitbahujans such as agriculture, arts and crafts. In turn, knowledge associated with production of wealth is undervalued. Generally speaking, only knowledge relating to the occupations of caste Hindus is given importance. There is a conspiracy of silence regarding the knowledge associated with Dalitbahujan occupations.

Fifth, the language used by Dalitbahujans in their everyday life is different from that used by caste Hindus. Their language is not only non-sanskritic but not even standard vernacular languages such as Hindi, Tamil or Bengali. Not only that their language is not recognised by the state but it is stigmatized by the people of caste Hindu society both of which undermines Dalitbahujan identity. The Dalitbahujan names are quite different from those of caste Hindus but as they are disparaged they are inclined to shift either to sanskritised or anglicised names.

Sixth, the ideas generated by the organic intellectuals of Dalit-bahujans are hardly recognised let alone communicated to the new generations. Even when Dalitbahujan intellectuals are recognised reluctantly (e.g. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar), the politics of knowledge transmission invariably renders their contribution insignificant. Given the localisation of Dalitbahujan castes to their respective linguistic regions, their leaders rarely become all-India figures even when they have made signal contributions as illustrated by the cases Mahatma Phule in Maharashtra, Basava in Karnataka, Naryana Guru in Kerala or Narla in Andhra Pradesh. Consequently, the basic cleavages and differences between caste Hindus and Dalitbahujans remain unnoticed.

Seventh, generally speaking the exclusive political voice of Dalit bahujans remains muted and submerged due to the absence
of political parties which champion their cause. As and when such parties emerge and operate their influence is confined to certain pockets. For example, the Republican Party of India founded by Dr. Ambedkar is virtually confined to Maharashtra. And the recently established Bahujan Samaj Party’s influence is confined largely to Uttar Pradesh. Consequently, the political voices of Dalitbahujans are being articulated through mainstream parties wherein they remain subordinated.

Eighth, given the numerical importance of Dalitbahujans, universal adult franchise did make them politically salient. But this is not adequately matched by their upward economic mobility, in spite of numerous development programmes initiated by the government to improve their economic condition. The change in the ritual context is the least which continue to bestow on them low social prestige. Consequently, the existential condition of Dalitbahujans is characterized by status incongruence. Their efforts to interrogate the entrenched castes often result in atrocities against them.

Ninth, although rebels challenged the Hindu caste system periodically in the last 25 centuries and tried to establish separate religions or sects, they did not succeed; they were silenced by incorporation into the Hindu system, usually assigning a low status. Gautama Buddha was a Kshatriya who revolted against the Brahmanic Order. But he was gradually incorporated into the Hindu pantheon as an avatar of Vishnu and rendered powerless as a reformer. This has happened to the rebels of Bhakti movements too which erupted between eighth and eighteenth centuries in different parts of the Indian subcontinent. This clearly points to the near impossibility of reforming the Hindu caste system so as to provide a respectable position to the Dalitbahujans. That is, in so far as caste hierarchy exists the perspective from below would remain relevant.
Finally, it is necessary to recognise that knowledge has two uses: Oppression and perpetuation of hegemony and institutionalization of equality and justice. The view from above sometime directly and almost always indirectly aided and abetted oppression and hegemonisation. The view from below can and should provide the much needed antidote to this facilitating the institutionalization of equality and social justice. This is the rationale and justification for the perspective from below which can contribute to the nurturing of a robust civil society.
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The Author

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