

## Restoring The Presence: Constructing Dalit Theory and Countering Epistemic Injustice

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### ABSTRACT

The production of knowledge has been a contested venture since ages. Social groups dominating knowledge production have dominated and appropriated material as well as intellectual spaces. In India, Dvijas (twice born castes) have dominated the reflective space and restricted Dalits from articulating their symbols and ideas. In addition to maintaining material subjection, this institutional gatekeeping has excluded Dalits from the production of knowledge, making their contributions to epistemology invisible or invalid in the eyes of the prevailing discourse. Dalit expression of their experiences, narratives, knowledge, art and symbols has been a matter of socio- cultural transgression for dominant castes. The paper invokes the concept of epistemic justice to create an egalitarian intellectual landscape by pursuing Dalit theory. It profusely argues for advancing Dalit intellectual representation in form of theory to develop an alternative world view. It investigates the politics of knowledge creation and the mechanics of epistemic imperialism as means of upholding caste-based hierarchies. By emphasizing Dalit stories and intellectual traditions, the study makes the case that Dalit theory must be developed and validated as a transformational framework that may subvert prevailing epistemologies. The paper advocates politics of epistemic reconfiguration of spaces as pathways to achieve epistemic justice.

**Keywords:** *Dalit, epistemic, injustice, knowledge, power, experiences, theorization, egalitarian*

‘While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern. Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality’ (Freier, 2007).

### ***The Imperative for Dalit Theory: Reclaiming Intellectual Spaces***

Theory is a set of interrelated concepts and ideas for understanding events or phenomenon. It is explanatory, conceptual and normative. The question is, why is it significant? Theory serves many purposes. It generates knowledge, explains relations, draws conclusions, develops norms etc. Thus, theory is said to have a command over knowledge formation

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Received: June 04, 2025; Revision Received: June 26, 2025; Accepted: June 30, 2025

process and its preliminary role is to define and determine standards in society. Theory, in process of knowledge generation, remains a significant factor in justifying and sustaining power. Its power to construct ideas, assist socio-political system to construct reality. Foucault examined this relation between knowledge and power and said “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it”. So, if needed, theory is also used for manufacturing reality. For instance, since long, East is often explored with Western lens. Western categories have defined what East is and what it should be. Political scientists like Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee and many others, have criticized this colonial authorship. The mystification of eastern countries dominates the perceptions of West towards East. Hence, East, in form of postcolonialism, required representation or articulation of their ideas and identity to undo ethnocentric misrepresentation by the West. Hence, theory (in form of ideas and concepts) also serves the purpose of representation of idea and identity. It provides an alternative perspective to look upon society. In the same way, Dalits require theoretical representation to undo epistemic imperialism. For ages, they have been deprived of right to learn and reflect. They were always kept busy in menial works and never allowed to escape their contexts. Guru mentions “ghettoization into inferiorized manual spheres, reflecting the closed character of society, resulted in loss of the confidence that is so important in developing the theoretical potential in social sciences”. The nature of occupations was so alienating that it left no scope of innovation and imagination. In post independent era, Dalits were proved to be ‘late comers’ for every opportunity because of their educational backlog. In the post independent era, movement was unfolded in form of Neo Buddhists movement, Dalit panthers’ movement (1972), formation of political organizations like Republican Party of India (1957), All India Backward SC, OBC and minority communities Employees Federation (1971) and Bahujan Samaj Party (1984) etc. But, it didn’t provide sustained consolidation of ideas and hence, were appropriated by politics and opportunism sooner or later. Teltumbde while reflecting over the question of theorizing Dalit movements mentioned that Dalit politics has created a space in every sphere but “it could not do so thereafter when it had to consolidate its gains particularly in the context of substantial changes that befell during the post-independence times. During this period, it appears to have been eclipsed by the shadow of its own past”.

The theories and ideas, regulating society, are culturally rooted and structured to run society in certain ways. That’s why, ideas working for the oppressor cannot serve the purpose of oppressed. Dalits have been oppressed structurally for which they need to create their own categories and concepts to produce theory for their universe. The emergence of Dalit critique began in form of literature; poetry, stories, autobiographies, paintings, which brought different voices on the surface for the first time. Works like *Jhoothan* (1997), *Why I am not Hindu* (1996), *The Prisons We Broke* (2009), *Golpitha* (1972), *Akkarmashi* (1991), *Karukku* (2012); have been memoirs of the Dalit lifestyles and culture. The need is to extract the experiences out of these texts, which give an insight of how caste system dehumanizes their lives. Guru is of the view that though, the literary critique has been successful in highlighting their plight, Dalits cannot rely on poetry alone. He says Dalits use poetry as a substitute of theory when it can never be. It may add aesthetics and can be more popular but can’t compensate for theoretical representation. He mentions “Poetry helps the Dalit in making connections through metaphors, but not through concepts. It is the theory that is supposed to do that”. Theory creates and relates concepts and carries immense explanatory power. Another reason why theory must matter for Dalits, is to defy the subject- researcher binary. Shudras have been an empirical site for academia as Guru uses the phrase ‘theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras’ representing the birth right of Twice born castes to read

and produce knowledge. This task of producing ideas helped upper castes to generalize one dimensional reality. Hence, for reconstruction Dalits need to deconstruct the empirical-theoretical binary and theory certainly serves the purpose of construction and representation. One more reason to stress upon the methodological shift is because of the aim of the research itself. When a researcher studies the experiences of the marginalised, the aim must be to benefit the community and shouldn't be limited to capturing of experiences. Vadiya argues "the knowledge generated by the research should be made accessible in order to improve the conditions of their existence" (Vadiya, 2018).

However, one might think that there have been Dalit movements in the country, which were not necessarily product of any established theory as such. But these movements were not devoid of ideas and concepts. In this case, one should consider temple entry movement led by Ambedkar in 1927, which was described as a powerful protest by Dalits to enter in the temples primarily. Guru has decoded the temple entry movement as not simply a movement of getting entry in the temples to worship but to counter the irrational denial of self-respect and justice. According to Guru, "Ambedkar uses the principle of labor contribution all rallying point in order to achieve this twin pedagogical purpose....In his view, the contribution generates the language of right to enter temple". The above description of the temple entry movement links several concepts such as concept of Space, notion of self-respect, moral recognition and labor contribution principle. This interconnected explanation of movement creates concepts and relate them in a metaphysical manner which goes beyond physical entry of Dalits into temples. It decodes entry to temples not only as an action but produces an experience of collective resistance to domination and symbolizes the ideas of self-respect and equality. This is the work of theory, which brings the underlying ideas to the surface to make a whole picture and explain phenomenon beyond materiality. It presents a set of beliefs and messages to the common masses. It has power of abstraction which generalizes consciousness and binds all in one framework. Dalit theory project is required to use these concepts and categories to construct theories for consolidating the diverse Dalit community.

Another insight into the question '*Why Dalits require theoretical language?*', comes from the idea of '*ownership*' to '*authorship*'. Experiences are crucial to human life but there is remarkable distinction between owning an experience and articulating or authoring the experience. Sarukkai mentions, "We are related to our experiences as owners: we own our experiences but do not author them". Being an author of the experience is to have an autonomy to explain and articulate the experiences in a manner one wishes. Thus, authorship and ownership confer different rights upon owner and author. Merely owning the experience is a less advantageous position than being an author of the experience because of getting misrepresented and getting no representation. Guru emphasizes that only the owners of the experiences should have exclusive right to authorship. Guru is of the view that Dalit community is the owner of authentic experiences but merely owning the experience do not serve the purpose. For discovering Dalit self, one needs to come out of the shell and must author these authentic experiences of untouchability, discrimination and humiliation. This would provide authentic representation to the community. Many Dalit writers such as Baby Kamble, Om Prakash Valmiki, Kancha Ilaiah etc. (including Ambedkar) have owned as well as authored their authentic experiences and served reality in striking way. This unearthing of the personal narratives has helped in creating collective consciousness. Therefore, it is imperative to filter ideas and beliefs out of these real-life narratives.

***Countering ‘Negation’: Impediments in pursuing Dalit theory***

There are two possible ways to understand the challenges of pursuing Dalit theory; firstly, the challenges which are external to the community, secondly, the internal problems of the community or challenges from within. The first category consists of challenges which are historic and structural in nature. The empirical- theoretical binary, deliberate exclusion and subjection to menial tasks, gatekeeping of knowledge and learning spheres, discrimination in educational circles, negation of Dalit scholarships etc. are major historic- structural hurdles in front of Dalit theory. The institutional discrimination in universities poses a great challenge to Dalit theory today. Ironically, Dalit studies have got recognition as a course in itself but the Dalit intellect has only got temporal recognition. It is not purely absent or excluded but “negated”. It is negated in a sense that the recognition has not brought inclusion and comfort in academic circles. Additionally, an interesting explanation of the exclusion is found in problem of ‘double bind’ (concept given by Saitya Brata Das, as quoted by Kawade). The problem of ‘double bind’ is identifying oneself as Dalit intellectual binds that researcher in to the Dalit studies in such a way, that it serves the purpose of hegemonic order. It works as soon as Dalit begins pursuing Dalit studies, “...hegemonic order happily allows the discourse Dalit studies while depriving it all of its militant, radical possibilities... and they reduce Dalit intellectuals only to be fit to do Dalit studies...”. Thus, it further creates boundaries rather genuinely opening the social sciences. Kawade calls this tendency a ‘Brahmanical consensus’ which expects Dalits not to touch any other domain of knowledge except Dalit studies.

Another impediment stems from the ‘inegalitarian’ approach of academia in India towards Dalit account of knowledge which is associated with the proliferation and promotion of knowledge. The term egalitarian means believing in equal worth of all individuals. The term egalitarian is derived from the French word *egalite* means equal. This is a trend of political philosophy which caters to the socio, economic, political equality. It supports the equality of outcome rather being limited to equality of opportunity. Is equal society also an egalitarian society by default? No. The term equal and egalitarian are related but not similar. Egalitarian or egalitarianism and equality both see humans as equals or should be treated as equals but egalitarianism goes further by emphasizing on distributive aspects. It goes beyond to the moral notion of individual equality. Egalitarian principle in academics sought to achieve equal access, equal chance to produce and disseminate theory. Egalitarian principle in social sciences, is an attempt to bring ethics into theory. The ethics of theory is to theorize in a way, in which the moral purpose of theory can be attained. Gopal Guru has addressed the egalitarian deficiency, of social sciences in India, for ‘gatekeeping’ of theorists and theories belonging to Dalits. Guru reflects on the principle by taking a stand on academic exclusion of Dalits and their view points. According to Guru, “Egalitarian principle provides both moral opportunity as well as capacity to interrogate exclusionary nature of social sciences practice in the country”. Egalitarianism in social sciences is an opportunity to reorganize the social sciences in India by invoking a sense of moral responsibility of researcher and interrogating his claims and intention to promote certain categories or arguments. The principle would discard such innate or established norms which treat some groups as “born from thinking head of the pure bodies”. Guru takes this argument further and addresses tendency of appropriation of Dalit universe by non-Dalits for pursuing something fresh in theory. Egalitarian principle would challenge this attitude of non- category scholars on the moral ground of experience. Egalitarian principle will provide two-fold freedom to all; firstly, by allowing all groups to enter in the theoretical realm and secondly, by opening common categories and concepts to be used by all social scientists rather promoting ‘politics of naming’ and arbitrary categorization of people as capable or incapable. This would undermine the practice of theory as ‘hegemonic necessity’ and promote as ‘ethical and social

necessity'. In context of Dalit theory, the egalitarian principle serves as a ground for addressing the epistemic imperialism in theoretical terrains of Indian social sciences practice. The application of egalitarian principle would deepen the discourse and diversity available in Indian society and can lead to discovery of original concepts and theories from subalterns. It would encourage and build an enabling environment for new perspectives or old narratives with fresh insights. It would bring the empirical *Shudras* versus theoretical *Brahmans* binary to end and bring Dalits out of the category of empirical objects.

The challenges from within the community arise primarily from their failure to move beyond temporal gains and this results in false notion of progress. Many Dalit academicians get trapped in the temporal gains and forget their actual purpose towards empowerment of their community. Guru mentions that most "Dalits are vulnerable to the temporal power that doesn't flow from theoretical practice but from what are considered to be the easy if not more glamorous spheres of mobility". Additionally, they are so overwhelmed with empirical studies that they are not fascinated to produce their own theory. They are satisfied with the little space they have created in academics in pursuing empirical research. This develops a sort of distaste for theoretical representation. Apart from this, Dalit movement has not been able to detach itself from already existing ideological frameworks such as liberals, Marxists, subalterns etc. They have not been able to produce their own concepts and categories. Consequently, they either have to join liberal framework of multiculturalism, rights, individualism or Marxists concept of class struggle, stateless society, exploitation etc. Wankhede observes that "since Marxists still operating in frameworks of class and anti-imperialism, promoters of social justice find it difficult to fit in". The tendency to prefer liberal or Marxists lens limits originality and contextuality of Dalit movement. It kills the possibilities of creation and creates categorical dependency to get adjusted into these pre-existing frameworks.

### CONCLUSION

Epistemic injustice represents a foundational inequality, determining the hierarchy of knowledge and knowledge producers. Theory, situated in lived experience, assist as a significant tool to challenge the epistemic oppression. In this context, Dalit theory has served as a powerful discourse countering dominant world narrative. It has been a project of visibility against invisibility and emancipation against oppression. Its success lies in its flourishing as a young discipline, also referred as 'qualitative transformation' in Indian academia. Yet, the academic success of the discourse struggles to translate in to political and social gains. The persistence of caste and caste-based politics raises question over its final and ultimate success as a discourse. This unalignment between theory and praxis demands a transformative engagement to restore the presence of Dalit agency.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Tiwari, M. & Khobragade, V. (2025). Restoring The Presence: Constructing Dalit Theory and Countering Epistemic Injustice. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(2), 565-570. DIP: 18.02.056/20251002, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1002056