
UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DALITS

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Notional Clarifications
- 4.3 Philosophy of Caste-Domination
- 4.4 Philosophy of Liberation
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Key Words
- 4.7 Further Readings and References
- 4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to introduce to the students, first, the meaning of philosophy of liberation in general, then, make them understand the underlying principles which are embedded in the philosophy of domination in the Indian soil. After analyzing the principles of the philosophy of Domination, the principles in Caste-domination can be counter questioned and the principles needed for the philosophy of liberation with special reference to Dalits can be arrived at. So, at the end of this unit, the students will be able:

- To understand in general what the philosophy of liberation is.
- To recognize the principles underlying the philosophy of domination of dalits.
- To arrive at the philosophy of liberation in favour of Dalits
- To discover the truth of Indian society and be motivated for liberative action.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of liberation is a recent discourse. Nevertheless, its antecedents are older than modern European philosophy. It can be said that it was implicit even in 16th century when the Europeans were dominating the peripheral worlds. Then in the 18th Century the philosophical justifications were born. Only in the 20th Century, especially in Latin America, Liberation Philosophy was first articulated. The intricacies of Latin American Liberation philosophy is not the main concern. It is mentioned here in order to show that in the past there was no systematized philosophy of liberation established that got the approval of the scholars of philosophy.

In fact, the philosophy of liberation cannot be understood from only one angle. Neither can it be understood in vacuum because liberation of any group of people takes place in a context. Unless we become aware of the context, it is difficult to understand the meaning of philosophy of liberation. Now the impending task

before us is to formulate the philosophy of liberation from the point of view of the most oppressed, the dalits, in India.

4.2 NOTIONAL CLARIFICATIONS

Is it possible to philosophize authentically and systematically in a dependent and dominated culture? The reason for this doubt is that the facts of underdevelopment and then of dependence and the fact of philosophy appears to be mutually exclusive or inclusive only with difficulty. Yes, we can philosophize from the dominated culture, the dalits culture. Only thing is that it will be different from the view point of the dominators' culture. The hypothesis of the philosophy of liberation from the oppressed point of view cannot have any allegiance to the philosophy of centre. This discourse must have a point of departure and must come to distinctive conclusions by a different method. Its point of departure is an ethical-political option in favour of the oppressed of the periphery. It is respect for the exteriority of the Other; geopolitically and socially speaking, listening to the word of the Other, the dalits.

Dalits

Since we are interested in analyzing the philosophy of liberation with special reference to Dalits, it is appropriate to ponder over "Who are dalits?" There are many opinions aired throughout our country regarding the category called 'Dalits'. Though there are certain disputable names like 'harijans', 'untouchables', 'outcastes', 'the last born', 'depressed class', 'SCs and STs and so on to designate the lower caste people, the most oppressed people of India, the category called 'Dalit' was accepted by the majority of the dalits in spite of some scholars opposing it. It was first advocated by Dalit Panthers and its major ideologue was Baburao Bagul.

Prof. Gopal Guru, in his edited book *Intervention* says, "It is a revolutionary one for its hermeneutic ability to recover the meaning of the historical past of the dalits. Also, it is not a mere linguistic construction but based on the materialistic epistemology. Its strength is that it has an ontological ability to define itself the other lower castes like tribals, toiling classes and women... it is interesting to note that the category Dalit was used no less than a person than Dr. Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly publication *Bahishkrut Bharat*. It was not a mere a linguistic expression. The term Dalit was defined by him in a comprehensive way. He says, 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology"

4.3 PHILOSOPHY OF CASTE-DOMINATION

Having clarified the main concepts like 'philosophy of liberation', 'the possibility of philosophizing for the oppressed people', and 'who are dalits?' the principles embedded in the philosophy of domination of the upper caste people can be studied. That study is needed to construct the philosophy of liberation through counter arguments. So, the task ahead of us is first to expose the principles that construed a philosophy of caste domination. Then, we have to engage into a discourse of a philosophy of liberation by counter arguing the principles of caste domination.

Main principles embedded in the practice of discrimination

One-dimensional Concern: Subject-Object Relation

In India, in the social and religious structures Caste ideology is deeply rooted. The very existence of dalits is viewed from the unitary concern of caste-dominated society where 'caste' alone matters. The being of a dalit is treated like an object. She/he is considered as 'It', an object that can be used, misused, manipulated, and exploited. The relation between the caste-ridden persons and the dalits remains to be Subject and Object relationship. A value dualism is created with the help of many binary opposites between Caste-Self (Pure-self, Twice born) and Dalits (Impure non-self, the last born), where the caste-selves occupy a higher status than the dalits (no-caste people). It is a denial of values against the affirmation of one's essence and existence, as a human person in relation to other humans.

The philosophical mind-set, that leads to treating dalits as 'It,' needs to be clarified here. In the 'I-It' relation, caste-self understands himself/herself as a closed 'I'. S/he is a closed totality. And there is no possibility of recognizing the dalits as the Other. Instead, they are commodified and manipulated as 'It'. Since the very logical construct of the caste pattern is 'I-It' relation, Casteism can only regulate a relation of hierarchy (Four Varnas and Avarnas), hegemony and subordination, and cannot exercise a genuine just-relation with the dalits. There exists a gradation of lower caste persons in the Caste hierarchy, each occupying a territory of its own in antagonism with lower castes. In India, the total weight of casteism falls heavily on the shoulders of the dalits as they are in the lowest rung of the society. This discriminatory practice is systematized, legitimized, institutionalized and religiously sanctioned, especially by Hindu religion, for further consolidation and extended exploitation.

Colonization of the Life-World of Dalits

In the philosophical frame of Casteism, the concept of 'self' is uncritically defined and accepted as a unified self, (shelved self) as one substance and one complete being. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, sociologist and theologian (1878-1965) in his writings expresses his recurrent interest in ethical problems and their relationship to everyday existence, as framed by the encounter between self and the Other. Emmanuel Levinas, a postmodern thinker, observes that the subject-object dualism is not restricted to the obscure 6th century BC; rather, it can be found throughout the length and breadth of Western Philosophy. Such a perception of reality is predominant in the history of philosophy, from Plato's theory of forms to Spinoza's monistic 'substance' and more recently Husserl's attempt to ground an ontology in the concept of 'Being'. Levinas is highly critical about the Western philosophical trends concerning the concept of being as one, indivisible and unified substance. One may even be aware of the fact that this kind of philosophy would pathologically be concerned only about the unity and totality of the substance to the extent of neglecting the Other. This will, in turn, pave the way for the development of an objective knowledge of this totality of 'self'.

Johnson Puthenpurackal, while writing about Philosophizing from Dalit perspective says in the book titled, *Subaltern Perspectives, Philosophizing in Context*, "(according to Jacques Derrida, the proponent of 'Deconstructionism')...Western thinking – and Eastern thinking no different – has been based on a hierarchical system of binary opposites of the center and the

periphery. The center has been taken as that which guarantees meaning and truth, and what is at the periphery has meaning only in reference to the center. Philosophy, morality, social structure etc., have been built exclusively on and for the centre, and the periphery is totally excluded. It is true in Indian society where the so-called High Caste always occupy the top of the social ladder and the dalits are pushed to the periphery to be in dismay and dismal. Thus the ideology and the structure of casteism colonize the life-world of the dalits. The everyday life of the Other (dalits) is fragmented and programmed as per the norms of the caste-dominated religious and social structures.

Discrimination and Alienation

The acceptance of unitary concern of the caste-self will not only colonize the life world of the dalits but will also discriminate them. Martin Buber throws more light on this subject. He recasts the subject-object duality as a relation between 'I' and 'It'. The relation 'I-It' denotes a situation where the self confronts an external object-world and proceeds to give this world shape, meaning and a pragmatic 'use-value'. Here, self is accepted as an indivisible substance that exists in itself. The concept of completeness is embedded in the substance itself. It does not need the Other for its completion. Here one can be reminded of the marriages conducted in India within one's own castes. If married outside, the purity is considered to be at stake. This kind of absolutization of 'I', the self, will meditate upon its accepted perfections (presuppositions) of the self. Absolutization of the caste-self and alienation of the dalit-self will lead to a practice of domination supported in any caste society. There are greater dangers involved here. The subject begins to contemplate passively without giving any room for relation with the Other. It also provides the foundations for objective knowledge and formulates the norms (Manu Dharma). Those norms will be the ideal and absolute norms. They will be the points of reference for all and the certitude of the objective knowledge is unquestionable.

The Being of the caste-person and its power to know, to conceptualize, to manipulate and interpret the reality of the Other is made identical. To be a caste-self is to possess the knowledge of the power to dominate. Knowledge and the totalized self are made identical. Consciousness is believed to be the characteristic of the caste-self whereas materiality, is the characteristic of the dalits. The conscious self (High caste are intellectuals), therefore, is deemed superior and the so-called unconscious, the dalits (the lower castes are uneducated and uncivilized) is doomed to be inferior in the order. Such a solipsistic megalomania is a source of violence and domination, because it conceals the reality that the self is heterogeneous, a product of its alterity with the Other.

Unitary Utility Approach

The self (Caste-self) would relate with the Other (dalits) only in terms of the pragmatic or use-value. Utility becomes the criterion for relationship. The nearness of the Other is calculated in terms of domination. In this subject-object relationship, genuine dialogue has no value. The proximity of the Other is not respected and the intimacy of the Other is not recognized. "The I-It relation is one of detachment and mastery and is regulated by a purely technical interest in manipulation and control or what Adorno and Horkheimer have identified as 'instrumental rationality'." Thus, dalits are reduced to mere instruments that are of utility value in any caste society. They are not allowed to recognize their nature as human beings. In Indian society when other caste persons may sometimes

be disliked, the dalits are always despised. The caste perspective of reality redefines their nature. Any claim that is made in and through this conceptual frame is bound to be lopsided, and therefore, liberation of dalits within a caste pattern is not possible.

Casteism has crowned itself as the absolute norm. Looking at the problem of dalits from the perspective of the totalitarian caste (Indian) world-view, the problem of the liberation of dalits can only be partially addressed, because the very foundation negates dalits. If addressed so, it could only bring non-sustainable solutions. Genuine liberation of the dalits lies outside the fallacious casteistic perspective. When the perspective itself is wrong, whatever may be the way in which reality is looked at, will also be wrong. Therefore, there is a need for a radical shift in our perspective. The alternative perspective should necessarily be freed from the faulty thought pattern of the caste ideology, that is, there should prevail a genuine relation between the self and the Other, between the so-called high castes and the dalits.

4.4 PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION

Humans are not isolated individuals. To be human is to be related to the Other in a society. Social institutions are the ground where social relations are realized. The 'I' has its existence only in relation to the Other. No individual can claim that s/he leads a genuine life isolated from the Other. Michael Gardiner says that "Human life is best grasped in lived experience, in the expressions of these experiences, and in the understanding of these expressions." They cannot be kept in isolation and studied because, "the entire universe is thoroughly *interrelated and organic*; what one is and what one makes of oneself takes place through dependence on others, through relationships and connectedness", says Albert Einstein.

We are social beings, but not in the sense that we would be incarcerated to one particular society without having any proximity or nearness or interaction with any other society. On the other hand, we are supposed to have relation not only with the individuals in our own religious or cultural societies but also with the individuals of any other human societies. We are social in the global sense and hence we are interchangeably social. Whatever may our society be at present, we belong to the whole human society in a wholistic sense. Our 'I's are dependant not only to humans but also to the non-human world, the world of nature. We depend on the entire universe, each entity interacting with the Other. Thus the foundation of our very being is characterized by dependency, mutuality, community and relationship.

When such mutuality or community is historically, culturally and religiously caste-strained, it is imperative that it must be restored again. The process of restoration of the genuine human relations would also then be alternatively historical, cultural, religious and ideological. Any such process has to begin with the analysis of the particular context of the problem, without losing sight of the holistic communitarian concept. Since the practice of caste-discrimination affects the Indian community as a whole, it should be responded primarily in the way that the dalits are affirmed. It means that, the denied identity of dalits has to be restored by means of an alternative process of thought and action. It is both a process of reflection of an alternative philosophy and a social action for liberation.

‘I-Thou’ Relation as against Subject – Object Relation

As against the principles of colonization by the caste-self, the freedom of dalits needs to be affirmed. To counter the principle of ‘I-It’ relation found in the caste pattern, the ‘I-Thou’ relation has to be fostered, as an alternative principle. To promote the ‘I-Thou’ relation at the global level, a proper thought pattern needs to be employed. The understanding of self matters a lot here. The insights of Emmanuel Levinas, the Lithuanian-French thinker is worth-mentioning here. He conceives the concept of *self* from a different angle. Levinas may be located more firmly within the phenomenological existentialism of Husserl and Heidegger, although, at the same time he is sharply critical of the aspects of this tradition. He attacks the idea that the self is a unified subject. It means that he rejects the way the concept of self has been understood by the Western thought. “This is what he refers to as the ‘Parmenidean’ or Eleatic view of the subject, whereas Heraclitus maintained that ‘all is flux’. Parmenides sided with such Eleatic philosophers as Zeno and argued that reality was monolithically stable and everlasting because, it was composed of a single, indivisible substance. It followed that Being was itself equally homogeneous and indivisible, ‘that which is’, and hence did not contain any hint of its negation, or ‘not-Being’.”

Levinas’s position is that “reality itself is not ‘all of a piece’. Rather, reality is complex and internally divided, a fractured mosaic of positive and negative forces that partakes of otherness as well as sameness. It follows that the subject itself is not a unified entity – of the sort that Parmenides compared to the ‘mass of a well-rounded sphere – but radically *pluralistic*, in as much as it is generated out of the alterity between the self and the Other.”

Such a conception helps us understand the need for relationship with each other. When we understand ‘I’ as pluralistic and not as a unified and substantiated entity, we allow space *in* the self and advocate interaction with the Other. The responsibility to interact with the Other is not something added to the self, but is understood as an inherent characteristic of the self. The self has to respect the proximity of the Other, and extend its ‘self’ necessarily to the space of the other ‘selves’. Levinas’ understanding of the self is that it is “radically *pluralistic* in as much as it is generated out of the alterity between the self and the Other. An understanding of this alterity requires that we cultivate a sense of ‘exteriority’, and develop an awareness, of our *relationality* to the world and other selves. The self is no more understood as *one* by Levinas but as plural, allowing space to be social, in the sense of having relation with the other selves. Thus, the notion of Eleatic school regarding being is overcome, and the possibility of having ‘I-Thou’ relation is realized.

The Interrelated ‘I’ as against Colonization of Life

In the I-Thou relation “the ‘I’ appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity. The I-Thou is one of ‘natural association’. It is a qualitatively different type of relation, since it establishes a new type of entity – a ‘we’ – that cannot possibly emerge from the I-It, which is only a concatenation of isolated egos, and hence not a genuine relation at all.” In any caste-perspective frame, caste-selves are ‘I’s, the isolated egos in an exploitative relation with dalits. A world which has denied the personhood of dalits can have only the isolated ‘I’s, in solitude, isolation and individualization. It cannot respect the other selves, not only dalits but also the other caste persons other than their own.

Only 'I-Thou' relation can instill 'life' in the relationship. When there is... "I-Thou relation, the self comes to the realization that it cannot be self-consisting, autonomous ego, but part of the category 'in between' or what Buber sometimes calls the 'ontology of the interhuman'." In any 'I-Thou' relation, the individual self (caste-self) has to lose its ego, the indivisible oneness, superiority and the centre. No individual self can exist, without having relation with other selves. All selves will have to recognize that there is a deeply felt need for being social and communitarian. The 'ontology of the interhuman' has to be made aware of. The realization of self as communitarian, the interrelated I, prepares the ground for relation with others.

Relation is Imperative as against Discrimination and Alienation

Now, it is clear that the caste-self can no more be closed up within its own viewpoint. We ought to accept mutuality, compatibility, reciprocity, and adaptability. In this alone lies real security of human existence. Thus the 'I-Thou' relation paves the way for 'We', a real unity, and a genuine community because the basic nature of the self is communitarian. When the self comes out of the delusion that it is one, complete and perfect, there emerges the spontaneity of being social and being global. The self becomes aware of the fact that the relation with the Other is a genuine 'living intercourse' and is a 'natural association'. It is inevitable and obligatory. There is no need to have any immediate or eschatological purpose for the manifestation of one to the Other. The relation is neither instrumental nor a means to attain an end. In this interaction, the presence of oneself to the Other, itself is the end. It is the process of attaining the wholeness of the parts, and in turn, the wholeness of the Whole.

Inherent Responsibility and Affirmation of the Other as against Unitary Utility Approach

In the unitary concern the meaning of existence is fragmented in itself. As such it cannot become the source of existential meaning. The fundamental and foundational truth is that the subject is not a thing but a relation. In the wholistic concern, which we have taken as the prime principle of our paradigm-shift, each one values the responsibility for the Other. Nearness of the Other is the way in which the communitarian nature of self is maintained and balanced. The alterity between the self and the Other should be recognized, and exteriority of the Other has to be taken note of for the sake of proper interaction. Michael Gardiner opines that "The Other is ... always-already *in* the self, and any viable ethics must take this into account... The relation between self and other cannot be thematized; it cannot be translated into rational, conceptual thought, for this would destroy the unmotivated and spontaneous character of the encounter. It simply *is*. It is a relation of pure immediacy, an 'epiphany'. So it is only 'beyond' cognition... One cannot remain a neutral bystander, indifferent to the presence of the Other."

The inherent responsibility of the self to the Other is not merely derived from the wholistic concern, but it is an in-built component of human nature. It already exists in the consciousness of the self. The interaction between 'I' and 'Thou' is not rationally supported, for rationality is always purpose-oriented. Any purpose-oriented relation, does constrain human relations. Ethically, relationship cannot be a purposeful activity. It is a genuine flux of reality. It is a spontaneous aesthetic flowering of the self into the Other self. Self has to relate and be related with others mainly to maintain the wholeness, the equilibrium of the world.

In order to attain the wholeness of the Whole, the individuals need to relate with the others in their society. In this relation, the individuality is not eliminated or fused but maintained as it is. The relation with the Other is towards the wholeness of the society. It pervades, permeates and transcends any social fringes or boundaries. Therefore, the ‘I’ is plural, communitarian, relational and interrelatedly social. When ‘I-Thou’ relation is maintained in the interrelated-social level, then, the wholeness of the whole, the equilibrium of the Whole will be restored and the identity of the Other is affirmed.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we are introduced to the general understanding of philosophy of liberation. As a responsible citizen of our country, it is imperative that we understand the Indian context and its deep rooted casteism. It is not enough that we understand that there is a problem. It is our bounden duty to alleviate the problem. Since there has been no systematic way of presenting the philosophy of liberation with a special reference to dalits, an attempt has been made to first bring out the principles embedded in the philosophy of domination in the caste society. As we have analyzed it is the one-dimensional mind-set which understands his or her self as a closed self and the Other as ‘It’, an object to be exploited. This leads to colonize the life world of the Other and discriminate them by alienating them from genuine relationship. Therefore, there exists only a unitary utility approach towards others. Then, a search is geared up to arrive at the philosophy of liberation by counter questioning the principles of domination. In the process, we become clear that we are interrelatedly social as our self is not a closed self but communitarian having an in-built relationship with the Other and so our relation with others is imperative and our responsibility to each other is inherent. If justice is denied for one group of people, then it is an ethical necessity to restore justice that is denied. It is social justice. It is an affirmative action for the liberation of the Other, the dalits. It is a process of struggle and suffering. It is commiseration. It is a suffering with the discriminated, the captives (*anawim*) against injustice. It is a cross towards resurrection.

It is a protest against and protest for. It is a process of going against the caste pattern as well a process of liberation. It eliminates the different forms of alienation of dalits in any caste society. By doing so, we could pave way for the real liberation of dalits. The Patterned way of thinking, the ‘closed’ life-style of caste-selves, as solitary and isolated egos, has to be thrown overboard, and a dynamic Process of Liberation has to be ignited and initiated so that there can exist the relation of ‘I-Thou’ encircling the whole world.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you mean by principle of discrimination?

.....

.....

.....

2) Philosophy should be non-philosophical. Substantiate the statement.

4.6 KEY WORDS

- Alterity

:

Relationship with the Other is referred here. That relation is understood as in-built in human nature.
- Exteriority

:

The space of one’s self which is in others is referred here. The self is not individualistic as it is commonly accepted, but it is to be understood as communitarian which means the space of my ‘self’ is in other selves. That space has to be reached by others in relation and so, the human relation is imperative.
- Proximity

:

The nearness of a person in terms of relation is referred here.

4.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Dirks Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind-colonization and the Making of Modern India*. Permanent Black, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002.

Dussel, Enrique. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Tr. Aquikina Martinez & Christine Morkovsky. Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1985.

Guru, Gopal ed. *Atrophy in Dalit Politics*. Mumbai:Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 2005.

Louis, Prakash. *The Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2003.

Michael, S.M, ed. *Dalits in Modern India – Vision and Values*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007.

Puthenpurackal, Johnson. J, ed. *Philosophical Methods – Through the Prevalent to Relevant*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004.

Rodrigues, Valerian, ed. *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Thadathil, George, ed. *Subaltern Perspectives– Philosophizing in Context*. Bangalore: Asians Trading Corporation, 2005.

Thorat and Umakant, ed. *Caste, Race and Discrimination – Discourses in International Context*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004

4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The High caste people mind-set is closed to other castes, because they do not come out of their closed shell (self). Therefore, their concern towards others will not take into account of others, but only themselves. It is called unitary concern. This will not allow other castes to enjoy their freedom and lead a dignified equal status in the society. Instead, their life is fragmented and colonized and thrown into the periphery. Thus they are alienated from the main stream of life and are exploited in all walks of life to suit the needs of the 'high caste' people.
- 2) For analyzing the philosophy of liberation with special reference to dalits, the students should feel one with the suffering of the dalits. Otherwise all the exercises will only be academic. It will be merely an armchair philosophy. Philosophy should be non-philosophical; it should enter into the ground realities to change it. It is necessary for the students, therefore, to identify that the self is not a unified one, but communitarian, interrelated I. the interrelation does not stop with only humans, but extends to other creatures and to the whole world. When we are able to understand that we are interrelatedly social, and social in the global sense, then, we begin to realize that our relationship with others is obligatory and our responsibility towards others is inherent. If so, there starts a genuine relationship without discrimination and alienation.