

Working towards overcoming psychological consequences of oppression: an example from India¹

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This article focuses on the psychological consequences of oppression in the form of caste-based discrimination in India. These psychological consequences are described as processes in the minds of oppressed people, processes that are often unconscious.

First the position of the so-called untouchable castes (Dalits) is described. Then a report is presented of a Group Relations Conference (which is a temporary experiential learning institution), during which Dalit-leaders, who have taken the responsibility to fight for the human rights of their brother Dalits, met executives of other humanitarian organisations and managers of business houses. During this conference, the Dalits were able to identify unconscious processes based on oppression that were interfering with the effectiveness of their organisations.

Keywords: caste, Group Relations Conference, unconscious processes

The caste system

One of the Indian sub-continental tragedies is the acceptance of the hierarchy of groups. This hierarchy is based on the principle of purity and pollution determined by birth. It has existed for several millennia and it is indeed very hard to make a dent in it. In fact, even many people who belong to the so-called *untouchable* castes or other so-called *impure* castes believe in this hierarchy. They

do so not only because this social structure has been strongly associated with religious beliefs. Unconscious psychological processes such as projection, introjection and internalisation play an important part. Projection can take place when a person perceives impulses and wishes inside himself that he considers as bad or dirty. The person may then become afraid of these 'evil' wishes and impulses, and try to remove them from his awareness. One way of doing so is by denying that these 'evil' wishes and impulses are a part of himself, while simultaneously stating that other people are guided by the same 'evil' wishes and impulses. In other words, the person projects the evil inside himself onto other people, whom he then sees as bad.

The caste system itself can be said to be based on the psychological process of projection, in which every caste projects the evil within their community onto members of the lower castes.

Introjection or internalisation means that a person starts to believe the judgements of other people and adopts them. This occurs when the members of the lower castes actually start to believe that they are inferior and impure - they have then introjected the projections of people from higher castes. For example, I once tried to persuade a fam-

ily belonging to a caste rather low in the local hierarchy (the *Bagdi* caste of West Bengal), to offer me a cooked meal that included boiled rice. They considered it a sinful act on *their part* because eating a meal consisting of boiled rice cooked in their home would 'pollute' me! It was enough for the family that I have a surname which is common among the members of the high Brahmin caste. That I am not a Brahmin, but according to Manu's laws an outcast since I have not gone through the thread ceremony, or that I have renounced religion itself, made no difference in their perception of the ritual distance between us (Chattopadhyay, 1991a). While a large number of Hindus belonging to higher castes actively discriminate against lower castes, many Moslems (Ahmad, 1973) and Christians (Swarup, 1987) too practice some form of discrimination based on caste (where the caste prior to conversion is known) or caste-like hierarchy. As a result it has fallen to a minority to fight on behalf of the majority of low-caste people who, as a result of introjection and internalisation, passively accept this degrading caste hierarchy based on the twin concepts of purity and pollution. Lawrence (1979) has dealt at some length with the impact on society of such passivity on the part of the majority, in the context of studying urban guerillas and similar phenomena. Lawrence's hypothesis is that so long as the majority of any community remains passive in the face of felt injustice meted out by the establishment, a minority will unconsciously express the anger on behalf of the majority, sometimes in very violent forms.

Dalits are at the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy based on the twin concepts of purity and pollution. This societal position limits them in terms of choice of occupa-

tions. They have been oppressed throughout the recorded history of India, relegated to toiling and 'polluting' tasks like agricultural labour, disposing of dead bodies, working with leather, cleaning toilets and sewers etc. Many Indians continue to believe that others would be polluted by their touch, even by their shadow. To avoid such 'pollution', Dalits were segregated and denied access to many community facilities like schools, temples, wells, water tanks, etc. To this day, thousands of villages have a separate area for Dalit houses (including houses built for them by the government), separate wells for Dalits, class rooms where Dalit children sit separately, tea shops with separate glasses for Dalits. Such discrimination occurs despite laws against such practices².

There are today about 160 million Dalits in India, about 80% of whom live in villages. Although a community of 160 million is quite large, within India's current population of 1 billion they constitute a minority community.

The word Dalit has several meanings³. These are, according to a standard Bengali-English dictionary, 'trampled underfoot, trodden, chastised, coerced, quelled'. These meanings can also be found in most other Indian languages, including Sanskrit. The socio-psychological conditions of those castes reflect most or all of the meanings noted in the dictionary, in terms of the experience of those who belong to those castes and in the perception of a minority of liberal and *thinking* Indians, whichever caste, religion or socio-political group they may belong to.

Why are people treated as less than human?

India boasts of democratically elected governments both at the Centre and in the

States. How is it possible that in a democratic country a number of people are treated as less than human by the majority of the Indian population? I will offer four hypotheses, which all refer to unconscious phenomena (c.f. Chattopadhyay, 1991c).

The *first* hypothesis posits that in every country certain very threatening negative internal processes embedded in society are projected onto less privileged minority communities, so that the majority need not confront the evil within. Further, in many situations the less privileged communities introject and internalise these negatives. The punishments that are then unconsciously meted out to those on the receiving end of these negative processes sometimes take terrible proportions.

The *second* hypothesis deals with my concept of 'the invader in the mind in Indian metaculture' (Chattopadhyay, 1991b). Briefly, this hypothesis is built on numerous examples from everyday life. These examples show how persons who have contextually more power over others abuse their authority. This could be seen in a post office where the clerk takes his own time to deal with a queue of people because the clerk has contextually more power than those who are standing in a queue on the other side of the wooden counter. It is as if the clerk is not there to serve but to grant privileges, and the citizens queuing up do not have the right to demand efficient service. Rather, it is as if they are some kind of supplicants! Or again, this could be seen in the way superior role holders in business houses sometimes demand services from subordinates, services that have no relation to the tasks allotted to either of them by virtue of their respective roles. This process of breaking the role boundaries of contextually weaker people (a process that has been described as 'invading the boundary')

is extended to groups as well. Since the caste hierarchy in most situations runs parallel to economic hierarchy as well, higher castes quite often abuse their power over lower castes. This abuse of power takes on vicious proportions when it comes to very low castes. In the article referred to above, I have offered more evidence to suggest that as a defence against exploring the presence of an 'invader' in the mind of every Indian community, all kinds of boundaries of a section of the underprivileged communities are invaded and violated by the majority.

The *third* hypothesis deals with the term 'underprivileged' in the Indian context. Historical evidence suggest that this term is a defence against confronting the reality of the privileged elite's denial of basic human rights of the less powerful in this subcontinent. For example, the popular epic *Ramayana*, which is read by a majority of Indians with religious reverence, describes how Ram remorselessly beheaded a person of low caste, just because that man was trying to develop the wisdom of the average very high-caste man. These low-caste people were denied access to knowledge and the means of personal development through meditation etc. Since this person had somehow managed to find access to such knowledge, Ram considered it justified to behead him without further compunction! This serves as a model for many people today. Obviously it does not mean that they feel free to behead others. But they accept that the upper castes reserve all kinds of social opportunities for themselves. As a result lower castes are denied not just social privileges, but such basic human rights as equal opportunity for education and livelihood.

The *fourth* hypothesis deals with the paradox created by the rich cultural diversity in the Indian subcontinent over the millennia.

While enriching many aspects of the Indian personality, the diversity on offer has also resulted in people internalising many apparently conflicting cultural traits and realities. This process has created an Indian personality characterised by an inability to manage these many internal differences. Instead of coming to terms with and dealing with uncomfortable internal realities, some parts of the personality are experienced as bad, and then split off and projected onto other people (or groups) in the environment. The age-old caste system provides a readily available possibility for projecting the worst parts of oneself onto the members of the lowest caste.

Group Relation Conferences

Group Relation Conferences (GRC's, also known as Working Conferences) are temporary educational institutions for learning from 'here and now' experience. By 'here and now', one means working with experiences that are readily available to all the participants (both members and staff) within the conference. To that end they provide opportunities for the participants to explore their experience in the GRC as it takes place in different events – experiences that are both conscious and unconscious. A GRC usually runs for 5 to 14 days and several *events* are built into it.

For example, in a GRC organised for a software company's top management, an event known as Social Dreaming Matrix took place. During this event the members present their dreams of the night before and the associated thoughts and feelings. When one member offers his or her dream and associated thoughts and feelings, other members too associate their thoughts and feelings with that dream. One of the dreams that were presented was that the member took delivery of his laundry. On returning home he opened the laundry packet and found that it consisted of neatly folded undergar-

ments, which were well ironed, but dirty. The consultant's hypothesis was that since undergarments are usually made from cloth of soft texture, the dream was pointing towards guilt associated with their work. This hypothesis was based on association of soft wearing apparel with software and dirty but well ironed undergarments were associated with suppressed bad feelings. Once this hypothesis was offered, quite an amount of data came out on the guilt associated with the salary structure of the software industry in India as well as the envy associated with how much their America-based associates were earning by selling the software developed in India and exported to America. The members could then begin to look at how these suppressed feeling were in fact getting in the way of their efficiency.

Each event has a primary task, as also its own configuration, depending on the task. Some events consist of a members' meeting.. In others, they are formed into smaller groups, while in yet others the members choose to form groups of their own. Each event is monitored by consultants who keep offering interventions, mostly in the form of hypotheses about the unconscious dynamics taking place in the event. These hypotheses are based on the on-going experience of the consultants in the groups, and members are encouraged to work with the hypotheses based on their internal experiences, such as unspoken thoughts and unarticulated associated feelings.

'Experience' in this context also means the impact of the events in terms of how one articulates what one perceives as happening in the events, as well how one deals with the feelings and emotions associated with them. This is done in ways that are generally not possible in the hurly-burly of day to day life as one moves from role to role and location to location. The GRCs provide the space to reflect on one's experience, including outward behaviour, inner experience, thoughts and feelings. One conceptualises

and internalises those insights that one considers to be useful in one's life.

In other words, one accepts one's learning from experience on the basis of one's personal authority. In acknowledging one's new insights, one also has the opportunity to deal with problems encountered in using one's personal authority. Obviously, GRCs have neither a set of curricula nor any formal lectures or evaluation of performance. The participating members accept or reject learning and insights based on their personal authority. The staff provides and manages the boundaries of task, time and territory in the role of collective management. In their consultant role during various events they offer working hypotheses and other interventions on the basis of their 'here and now' experience.

To shed further light on the process of the GRC, I quote below from a note prepared by one of the consultants, Rina Tagore:

'The methodology (of the GRC) places experiential learning at the centre, without any fanfare of pampering the learning process; it instead gives complete authority to all – staff and members in their roles – around the primary task(s). Stripped of pretences, the conscious and unconscious dynamics of individual and group behaviour surface as people engage with the tasks. This is a challenge as there is no garb of intellectualism or pretentious emotions. It is often frightening, as the group is confronted with their own shadows and what lurks from within the depths of the individual and collective unconscious. Experiential learning is thus far more powerful than what can be gathered in research papers and academic statistics. (I say this without negating the relevance of research in analysing socio-political phenomena). GRCs through the firm adherence to roles, tasks and their related boundaries create such a space that individuals in groups are confronted with their conscious and unconscious in a powerful way.'

It must also be mentioned here that GRCs create situations where it is possible for the trained and experienced consultants to offer hypotheses to the members about their unconscious assumptions as the basis of many of their intellectual and emotional positions, as reflected in the 'here and now' behaviours of the groups as they occur. Members are encouraged to work with the hypotheses offered by exploring the 'here and now' data available to all as also their feelings and emotions, which are also data of a different kind.

One of the common examples of unconscious assumption and its behavioural impact is the picture of authority that the average individual carries in the mind, partly consciously and largely unconsciously. These pictures are almost invariably projected on whoever is/are perceived as authority figure(s) in any given situation, whether or not those people carry the kind of authority that they are assumed to carry. In GRCs, such assumptions about authority are inevitably projected on the staff in their role as collective management and individually on their role as consultants, who try to assist the members to realise the nature of their projection and its impact by offering hypotheses with the 'here and now' evidence.

It is also acknowledged that members can actually work with the hypotheses and other interventions offered by the staff and learn worthwhile facts about their own behaviour and related societal phenomena so long as they are able to deal with their inner resistance towards confronting 'unpalatable' or 'indigestible' truths that emerge in various events of the GRC. This ability is related to one's capacity to take the risk of exposing one's untrue inner assumptions, which in many situations lead to one's hitherto unrecognised destructive

behaviour – destructive of self, of others, of institutions to which one belongs, or all of these simultaneously. It is consequently a painful process for those who muster the courage to learn worthwhile insights and realities.

A GRC for Dalits

It is only comparatively recently that the Dalits of India have begun to deal with their problems in an organised way rather than remain dependent on the elite to alleviate some of the miseries of their existence. Dalit members expressed the need for a GRC for those Dalits in leadership positions in several NGOs connected to Dappu⁴, the umbrella organisation of numerous Non-Government Organisations (NGO's) that are working for the benefit of the under-privileged Dalits in a very large area of the southern Indian peninsula. The GRC was organised jointly with Learning Network, a consulting organisation based in Bangalore, whose Director has considerable experience in India and abroad as a GRC staff member. The participants were not only members of Dappu: the GRC recruited members from non-Dalit NGOs as well as from the corporate sector. The theme chosen for this GRC was *Identity, Authority, Leadership: Resistance, Self-Empowerment & Transformation in Organisational and Social Systems*⁵.

The emotional baggage of the participants. A powerful Dalit leader, who is the head of a several thousand strong Dalit NGO, entered the Opening Plenary a quarter of an hour late although he had registered on arrival at the venue at least a couple of hours earlier on that day. When he spoke in the opening plenary towards its close, it was to make sure that all the participants (members and staff) understood that he came late on purpose to show his ambivalence at agreeing to

join 'a workshop based on a Brahmanic model and attended by corporate types.' His contempt for and anger towards the staff, which included two persons with Christian names (one of whom is a Dalit leader), another with a Moslem name and two others with Brahmanic surnames, as also towards managers attending the conference, almost dripped from his short speech. He gave all participants to understand that he had come with the prime motive of collecting evidence of why such GRCs should not be attended by Dalit 'activists' like himself and others present as members there.

Other Dalit members' emotional baggage also consisted of mixed feelings, though none of them were as vocal in expressing their feelings. Two younger women members talked with a great deal of excitement at the prospect of learning in a new way. However, as the GRC began to unfold, it seemed rather obvious to us that the angry Dalit leader was actually airing thoughts and feelings on behalf of most of the other Dalit leaders in the GRC.

What struck me from the very beginning of this GRC was the intensity of the participation of the Dalit leaders, who described themselves as 'activists'. As a group they appeared to me to apply themselves with far more vigour and attention than managers in GRCs generally do. While a few Dalit leaders had joined the GRC with the hope of learning something to help them carry out their duties as 'Convenor' of various Dalit institutions and organisations, the majority had joined the GRC with a heavy dose of scepticism about the outcome of the GRC. However, their vigour and attention remained alive right through the GRC despite the feeling of scepticism and associated anger that was expressed by a Dalit leader in the opening plenary on behalf

of many others who talked of mixed feelings in guarded language.

Major problems of the Dalit leaders. Through their experience in the GRC, almost all of the Dalit leaders began to realise the psychological process behind the terms 'activist' and 'convenor'. As I understand this process, 'activist' is a metaphor that stands for minority action against a discriminating and dehumanising establishment, with the passive support of the majority. In Dalit organisations, emphasis is laid on activities that highlight the process of discrimination. This takes away the focus from designing and managing tasks aimed at restoring human dignity to Dalits and putting them on the road to economic prosperity. Most energy is spent on fighting against discrimination instead of promoting positive developments, resulting in a waste of energy and other scarce resources. This problem became clearer for the Dalit members as we helped them to articulate the primary task of their respective organisations and work.

Many Dalits realised and acknowledged how a process that loses focus on managing objective-related tasks leads to wastage of resources. Using the term 'convenor' further reinforced this process. This term reflects the rejection of anything that is usually associated with the terms 'manager' or 'management', which to them represent the exploiting oppression by the higher castes. Since being a boss has become associated with being an oppressor, nobody wants to be a boss. That results in a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities within Dalit organisations.

Dalit participants in the GRC began to see how their anger and hatred towards the establishment, though quite justified, has resulted in their unconsciously rejecting

some of the basic tenets of managing successful organisations.

At the closing plenary the Dalit leader, who at the opening plenary six days earlier had almost spat out his rejection of a 'Brahmanic model' and the presence of 'corporate types', pointed at his own head and said that he had come to realise that the 'Brahmanic model' had previously been present in his head and that he was projecting it on the staff. He and several others also mentioned at the closing plenary how their anger at being denied basic human rights in a free country had led them to reject the word 'manager' as something that belonged to the 'corporate world', representing the worst kind of exploitation. Another Dalit participant, who headed a seven thousand strong Dalit organisation of garbage cleaners, acknowledged his earlier problem around even exploring his leadership role in the organisation because of his experience of being betrayed by many of the country's (elected political) leaders. These are only a few examples of the multitude of insights shared by the Dalit leaders at the closing plenary. In that process, they acknowledged that in rejecting the word 'manager' and describing the managerial roles in their organisations as those of 'convenor', they had quite unconsciously set organisational processes in motion which had created mismanagement of various much needed resources, which they would now work towards undoing.

It had been obvious to us how much pain the Dalit leaders went through during various events of the GRC whenever they developed insights about their way of running Dalit NGOs and other Dalit organisations that fought for human rights almost all year round. The pain was about realising the mistakes that they had been system-

atically making in terms of managing those NGOs and other organisations. It was the commitment to their chosen tasks and objectives as also their deep seated motivation that helped them acknowledge their insights in public (i.e. in the closing plenary).

Participants working for the cause of the Dalits.

Participants working for Dalits as facilitators and resource persons were confronted with their own notions and the myths they tend to build. Faced with a competent Dalit subsystem there were feelings of threat stemming perhaps from the recognition of a reality that this subsystem was equally, if not more, powerful. Envy in learning could be witnessed on many occasions – how could Dalit people, less fluent than themselves in the English language, manage to express themselves, communicate and even learn!

Discussion and conclusions

Government policy towards lower castes. In an attempt to alleviate the burden of poverty, numerous so-called lower and untouchable castes have been declared in more than one Schedule of the Indian Constitution as the beneficiaries of certain reservations of opportunities. It seems evident that after nearly sixty years of independence, with reservation of opportunities throughout this period, this strategy has made no significant difference to the lot of those who are known as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, including so-called untouchable castes, now also known as Dalits. It is true that with the help of these benefits many of the economically better-off members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have occupied a number of important positions in political parties, in government and in public sector enterprises. However, all that has happened as a result is that they have formed some kind of

an elite among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes with access to the cream of the benefits. The lot of the vast majority has remained little better than what it was before India's independence.

Yet there has been no new thinking by the different political parties that dominate government at the Centre or in the States to introduce such political and practical changes as would provide realistic opportunities for the average members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, enabling them to rise above poverty level and challenge the hierarchy of the caste system with its dehumanising principle of purity and pollution attributed by birth. The two will require very different approaches, particularly in view of the fact that many, if not a great majority, of so-called low-caste people also actually accept their caste status in terms of pollution by birth. This happens largely because of the religious sanction behind caste hierarchy and the fear of some kind of terrible punishment both here and in the hereafter⁶.

The brand of Dalit leaders who came to attend the GRC as members seems to belong to a class by itself. Defying the economic, political and religious weapons aimed at Dalits in order to keep them as untouchables who must continue to burn in the millennia-old flames of the dehumanising fire of the caste and the *varna* systems, like the phoenix they have been consumed and have risen once more from the ashes to organise their down-trodden fellows to challenge the system. Hence, they have the guts and the ability to accept the pain of transformation from within. There lie their motivation and intense engagement with duty.

Helping oppressed people. As a consultant to both government organisations and NGOs,

it has been my experience that strategies for helping oppressed people are made on the basis of several factors, which are generally considered as data. One is the assumptions of the bureaucrats or the NGO leaders. Since in 99.9% situations those people not only do not come from a background of oppressed people, their assumptions are more often than not based on cultural beliefs about the 'down-trodden'. These beliefs in many situations do not tally with the reality of oppressed people. Secondly, secondary data like census and survey reports are also used to form assumptions on which strategic decisions are taken. Since both census data analysis and survey data analysis are done by people far removed from the day-to-day life of oppressed people, once again cultural assumptions creep into analysis, however much efforts are made to do away with bias. Thirdly, oppressed people over generations come to distrust what they consider as the 'establishment'. As a result the answers that they give to census questionnaires or other forms of surveys are again more often than not based on the oppressed people's belief about what the establishment as the oppressors' representative would like to have as their response.

The story is somewhat similar to the reason why in commercial enterprises Management By Objectives (MBO) by and large failed. The subordinates fantasised what they assumed to be their managers' (or bosses', in simple words) expectation of them and presented those as their own well-considered task-related objectives. As a result the action plans were far removed from the reality of those who had supposedly presented their objectives in terms of tasks and results for the year to come.

In both situations, assumptions about power figures and power groups are made

by the comparatively powerless or less powerful. While some of the assumptions are quite consciously held in the mind, their bases mostly remain driven in the unconscious. Unless the oppressed can be helped to access their unconscious group assumptions, helping them may end up in providing cosmetic changes rather than leading to transformation for a better life.

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² Non-Indian readers who find it difficult to visualise the Dalits' experience of themselves in the Indian milieu may find some similarities in the life experience of Afro-Americans, as described in such books by Langston Hughes as *The Ways of White Folks* (1933) and *Ask Your Mama* (1961).

³ The great leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (who drew up the draft Indian Constitution at the behest of Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, which text was by and large adopted by the Indian Parliament) coined the word *dalit*. Ambedkar belonged to the so-called untouchable community by virtue of his birth in the *Mahar* caste, famous for its military prowess (though unrecognised as such in history books, presumably because of its low position in the Hindu caste hierarchy). He coined that term after rejecting the term introduced by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had used the term *Harijan*, meaning the 'People of God'. Elevating the so-called untouchables intellectually by associating them with the term 'God' perhaps hid their problems from the general public more than it helped them. So Ambedkar chose a term that seeks to confront all other communities of India with a very unpalatable Indian reality. This lent a political voice to

the issue of caste discrimination.

⁴ A *dappu* is a drum with a leather surface used by some so-called untouchable castes. It has now become a metaphor for their struggle to achieve human existence.

⁵ This GRC took place in Hyderabad from February 17 to 22, 2003. I was authorised by Dappu to co-direct the GRC with Rosemary Viswanath, Director of Learning Network. The three other persons on the staff were Paul Divakar (Convenor, Dappu), Zahid Hussain Gangjee (CEO, Zahid Gangjee Associates) and Rina Tagore (till recently the Programme Officer, Human & Institutional Development, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Embassy of Switzerland, Delhi). The GRC was jointly sponsored by Learning Network, a Bangalore-based consulting and training organisation, and Dappu.

⁶ This fear is so deep seated that, as I have mentioned before, at a personal level I have failed to establish my bonafide as a person without religion and an outcaste by virtue of not going through the thread ceremony prescribed for those born in a *dwija* (*Twice Born*) family. Since the so-called second birth takes place after the thread ceremony, by not going through it I, my children and their progeny happily remain outcasts, but this is unacceptable to most people. Upper-caste people feel threatened at this challenge and lower-caste people do not seem able to accept that one can actually renounce one's religion and caste by birth.