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Discourse Formation and Praxis in Everyday Life

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In sociology, and in other social sciences, we generally talk about others, while keeping absolutely mum about ourselves. The result is so called "objective" (in most cases manipulated) "scientific" dispassionate "texts"[1] which obscure the reality and do not help enriching our collective wisdom. Subjective knowledge (in Weberian sense), drawn by applying reflexive or autobiographical method, which is usually given no respect in the so-called scientific tradition, could be an alternative mode of doing sociology. Discourses in sociology and other social sciences could be drawn from lived experiences, with high degree of embeddedness, which would help understand the dynamics of everyday life social praxis better.

Keywords*:* Self-formation, tradition, caste, patriarchy, texts, discourse, praxis, communalism, secularism, critical agency.

The self-formation

We grow up with a rich treasure of lived experiences; draw up ideas and perceptions about the life and the world around, much of which could be mediated through traditions, language (given "texts") and constructed (by the powerful) knowledge (Foucault 1980) . We get into an endless dialogue with the traditions, with the given discourses and with macro societal and historical forces, and decide about our societal role or individual course of action. In the process of growing up and in everyday life we move through significant events which work as the turning points in shaping our discourses and self.

Besides one's lived experiences, the given body of knowledge (objective, mediated, documented in secondary sources, which the learned enlightened section of society is privileged to access) also helps shape one's discourses. The important historical figures or the philosophers constitute the "significant others" who leave,

through their writings, speeches and all other texts, a lasting impact by shaping our views and approach to life.

In all cases, we objectify (or other) the elements of discourses that are on offer in a given time, scrutinize them in the light of the available wisdom and experiences and then internalize only those elements into our "relative self"[2] which pass the test. The process does not stop there; the reflexion on the elements of discourses continues in the light of newly gained experience and knowledge to reach a new discourse (or a modified and enriched one). In other words, our dialogues with and reflections on the body of knowledge in a point in time go on through a process of "objectification of self"[3] and we move forward through a continuous process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of self. This adds dynamism to our temporal discourses and the "constructed self" moves on from one position to another.

Human beings draw identities while engaging dialogically with the given systemic identities. The primordial identities, which are structurally given and which are also called statuses (like caste, religion, gender, race, class and so on) do not go uncontested at the level of the individual agency[4] and at the level of the dynamic collective[5]. As we interact with the socially given forms and statuses, as we develop a critical agency, we dialogue, contest, deconstruct and reconstruct the given forms or identities. The identities that we construct are temporal and always carry an element of doubt and are therefore open to revision and change.

In dialogue with patriarchy and caste

Let me give a couple of illustrations in support of my thesis (outlined above) from my own experiences. I was born a boy in a patriarchal and feudal social order, which was indeed a privileged position compared to the position of three of my elder sisters and two younger sisters. Having enjoyed the privilege and favourable treatment I grew up as a self-confident domineering person inculcating elements of patriarchal sense of superiority vis-a-vis the persons of the opposite gender. I developed a notion that my sisters (five in total) will be married out and we, three brothers, will always be in the family with all our privileges and

responsibilities. A shared perception, which followed from this, was that we (the brothers) are "more" and they (sisters) are "less" members of the family in terms of status, rights, responsibilities and privileges. Gender discrimination was omnipresent in our everyday life, in the way we were treated, both in the family and in the village community.

Our sisters were not fair in complexion, not "good-looking" by any social standard and did not acquire enough education to be somebody or to be economically self-reliant. After school level education or graduation, they were taken off and were married out with great difficulties and search by paying some amount of dowry. Up to primary or high school level, our sisters were as good as we brothers were in terms of examination performance. But as we moved to higher classes the sisters fell behind while the brothers excelled. In my effort to interpret this turn of events I realised that the patriarchal social order is programmed to destroy the self-confidence of the girls of average looks and average talent. In their socialisation process a clear and loud message is conveyed to them and that is "you are only good enough to be housewife". For us, the brothers, the message was to be "somebody" that would ensure our economic self-reliance and give us a status of honour. In our high school days, we knew that as we grow up we will have to take the responsibility not only of our aging parents but also of the members of our family of procreation. In my early boyhood, I definitely cherished the privileged treatment and never questioned this iniquitous gender treatment.

In the latter stage of my life, I had to deal with two women, my wife and my daughter, more intimately. In dealing with them I critiqued many elements of patriarchy which were intimately (or unconsciously) guiding my "self", deconstructed[6] many such elements to be a new self, with new discourse and approach to the persons of the opposite gender, both within and outside the family. The treatment of my wife also has passed through a course of evolution; in the early stage of our conjugal life, the patriarchal elements in me were predominant while in the later stage the relationship is re-laid on the principle of partnership and friendship. Even after the change of discourse I cannot say for sure that I am totally free of the elements of domination and patriarchy, which sustain their conscious and unconscious

presence in me. In rearing our only daughter, I not only did play the role of father but that of a mother as well, doing things that a less gender sensitive man would not have thought of doing.[7] What I have learnt from my experience is that a gender sensitive man may not be free of patriarchal elements which are deeply rooted either in the conscious or unconscious self, but his treatment of the intimate ones of the opposite gender could be significantly different from those who are less self-reflective and less sensitive. While living in a relation (any relation), thus, one is dialogically involved in self-reflection and goes on reconstructing the ever-shifting discourses of everyday life.

I have been through the same course of evolution with reference to my caste identity. Needless to say, caste, like gender, is a social construct. The politics of caste means segregation, discrimination and subjugation of the "lower castes" by the "upper castes". The unequal control of the economic, social and cultural capital (to borrow the phrases of Pierre Bourdieu) by the members of the different castes helps continuation of the caste principles and the caste system. The reproduction of social inequality and hierarchy is done with hegemonic intention. As a child interacts with her/his friends in a multi-caste situation in preschool or early school stage she/he is told about the principles of commensality, caste boundaries and caste identities. Gradually the child learns to take these cultural elements as "real" and learns about the practice of othering and boundary maintenance. As the child grows up further she/he is taught about caste occupation and then caste endogamy. If the members practise the caste principles as "sacred" (in Durkheimian sense) the reproduction of the caste system is guaranteed. But the reality of caste consciousness and caste relations are not as simple and static as this. The growing, conscious, individual self engages in a dialogue with the given discourses on "caste" empowered by her/his lived experiences, starts questioning the "validity" or "rationality" of the caste principles in the light of an ever-maturing sense of value and justice. Soon the person finds herself or himself in conflict with the given discourses (both in language and philosophy). In this task of deconstructing the given elements of culture and discourses, an individual self, which has already grown out to be a critical self, draws from experiences and the "significant other"

(which again can be an association with enlightened person, an ideology or the texts).

This point of deconstruction is necessarily a point of reconstruction because an individual mind cannot be in a void, without discourses, true or false. This can potentially take a revolutionary turn at the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, a naive believer of the caste system, a conformist or a loyal follower can turn into a non-believer and thus rebels against the system. Stressing my memory the furthest I can recollect, in my childhood I was told (by my illiterate grandmother and neighbours, of course, not by my parents) not to dine in the houses of my Muslim and lower-caste friends, who lived close to my primary school, and who used to offer me food at the lunch break in their house. I used to enjoy the food as I used to be very hungry, knowing little about the caste principles and community boundaries. I saw them (the Muslims and the lower caste fellows) sitting at a distance when served food on the religious and social occasions in our house. As I grew up I learnt about the "politics" of caste system and started reflecting on the learnt discourses on caste system and community boundaries and found no reason to follow them. In terms of "value preference"[8](in Weberian sense) I stand against caste system. If I have found a new discourse on the institution of caste, it certainly defines the course of my interaction with the members of other castes many of whom are my friends and neighbours. In this way, old discourses make way for new discourses through a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Following the rules of Marxist dialectics, we can say that the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction of the elements of culture or discourse work simultaneously and inseparably; they can be segregated only at the conceptual level. The dialectics may even work at the level of "unconscious". The process works like quantitative change leading to qualitative change (one of the dialectical laws outlined by Engels in his *Anti Duhring*) and we often remain unconscious about the point of transformation or "liberation". Thus, over the years, our discourses on anything that matters in our life change over time.

Discourses and praxis of secularism

We can approach the institution of religion in the same way as we did to gender and caste questions. I could see a transformation in me vis-à-vis my discourses on religion. Until the college level I was religious, following the footsteps of my parents, who were "honestly" religious, although not communal (in Gandhian sense). My father who was a primary school teacher had many Muslim friends, colleagues, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. Many of his Muslim students spent nights in our house, sharing bed with me, while preparing for the scholarship examination, which was held in erstwhile East Pakistan at the end of class V. I also had a number of Muslim friends, who were my classmates and playmates. In my childhood, I was very fond of the stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. My grandfather's younger brother was my guru in this; he used to read out pages and chapters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and I was the regular and most curious among listeners. Arjun, Bhim, Krishna and of course Ram were my childhood heroes. I was fond of listening Ramayana gaan[9], which were staged in the inner and outer courtyards of our house at least once a year. I grew up in a house where Durga puja and puja of other deities, particularly Kali, Laxmi and Swaraswati, were held on a regular basis following the calendar of festivals. There was the presence of gods and goddesses in all other social functions like marriage, *annaprashan, sradh, nabanya*, and so on. There was a *thakur ghar* with the idol of goddess Laxmi and my mother used to offer puja after bath every day. On every Saturday evening, we used to organize Sani puja in the inner courtyard of our house, near the Tulsi plant. Having grown up in such a religious ambience I was left with no choice but to appropriate the elements of religious beliefs and develop a self, loaded with religious faith. The alternative cources of looking at religion were yet to open up before me.

The religious faith and Hindu (religious and minority) identity was reinforced and reproduced in everyday life particularly when there was an overwhelming presence of the majority "other", the Muslim community, which had a distinct and visible religious culture (faith and practices). In one way, we were the oppressors (like the Hindu landlord exploiting the Muslim subjects) while on

other occasions the Muslims, particularly the "communal" section, was the oppressor. Their communal consciousness[10], which had its manifestation in their everyday interaction with the neighbouring Hindus, was strengthened by their anger against the Hindu sub-infeudators[11], who were the exploiters. Being cultivators and sharecroppers, our Muslim neighbours not only nursed a sense of anger, they also had an eye on the land owned by the Hindus. Even the agricultural labourers, who were mostly Muslim, had reasons to be angry with the Hindu landlords. The community identity and the class identity thus were juxtaposed.

It is in this context that the villagers drew their identities, "communal" or "secular". In the 1020s, 1930s and 1940s the social and political space in Bengal and in many other provinces of undivided India was largely communalized. India earned its independence through a series of communal conflicts which forced the refugees from either side to cross the newly drawn borders. My parents survived a communal riot in early 1950 and fled to India. They had gone back to their place in East Pakistan when things settled down after Nehru-Liaquat Agreement of 1950 (Agreement between the Governments of India and Pakistan Regarding Security and Rights of the Minorities). Again, in 1971, during Bangladesh freedom struggle, we faced communal attacks and came to India to save our lives. We were alien and unwanted in our birth place, the land of our forefathers. Living through such horrid experiences it was quite usual for us to be communal (the Muslim haters in this case). Passing through similar experiences as we did, many of my friends turned "communal" while nursing communal hatred. Millions of Hindu refugees, who had to leave the land of their forefathers, came to India, leaving behind the horrors of communal frenzy. Those who came over to the comforting and secure ambiance of the Hindu majority country (India), not necessarily became "communal". The refugee rehabilitation movement in the 1950s and 1960s in West Bengal and other parts was essentially a Leftist movement with a secular ideology.

Now the question is why I did not take the communal line following many of my friends. It is indeed a matter of fact that with growing age I ceased to be "religious" and turned secular, not in Gandhian sense but in "atheist" sense, in modernist sense, in Marxist sense.

Such a perception of life is a part of "practical consciousness",[12] to use Anthony Giddens' phrase, (See William and Seawell 1992) that largely determines my approach to the members of different religious faiths, with whom I interact in my everyday life. Following is a brief narrative of how it happened.

My parents lived through the historical developments in the decades before and after independence while living in a remote village in erstwhile East Bengal (later East Pakistan), where the Hindus were in minority. Carrying a sub-infeudatory lineage (the worst form of exploiters of the poor peasants under the feudal system that continued until the abolition of Zamindari system in early 1950s in East Pakistan) they have been the victims of communal conflicts (or riots) first in 1950 and then in 1971. On both occasions, their property and houses were looted and they were made homeless. Immediately after the loot, they took shelter in the houses of their Muslim friends in a neighbouring village and then migrated to India with their help. On the second occasion (of which I was a part and can recollect the events in minute details) we were sheltered by one of my father's closest and trusted Muslim friends for three months. Our Muslim hosts provided us all kinds of protection and some form of material support towards our sustenance. I was only 12 in 1971 and I saw everything with my frightened and inquisitive eyes. On both occasions, our whole family could have been massacred; we would not have survived without the help of our Muslim family friends. Those friends of ours saved us defying all threats from the communalized sections of the Muslims who had overwhelming presence in the area. These two incidents constitute the foundations from where I draw my "secular" identity; I can say with pride that I am not communal. All the members of our family sustain a sense of indebtedness to those humane friends of ours without getting an opportunity to reciprocate their favour.

The incidents help us understand two sides of religious identity; one communal, which was shared in common by the attackers for whom all Hindus are the "enemy" and other secular, shared by a section of Muslim friends, who despite being Muslim by religion, upheld the universal value of humanity. All the parties involved in the present case are "religious", either Hindu or Muslim, but some are "communal" while some others are "secular". Among the "secular" section again there could be two

sub-categories; one, religious yet humane and other non-religious and secular. Religion thus can produce contrasting identities among its followers in one historical time and space. Ours was not the only one incident of communal amity; the literature on partition and refugee movement is full of such incidents.

Apart from these historical developments which caused us much suffering because of communal divide among the people and which contributed significantly to the formation of my secular identity, my readings and political activism are the two other important factors that had strong influence on my discourses on secularism and communalism. Two important significant others who had great influence on me are Karl Marx and Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath was an active member of a reformed and modernized Hindu sect called Brahma who followed a form of monotheism (based on Vedantic ideas of bliss (*ananda*) and universal love) but he was secular in his own way, in his writings, and treatment of the Muslim subjects of his Zamindari estate. He treated all the Muslim characters of his novels and stories with empathy and recorded his strong protest against partition of Bengal in 1905 and communalization of society in the pre-partition days in his novel *Ghare Baire*. My adherence to Marxism and involvement in Left politics with full conviction since my college days also have helped getting rid of the elements of religious identity and pushed me towards atheism and class-based universal fraternity. Secularism to me is not just a belief it is indeed a discourse that shapes my praxis in my everyday life; it gives me a way of living, a commitment to my sense of truth. It guides me to take a position vis-a-vis Hindutva and Islamic fundamentalism; it helps understand the writings of Savarkar, Gandhi, Jinnah or the communists like P. C. Joshi, G. Adhikari and many others. My discourse on religion finds reflection in my writings, whenever they touch issues like religion or communalism, and in my social and political activities, in my interaction with the fellow members of all religious faiths.

Conclusion

This has been an experimental paper both in methodological and substantive terms. I have demonstrated how drawing from our rich body of personal experiences in different phases of our life

we can form discourses with conviction and embeddedness, which, in turn, guide us to interaction in our everyday life. I have particularly argued that our discourses on gender relations and caste are charted out drawing elements from the given "traditions" and our dialogical engagement with them at the level of interaction or praxis. Following Marx (e.g., *Theses on Feuerbach*) I would also argue that discourse formation and praxis are inseparable and hence dialogically interfaced[13] (Althusser 2005).

The thrust of the paper has been the discourse on and praxis of religion and communalism, which have been inescapable in our everyday life in contemporary India. My contention is that at the personal and collective levels, we can think of three possible positions vis-à-vis religion and secularism. First, as it is done in most Western democracies, religion is a private matter and the State has absolutely nothing to do with it. Second, as we find in India, the State is mandated (by the Constitution) to function as a facilitator of religious and cultural rights, particularly that of the minority communities, which it accomplishes through appropriate legislation and administration. Third, is the atheist position where individuals and groups do not believe in religion; they are guided by the ideals of universal brotherhood or humanism, which is one of ideals of modernism. In the former Communist countries of the East Europe I met many such people who claim to be "atheist". I personally think that taking an atheist position is the most effective means to counter communalism and prevent formation of communal identitity, which is the nastiest divider of people at the global scale, particularly in the post-cold war situation (Huntington 1996). But even the "atheists" may not be completely free of the elements of religion (particularly that of the religion of their parents or forefathers) from which they draw elements of their culture and they could express their anger when they see the religious fundamentalists organizing a terrorist attack killing hundreds of people belonging to other religious communities. An illustration of this point could be the rise of the neo-nationalists across Europe in reaction to terror attacks by the Islamic fundamentalists and immigration of the non-European "coloured" people who represent different faiths and culture. Thus, one particular individual or a group could theoretically and practically be inside and outside communal identity, depending on circumstances and their reading of the prevailing situation. Even my heart bleeds to

see proliferation of communal frenzy in our country and the subcontinent.

Notes

1. A "text" in post-structuralist sense could be a speech, an article or book, a film, a play or anything communicated in articulated form.
2. "Individual self" is always relative, bound to a space and time, which evolves in the light of new experiences.
3. This is a moment of self-reflexion.
4. A conscious-critical self, which is there in every individual, suppressed or free.
5. Ever changing collective perceptions or discourses.
6. The word "deconstruction" in Derridian sense means criticism and rejection (Derrida 1976).
7. Being a working mother my wife left our daughter to my care during the day time on week days and I had to wash her on many occasions.
8. The subjective sense of relatively enduring "good" and "bad", which are often drawn from the collective tradition, which an individual would want to uphold.
9. A performance of a composition of songs and narratives on the stories based on the life of Ram, the hero of the epic the *Ramayana*. The performance was done in rural East Bengal in the evening time by a male folk singer and his team in the inner or outer courtyard of the houses of the well-off Hindus.
10. A sense of being a part of a religious community with suppressed or expressed hatred for other religious communities, particularly the religious minority community.
11. In the zamindary system that was followed until early 1950s a zamindar used to sub-let parts of his estate to the sub-infeudators, who imposed high land rent on the tenants, in their effort to maximize profit.
12. According Foucault, consciousness on a subject that has direct bearing on one's everyday life interactions (See Hall 2008).
13. Louis Althusser in *For Marx* (2005) has lauded Marx for his unique contribution to method to knowledge where the latter asserts that the process of consciousness (or knowledge) formation is

inseparable from the process of social participation or interaction; they work on each other in an endless feed-back.

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A Tribute to Professor Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay on his Retirement

To,
Professor Rajatsubhra Mukhopadhyay
Department of Sociology
North Bengal University

Dear Professor Mukhopadhyay,

Congratulations on completion of your illustrious career as a teacher, spanning over thirty one years, beginning in mid-1985 and ending on 9 November 2016, first in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology and then in the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University.

Over these years, you have been the dearest colleague for the teachers and staff, the most popular teacher, an able administrator, an honest and sincere researcher and a critic when the system was at fault. You have set your own standards and have been astoundingly consistent in maintaining them; you have set new standards for others to emulate.

Through your scholarly and popular writings in English and Bengali respectively you have added meaningful knowledge to the discipline of Sociology and other social sciences, expressed your concern on multiple social issues and helped sensitize the masses on issues of their struggle for a better life.

You have helped your students in so many ways and encouraged them to do well. You have nursed your scholars with utmost care and helped them mature; many of whom are now well established in life. You have helped your colleagues by sharing information and with your wise counsel whenever they asked for help.

You have worked tirelessly for the wellbeing of the Department and led from the front to encounter whenever a crisis faced it, minor or major. You have served as the Head of the Department on several occasions and served as a very active member of different academic bodies and committees of the university.

You are leaving behind a proud legacy and a huge responsibility for all those who will stay in the Department for some more years,

to take it forward. We will miss you and your leadership badly in this task.We will miss the warmth of your presence in the Department; will miss your leadership and counsel in all our future endeavours. We would beg your kind presence in the Department whenever we would need you in our future programmes.

The teachers, non-teaching staff, the scholars and the students feel extremely proud and privileged to have your warm company over these years.

We thank you for everything that you have done for this Department, for all of us, and wish you a healthy, creative and meaningful long life.

With kind regards,

Teachers, scholars, students and non-teaching staff of the Department of Sociology, North Bengal University

16 December 2016