

Caste and the Question of the Other: A Study in Cultural Phenomenology

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Abstract

If phenomenology is defined as our encounter with the world of phenomena and in this process of encounter we understand that we are in a process of constant engagement with something; then cultural phenomenology also calls for an understanding of our everyday 'being' to that which is 'given' or 'already there' and come to a better understanding of how our participation is essential to the understanding of the structures of the 'cultural/social'; i.e. gender, race, and class and caste. Hence, what I mean here by 'cultural phenomenology' is the laying bare of the structures, especially the hidden and unmanifested layers, of cultural consciousness. We contend that cultural phenomenology has a great deal to contribute to the future of phenomenology, and having relinquished the presumption of unearthing the universal structures of consciousness, cultural phenomenology, according to me, is closer to the postmodern ethos of suspicion of grand narratives. In this sense, cultural phenomenology is a vital way of doing phenomenology in contemporary times. I also think that the later Heidegger's history of being in an attempt to uncover the Western understanding of being in various historical epochs, especially during the era of late modernity, was a grand way of achieving such a project. In this paper, I want to undertake one such exercise in cultural phenomenology— that of unearthing the average Indian's 'casteist' manner of encountering the other person, and its ethical implications. I shall be referring to Heidegger and Levinas intermittently.

Keywords: Caste, Varna Dharma, difference, other, cultural phenomenology, politics, religion, ethics

1. The question of caste

When we attempt to explore cultural phenomenology in India, one can start with the concept of Caste as it is the very essential element of Indian cultural philosophy. The concept termed 'Caste' has been one un-resolvable issue in India as the 'other' for the modern phenomenological understanding. 'Caste' represents the hierarchical 'power structure' of the Indian social system. Its initiation traces back to the days of dharmasāstras and purāṇa. Caste or jāti influences the social, political and religious construction of the history of India. The first indication of the caste system is outlined in the hymn of 'Purushasukta' of Ṛgveda.¹ The Indian notion of caste hence alludes to the most lively analogy— that of the living human body. Just as for the human body to function cohesively its various organs have to work in coordination, so too the analogy asks us to imagine society as a great body, working in unison, a part of it doing the work of the mind, another part functioning like the hand, yet another part of it like the thigh and still another part of society doing the work of the feet, all necessary functions for the body to be a body.² While the analogy is powerful, the liveliness and dynamism of the analogy is lost in the system of caste as we have it in history, for it came to be an unmoving part of the traditional Indian life that people could be

identified solely by their social function, perpetuated hereditarily through caste endogamy and property distribution. Through the norms concerning purity and pollution, "there is a strong concern for keeping unlike things separate."³ M. K. Gandhi, who became a victim of racial discrimination in South Africa, was quick to see that it was necessary to change both the colonial discriminatory political system and the Indian social system of the caste if India were to achieve authentic independence or swaraj.

The 'caste' as a system is complex. Though it is known for the social immobility it advocates, the system itself has changed during its long history. While caste has been a part of Indian life for centuries, "until well into the colonial period," writes Susan Bayly, "much of the subcontinent was still populated by people for whom the formal distinctions of caste were of only limited importance as a source of corporate and individual lifestyle."⁴ Colonial rule, thus, consolidated rather than casting a modernist suspicion on the caste system. And yet, it was a group of modernized Indians (Ambedkar, Gandhi, Nehru), who cast the eye of suspicion on the caste system. Paradoxically, caste has also meant a vector of identity even if that identity is itself stigmatic and derogatory.⁵ This explains the brand of identity politics in contemporary India. For this paper, however, I am going to overlook several of these complexities of the caste question. I

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shall, rather, focus on the consolidation of the 'like things' and the segregation of the 'unlike things' that the caste system is known for.

I want to start with the Heideggerian insight that "entities can be experienced 'factually' only when Being is already understood, even if it has not been conceptualized".⁶ An unspecified, inarticulate, pre-cognitive understanding or background is always already determining our sight, grasp and all overt knowing and perceiving. Certain inalienably practical, sensual, embodied, covert ways of grappling with the reality around us, right from our earliest moment of existence, form what Heidegger calls the 'hermeneutical circle' of our present overt ways of making things intelligible or making sense of reality as such. This covert background of our overt making sense, Heidegger calls the referential whole or world. There is a 'prejudice' in each case that makes possible our understanding of something as something. Hubert Dreyfus explains how we make sense of a room winter as a 'room' first and foremost. A room is pre-cognitively understood as a room not according to a certain set of rules or beliefs but because of a certain familiarity I already has regarding rooms in general: "It is a sense of how rooms normally show up, a skill for dealing with them, that I have developed by crawling and walking around many rooms."⁷

Similarly, we meet other people in certain ways on account of the tacit intelligibility of our world. Heidegger insists that it is "ignorance of the genuine structure of Dasein" that leads us to think that "there is a separate understanding of a bare world or an alien Dasein".⁸ The world "lets us encounter Dasein, the alien Dasein as well as my own".⁹ I meet the stranger from within my 'world' and she/he meets me from within her 'world', though the 'world' is not a static fixture but a structure of 'changing familiarity and understandability'. For instance, people encounter aliens and strangers who come to deal with them in varied ways. Hence, the identity of the other person is inevitably necessary for the interpersonal contact shaped by his/her cultural background.

This hermeneutics of understanding makes 'the caste question' a serious problem for cultural phenomenology. The other person tends to appear to the self already structured as a placeholder in the caste schema. Hence the question here is not to identify who is the 'other' but rather attempt to understand the experience of 'otherness' involved in the phenomena called caste.

The caste prejudice operates today, after more than sixty-five years of India's independence, more clandestinely than before due to the legal empowerment of the Dalits. But what I shall call the

'caste sense' is still prevalent across the social spectrum and is upheld by endogamous marital alliances, identity politics, and especially, the undertone of human comportment. Caste discrimination is still widespread in the comparatively backward northern states. However, even in states like Kerala, which boasts of the highest slot in the Human Development Index in the country, 'caste sense' is a tacit but real phenomenon. Cases of abject discriminatory overtures are also reported rather regularly. In April 2011, a scheduled caste officer of the Government of India was insulted in the state of Kerala after he retired from the office he held when the staff of the office sprayed cow-dung solution over the office furniture and the official vehicle used by the retiring officer before the new high-caste incumbent took office.¹⁰

But what is more difficult to see, analyze, and thus eradicate is the covert 'caste sense' that is not expressed in these overt ways but still determines the humdrum everyday behavior of people in their encounters with others. These covert structures come to the open when we look at the consolidation of power, for example, in various social, political, and economic strata like employment, education, religious worship, and so on. The 'caste sense' predetermines one's social interaction, friendship circles, and especially, one's loyalties. In conflicting social situations, these loyalties come to play and one's prejudicial eye is disallowed from seeing beyond one's 'caste sense', which, as if without even one's wanting and willing, compels one to make judgments favoring one's own specific 'caste sense'. The 'caste sense' is leisurely cultivated and the child is smoothly ushered into it with nothing really to have taught, right from determining the child's taste, her company, sense of touch, propriety and purity. From the heroes the education system constructs to the examples narrated inside the house, the child is given a clear sense of who is to be admired and who is to be abhorred. It appears that every workable system, whether desirable or not, can be upheld only in this fashion. As Heidegger reminds us, the most smoothly working system announces its dexterity by way of its disappearance.¹¹ It is not as the deliberate discriminatory tool that the 'caste sense' operates but as the unseen, unaware, unobtrusive undercurrent of one's comportment towards others. For everything that appears as a case of social breakdown, as in the case of the above-mentioned officer, there is a whole realm of 'caste sense' operating surreptitiously.

Even after six and a half decades of independence, Indians are not free from the influence of caste consciousness. Historically, India has been glorified as a nation for caste, creed and language and hence, the Indian caste system has been structured as one of the indispensable features of Hinduism and the Indian

Social system. But after colonialism, significant movements started challenging the inequalities associated with the caste system which have encouraged us to be more sympathetic towards other caste members. It is very interesting to encounter the importance of 'how caste status has affected the quality of life and social mobility in India in present times' but there are exceptions as we discussed earlier.

2. The question of the other

Levinas believes with Heidegger that anything can usually be made sense of only from within a context of intelligibility; he states that "all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to... a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing."¹² Without a background, there is no intelligibility. When we meet another person, we meet her/him from within our background and try to relate ourselves with the world from this identity and vice versa.

Levinas, however, has a peculiar move, an ethical one. For him, the face of the other person in a face-to-face encounter is something that ruptures my 'world'. The face is something irreducible to the symmetry of the world, and hence the encounter with the other is asymmetrical. The face breaks with my happy habitation in my world and challenges my egoistic spontaneity. This moment of disruption is the breakdown of my workable world and the intrusion of a necessity to respond to the face of the other. Levinas calls this compulsion that the sensual encounter with the other brings 'ethics' or 'responsibility'. In this break, Levinas is aiming to add a fundamental ethical nuance to the self-engaged in the world. "The relationship with the Other," he declares, "is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed."¹³

What Levinas so skillfully brings to the fore is the story of immanence and Being-in-the-world already disrupted by transcendence. His text speaks constantly of the friction between abstraction and concretion that the face signifies at the same time. A useful way of understanding the face, thus, is as an abstraction that puts into question the concretion of the encounter and the interruption of it by the third. The pre-original ethical encounter that Levinas recounts (especially in the later work *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence* (1974), is not something ethereal or out-of-the-world, but, rather, something that has meaning in the situational and particular context, something that individuates the ego. The transcendental, diachronous, unrecalable imposition this contact leaves on the ego is Levinas's way of telling us that the "inauguration" of the subject takes

place through the impingement by which an infinite ethical demand is communicated. But this scene cannot be narrated in time."¹⁴ Levinas builds the transcendence-immanence strife as a textual strategy for communicating the inherent ambiguity of proximity. Levinas does not want to overcome this tension, but it is certain that "[s]ignification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood."¹⁵ It is to be noted that Levinas never thought of this tension as something that could be resolved; rather, it is something built into the human experience of the ethical. "Transcendence, the beyond essence which is also being-in-the-world, requires ambiguity, a blinking of meaning..."¹⁶ At this point we cannot ignore that, the basic idea involved in the system of Caste in India is, 'the principle of difference'; of course idealizing this difference might be a problem in India, but above all, it presupposes the idea of difference which Levinas often talks about.

Who is my neighbor, my Other? If this is a concrete question, which assuredly it is, we then have a somewhat confused Levinas. In the 1946-47 lectures 'Time and the Other', the Other is said to be 'what I myself am not'¹⁷, 'the other is in no way another myself, participating with me in a common existence.'¹⁸ In a striking passage of *Otherwise than Being*, the Other, the neighbor, is described as the one who has no other place, not autochthonous, uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the inclemencies of the seasons, and helplessly dependent on 'me'.¹⁹ In this sense, is not the Other the one who is most distant from me, the one who challenges my spontaneous existence most radically, the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial other? Levinas circumvents an answer to this question, despite his powerful descriptions. As Bernasconi observes, Levinas operates above such categories by taking recourse to transcendentalism.²⁰ With the entry of the third party, there is control, society, the state, comparison and possession, science and commerce,²¹ and also the possibility of the enemy. In this context, the defense of 'my' people is important for Levinas. "I think that in the responsibility for others prescribed by a non-archaic monotheism, it reminds us that it should not be forgotten that my family and my people, despite the possessive pronouns, are my 'others', like strangers, and demand justice and protection. The love of the other – the love of one's neighbor. Those near to me are also my neighbors."²² In this passage there is no ambiguity at all that Levinas is speaking about the empirical others, and making it clear that those close

to self have priority over other 'others'. The message seems to be that even in the humanism of the other, the transcendent other should inspire us towards an ethic of the community, circumscribed by my unequal responsibility towards my neighbor and kin first and foremost. On the one hand, there is the formal transcendent notion of the Other; on the other, there is the practical injunction to be responsible to the concrete, nearby other. The teaching is clearly that in our relationships, we should honor otherness per se rather than level alterity in terms of the 'I' because we are constituted in terms of alterity; that is 'ethically'. Nothing is stopping the reader from prioritizing these ethics and delimiting it in terms of 'my people', for the Other is the neighbor close by as much as the distant foreigner.

These tendencies of the Levinasian 'Other', I suggest, should be resisted, and the thought should, rather, be allowed to travel to the path already begun. The Other that challenges my familiarity and comfort, the Other who menaces my subjectivity is truly what I am not, that which is farthest distant from me. The Other in the caste schema is the caste-other, who menaces my egoistic spontaneity, my loyalty to the community or the collected I. In the caste schema, nothing shakes my moral comfort zone more than the demands of the caste-other that in my pre-reflective, 'worldly' habituation I am most eager to accept without question. The experience of being and other is different from talking about it in terms of a third.

3. The question of ethics

If Levinas's other is truly the moral disruption of my being in the world, the relevance of this conception of concrete face-to-face encounter in the ethical questioning of the caste schema is evident and resourceful. As Robert Bernasconi contends²³ this is not always evident in Levinas's writings, but the resourcefulness of Levinas's phenomenology for such purposes is to be affirmed.

For Levinas, the condition for the possibility of ethics is the rupturing of my subjectivity and world by the face of the other. As this encounter is both transcendental and immanent, the encounter of the caste-other is immediately put into question in its ethicality. While Levinas's descriptions question all discriminations, they are particularly relevant in the context of caste-based othering because what is happening in such contexts is a sensual negation of the approaching other on account of the nuance of touch in the case of caste encounters. Levinas is characteristically speaking against everything that "drags us off and assembles us on the same side, chaining us to one another like galley slaves, emptying proximity of its meaning."²⁴ The uncontested loyalties, which Levinas himself was not able to fully

challenge, should be the ones to be challenged and ethically critiqued in caste encounters.

In discriminatory caste encounters, the ethical response elicited by the face of the other from the self is negated by the pre-cognitive cultural layers that blindly chain subjects to their world. It is such enchaining that wishes to challenge. He wishes to challenge it not because such injustice is an ethical wrong committed to the other; it is also, at the same time, an ethical aberration committed to the self. It is negating the exposed, exiled, persecuted, ousted subjectivity of the self, and consolidating the essence and being of the self that is ruptured by the ethical encounter.

Caste as the basic 'principle of difference' has a negative connotation in the Indian cultural scenario and has become an indispensable part of the social identity. Hierarchical order or the structures of social identities sometimes create a digressive attitude in the minds of those who are treated differently. But at the same time, the 'ethicality' in terms of cultural other has a basis on the non-approachable idea of the abstract other which always and already pushes the 'I' to encounter the other in terms of a response. If we intend to approach the Levinasian idea of the Other with the capital 'O' then there remains no cultural conflicts and misrepresentation of differences. The novelty in the Levinasian approach lies in the acceptance of the idea of difference and the only way to approach and regard this difference is through ethics.

Conclusion

Reviewing the above analysis of the very idea of 'caste' and the 'other' from a cultural phenomenological perspective, it might appear quite repetitive amid sociological and political understanding of caste as a problem in India. One of the reasons why we hesitate to express it in cultural-phenomenological terms is that, since the very beginning 'caste' as a subject matter has been prioritized by the sociologists and political thinkers in their terms. It is as if they owned the topic called 'caste' and any attempt made by the philosophers to understand it would lead towards a kind of misunderstanding or reframing within the peripheries of the sociological and political understanding of it. This paper hence is just an attempt to explore and understand the concept of 'Caste' concerning the idea of 'Other' in phenomenological terms. We found that Heideggerian understanding of Dasein's situated-ness in the world is the starting point from where we can develop the understanding of one's own being and also of the other who is also sharing the same. In Levinas, this idea of sameness is replaced by a non-same kind of asymmetry in relation. Hence within the paper, we most often explored both Heidegger and Levinas for the support of the argument.

Moreover, through this paper, I am not in a position to claim it is the only possible way in which caste can be understood; rather my aim through this paper was to figure out the basic understanding through which this inevitable phenomenon can be explained in phenomenological fashion. This is just to initiate and locate the problem of 'Caste' with the idea of 'Other' so that in the future we can develop this cultural phenomenon further in the line of mainstream phenomenology. I feel that there is a lot to explore in Indian philosophical and cultural tradition and examine it in terms of phenomenological perspective.

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