

## Identity Politics and Its Conservative Critics

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In their article Rajen Harshe and Sujata Patel ('Identity Politics and Crisis of Social Sciences', *EPW*, February 8, 2003) come down hard on identity politics for undermining the institutional concerns that provided sound scholarship and good pedagogy in social sciences; for vitiating the liberal atmosphere in the academic institutions by encouraging a culture of intolerance and for weakening the nation state in India by making the people lose sight of pan-Indian visions. In *EPW* itself I have written a few articles denouncing theories advocating identity politics in the name of caste, sex, nationality and religion. I do agree with some points of Rajen Harshe and Sujatha Patel's (now onwards Harshe and Patel) criticism against theory and practice of identity politics. However, I feel that their perception of the impact of identity politics on social sciences, academic institutions and the society is influenced by subjective feelings and personal prejudices. Further it appears to me that the solutions that they suggest to overcome the ill effects of identity politics appear to be more problematic than the problem they deal with.

Harshe and Patel contend that the first few decades after independence was an ideal period in the history of social sciences in India, wherein the scholars inspired by public intellectuals and progressive social movements came out with studies illuminated by reason and substantiated by wealth of empirical evidence. The academic endeavours of those scholars led to a fusion of indigenous social concerns with international social science theories. Reinforced by the democratic practices sponsored by the state, Harshe and Patel say, the scholars upheld the practice of civility in all public debates. During that period several schools of thought were encouraged to flourish and

grow in creative tensions with each other. To substantiate their argument, they present an account of the contributions of D R Gadgil, A R Desai and Rajni Kothari. Good social science practices that such liberal and Marxist scholars have set since independence days, Harshe and Patel argue, are now undermined by persons advocating and practising identity politics in the academic institutions. The history of social sciences in India so constructed by Harshe and Patel suffers from serious handicaps. May be that D R Gadgil passed away in 1971. But A R Desai was amongst us till 1994 and he had seen and reflected on the rise and growth of different types of identity politics during his lifetime. The Marxist scholarship did not end with A R Desai. There are quite a few active Marxist scholars who continue to write and engage in ideological debates on issues of contemporary relevance. Rajni Kothari is very much alive and active and his *CSDS* continues to live up to the traditions set by Kothari and his colleagues. Further the rise of identity politics do not seem to have posed any threat to scholarship or pedagogies in social sciences, as Harshe and Patel make us believe. Far from it, both in India and in the west, identity politics stimulated the scholars to explore new areas and come out with new perspectives. Many subjects such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, environment and human rights started receiving due attention from the academics. A few scholars and activists, influenced by postmodern scholarship, produced good pieces of texts upholding the identity assertions of marginalised communities in India. Their discourses have fostered a lively debate among advocates and critics of identity politics. Journals like *EPW* created a forum for lively discussions on strengths and limitations of identity politics. The debate compelled scholars adhering to different schools of thought to take a serious look

at their own theoretical positions and modify or revise them in the light of criticism hurled against them. In the west identity questions compelled the liberals to come out with theories such as communitarianism, multiculturalism and political liberalism. Of late some liberal scholars in India are trying to adopt those theories to Indian conditions and are making efforts to strengthen the liberal democratic foundations. Similarly identity politics compelled the Marxist intellectuals to take a serious look at superstructure and study the nature and dynamics of non-class social entities. In recent years the advocates of identity politics also had to revise their positions in the light of growing criticism against the negative impact of identity politics. There is some truth in the argument that initially the supporters of identity politics emphasised on essentialism and celebrated the differences. But of late they too have started becoming conscious of the drawbacks of essentialism and have started talking of the need for forging of identities. As such there is not much substance in the assertion that identity politics held back the development of social sciences in India.

At one level it appears that Harshe and Patel seem to be concerned more with the harmful effects of identity politics on the working of academic institutions than the academic scholarship that it produced in social sciences. They think that because of identity politics the rules of healthy academic discourse in the universities are distorted and the academic institutions have become an arena for interplay of identities. In their view identity politics produced a breed of apparent academicians turned into full-time politicians, who have started playing with identities to promote their own personal agendas. It is true that we do come across some such persons in the universities who make career out of identity politics and vitiate the academic atmosphere in the university for personal gains. But we are also aware of many other academicians who claim themselves to be Gandhians, Liberals or even Marxists and involve themselves in such opportunistic games and make their career by using

party or ideological masks. When such incidents do not make us take a stand against Gandhism, Liberalism or Marxism, will it be right on our part to assail identity politics on the basis of what certain individuals do? Do Harshe and Patel mean that all feminists, postmodernists, subaltern theorists, dalit intellectuals and human rights activists working in the universities, who rightly or wrongly lend support to identity politics, also involve in such mean politics? It is well within academics to make a critical evaluation of the theorisations of the advocates of identity politics and expose the limitations of their perspectives and arguments, but to ignore their positive contributions altogether and to allege that they make use of the theories to rationalise their indulgence in petty politics inside the universities in pursuit of personal gains smack of prejudice and myopia and in themselves they constitute a politics of a negative kind not conducive for liberal academic atmosphere in the universities. Of course, Harshe and Patel indirectly admit that only a few academicians involve in such games. If the majority is opposed to politics based on identities, then the question arises as to why does the majority keep silent. What is it that they lose by taking an open stand against such petty politicians? Is it because of fear or indifference, or is it due to guilt coming out of the realisation that they also played such games at times by taking recourse to some other theories and practices? If the majority remains silent, then the problem lies with the system as a whole, not with identity politics per se. If one is serious about fighting the negative effects of identity politics in the institutions of higher learning, one should first try to locate the factors that led to the problem.

Harshe and Patel's account of the anomalous growth of higher education in India does not tell the whole truth. Factors like the changing dynamics of Indian politics, the rise of new social forces and social movements, the birth of new ideologies and perspectives, etc, have created the conducive atmosphere for identity politics inside the universities. But apart from these factors, there should be some other bases within the academic institutions, which make it possible for identity politics to take its roots. One such fact that Harshe and Patel's article does not reveal is that for long the institutions of higher

learning in India were dominated by male academicians coming from urban, upper class and upper caste backgrounds. It may be true that some of the academicians of yesteryears, despite their elite social background, exhibited secular and democratic values and produced works that have considerable social relevance. But this cannot be said of all academicians. Many amongst them, despite their apparent commitment to reason, objectivity and civility, remained casteists and male chauvinists at heart. One can get a sight of their real character, not so much in their writings, but in their private conversations and personal behaviour. Their elitist attitudes and insensitive behaviour and behaviour in the work place hurt colleagues and students coming from different social backgrounds. Forgetting that their own intellectual growth was made possible because of their privileged social backgrounds, these academicians insist on objective yardsticks for judging the academic standards of others. Instead of encouraging and helping the less privileged colleagues and students, they look down upon those who fail to reach the set standards. All these create a suffocating atmosphere in the work place, leading to the breakdown of communication in the universities. In such situations, it is but natural that some people come to the conclusion that identity politics is the only way out to their growth and development.

The fault, therefore, lies not just with the persons engaged in identity politics, but also with those academicians who consciously or unconsciously drove others to take recourse to identity politics. Merely by appealing to reason and reflexivity or civility and democracy, we cannot stop people from believing in and playing with identities. The recognition that all persons associated with academic institutions are not just intellectuals; that there are also human beings would be the first step to deal with identity politics. Reason alone cannot show solutions to problems where human emotions are involved. It is only by developing genuine concern, love, understanding and respect for people coming from different backgrounds and by helping the less privileged to overcome their handicaps that we can win over others and make them listen to reason. Weaning away the people from identity politics takes its own time. Meanwhile we have to bear with a few self-styled leaders projecting

themselves as leaders of these communities and playing with identities. One need not fret too much about the accountability of such academic politicians. The public keeps on watching the activities of all academicians who declare their commitment to a particular ideology or practice. If they are really opportunists and insincere to the cause they espouse, they get exposed and meet their fate sooner or later. If anyone is really serious about accountability, we should worry about accountability of academicians who maintain that they are apolitical, objective and neutral, for it is their politics in the academic institutions that go unnoticed by the public at large.

### **National Identity vs Other Identities**

Apart from expressing their concern over the impact of identity politics on social sciences and academic institutions, Harshe and Patel also share their anxiety over the possible effects of identity politics on the inner unity of the people and sovereignty of the nation. They argue that owing to identity politics we lost sight of pan-Indian visions as well as the importance of the nation state. According to them weakening of the Indian state makes the country vulnerable to the global forces dominated by the world capitalist system and displaces the pan-Indian institutional and epistemological basis for conducting social sciences. They feel that pan-Indian identity alone has the ability to bolster strength to face the challenges of globalisation. There is nothing wrong in appealing to the masses to give up narrow identities and unite together to fight for their common problems. But what I feel objectionable in Harshe and Patel thesis is its attempts to pit national identity against other identities, forgetting that often national identity can very well get along with other negative identities such as Hindutva and can pose a threat to the civility and democracy that they seek to defend. Again it does not occur to them that pan-Indian unity need not necessarily mean strengthening of the Indian state. Their belief in the ability of the Indian capitalist state to represent the interests of all classes and communities make them suggest that the state be equipped to handle questions of equity and justice. But who are standing in the way of the Indian state taking up

developmental and welfare activities for the poor? The growing literature in social sciences legitimising the displacement of the state and privileging of the community that Harshe and Patel also refer to is coming not from the supporters of identity politics, but from the advocates of liberalisation and globalisation—from the IMF, the World Bank and their lackeys working in India. If the Indian state is complying with them it is because of its own class character, not because of any clash of identities in the civil society. India may have its own contradictions with the imperialist nations, but one should not forget that the Indian state itself is a capitalist state exhibiting imperialist tendencies and aspiring to become a global power. The possibility of all Indians uniting against the challenge of globalisation does not arise since globalisation affects different classes and communities in different ways. In India the elites—indigenous monopolies who aspire to become multinationals, the rich peasants who wish to profit by exporting their farm products abroad, the upper middle classes who lust for everything that is foreign and the stock brokers who benefit from the vagaries of unrestrained market economy—are the strongest supporters of globalisation. But the less privileged sections, meaning workers, small peasants, unemployed, dalits, tribals and poor women who are to be adversely affected by it, oppose the process of liberalisation and globalisation. When the interests of these two groups do not go hand in hand, how can there be any pan-Indian vision on the question of globalisation. Are the authors clear as to with whom and for what purpose the people should give up their narrow identities? Should the common people unite and rally behind the Indian nation state so as to make its ruling classes stronger so that they could exploit and oppress the people—the Indians as well as non-Indians—more effectively and efficiently? Or should they give up their particular identities and join together for waging a united struggle against both the Indian ruling classes and the foreign multinationals whose globalisation and liberalisation policies have become detrimental to their very existence?

These questions probably do not strike the minds of the likes of Harshe and Patel because of their conservative state centric approach. They get alarmed by the rise of identity politics that challenges all the rules

that classical liberalism considered as sacred and sacrosanct and try to arrest its further growth. But their liberal constraints, their elite background, their rigid ideas as to what is good and what is bad, their lack of faith in the ability of the masses to realise their own interests and their belief in the progressive character of the nation state, prevent them from making a probe into the contradictory dynamics of identity politics. They see all identities minus the national identity as narrow and inimical to unity. Naturally they fail to differentiate between the identities that are the outcome of oppression, exploitation and neglect and the identities that have domination, exclusion and discrimination as their agenda. There is a difference between identity assertions of the marginalised communities aiming at democratising society and the narrow identity politics led by community elites to propagate separatism and exclusionism. It is therefore essential

that we need to recognise and sympathise with the struggles of the marginalised communities fighting for protection of their identities and at the same time ensure that they all unite together in their struggle against the common enemies oppressing and exploiting them. Inability to appreciate the need for simultaneously shouldering these two contradictory tasks drives scholars like Harshe and Patel to explore simplistic solutions such as projecting external threats and appealing to people to give up all 'narrow identities' and rally behind the nation state. They expect the people to strengthen the hands of the state and urge the state to fight against the external dangers and ensure justice for all classes and communities within the country. But finally when they realise that neither the people nor the state pay heed to their well-intentioned appeals and advices, they get dejected and become cynical of everything that happens around them. **EPW**