

Beyond the Sociology of Values: Social Reform Movements and the Formation of Egalitarianism and Individualism in 19th century India

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ABSTRACT

The paper critiques the well-established understanding that 'individualism' entails equality and 'holism' entails inequality as individualism and holism are respective essences of two different kind of societies (Dumont 1967). It argues that social and political equality is a social ideology which emanates rather from the historical social and egalitarian movements which conceive the then prevailing state of society based upon their understanding of inequalitarian ideologies and unjust social order. Presenting a brief case study of two historical egalitarian movements in the 19th century India, respectively led by Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) and Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) who laid the ideological foundations for an egalitarian society in India, the paper suggests that in order to achieve social equality, it is important to understand the historic moments of injustice and inequalitarianism in a society. Egalitarian movements engender and provide enabling conditions towards making of an egalitarian society.

Keywords: *Egalitarianism, ideology, individualism, and cultural essentialism, social reforms, movements.*

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The Problem

Ever since India embraced a modern democratic government, constitutionally dedicating itself to the modern values of equality, liberty, justice and secularism, questions have been raised over potential conflict of these values with traditional Indian society. The debate entails that these modern concepts are culturally borrowed from modern western societies and implanted upon a traditional Indian society—with assumptions that Indian society did not suitably evolve to engage with the ideas and practices of a democratic government (Rudolph, 1965; Kaviraj, 2010; Brass, 1984; Frankel, 2000; Kothari, 1976; Beteille, 1965; Cohn, 1968; Dube, 1958). At the heart of the debate lies the conceptions of duality between the modern and a traditional society.

While modern societies are understood to have historically evolved to imbibe democratic form of government; traditional societies, on the other hand, remain historically static and therefore incapable of absorbing democratic values and governance. The debate over the modernity-tradition binary (Singh, 1974; Raju, 2011) has resonance across different disciplines of social sciences.¹ Engaging with questions of modern democracy in India, political scientists and theorists have sought to uncover the

¹ The different disciplines have engaged with these questions of modern and traditional societies and their relationships with modern values of equality, liberty, individualism and secularism. While the discipline of Comparative Politics engages with these concepts from a comparative framework to evaluate how these concepts fair in different societies in terms of their negotiations with social institutions and social structure. Anthropologists engages primarily to assess how these are being made sense by people who live traditional lives. On the other hand, historians have engaged with these questions to trace their evolutions vis a vis competing political ideologies and social groups. In case of India, these all these disciplines have engaged to find how these modern concepts are being negotiated historically, culturally, politically and even ideologically.

indigenous and authentic political discourses on Indian democracy (Guru, 2011; Vajpayee, 2012; Parekh, 1989; Bhargava, 2010; Ganeri, 2011). These scholars point out the inadequacy of western theories and concepts and further, at times, propose developing of an understanding of Indian democracy through a language and a conceptual frame that help in understanding Indian democracy and its challenge (Parekh 2009). Reflecting on such an intellectual trend, Gurpreet Mahajan (2013) observes a persistent intellectual insistence that seeks to understand India on its own terms; meaning thereby, that India must be studied and analyzed through the conceptual categories that exist in its own traditions. Although there cannot be any consensus over what is '*Indianness*' in these categories, or the extent to which *Indianness* may be retrieved from diverse Indian traditions, there is quite clearly a shared urge on the need to uncover the *Indianness* of Indian democracy and its functioning among these scholars. Sociologists and Social anthropologists and historians, on the other hand, have tried to find elements of modern concepts like 'individualism' (Madan,) 'equality' (Beteille, 2001) and 'liberty' (Sarkar 1919, in Indian traditions).

Such an intellectual exercise has been a persistent feature of Indian political and social theory that goes back to its 19th century Indological and orientalist moorings². This project of constructing an indigenous discourse on social and political theories largely emanates from the conception of cultural essentialism—assumption that each culture is different with its own system of values, ways of thinking and of evaluating what is good and desirable. Cultural essentialism finds its root with early orientalism which essentialized the non-western societies as an ahistorical society in contrast with historical western society. There is a critical need to integrate the essentialist notion of difference with empirical history, thereby foregrounding the role of history as a way of undermining a historical assertion of essentialism, especially since at the heart of essentialist construction is the idea of 'values' which turns these notions into reified historical constructs.

1. Cultural Essentialism in Indian Sociology: Louis Dumont's Sociology of Values

This delineation of cultural difference, historically, emanates from the politics of essentialist construction, an intellectual exercise, largely, enunciated through the idea of 'value'. The idea of 'value' assumed preeminence in Indian public and academic debate once it was used Louis Dumont (1911-1998) who brought it at the center-stage to develop theoretical contrast between Indian society and the modern western societies in his classic work *Homo Hierarchicus*. Dumont (1967) sought to establish that Indian and western societies were fundamentally different because of their defining 'values' that they subscribed to. For Dumont, these essentialist 'values' worked along the category of ideological values of individualism and holism representing the equality and hierarchy respectively representing modern western societies and traditional Indian society. Embedded in the two different respective ideological systems, these essentialist delineations did not only frame ideal values but sought to characterize social actions suggesting historical conformity with the totality of social institution and ascribed social role to be performed by a social group/collective. To that extent, hierarchy was essentialized to encompass Indian society pervading all its constituent parts that collectively came to represent the whole. Such a totalizing nature of hierarchy proved to be all-pervasive in an essentialist sense for Indian society governed by the ideology of holism. On the other hand, as Dumont's formulation proceeds, the western societies accord absolute importance to individual human beings, where every human being represents the embodiment of humanity at large and as such is equal to every other human, in addition to being free. It is this essentialist logic which holds that society with values of collectivity and holism 'on' possess value(s) of individualism, freedom and equality rather they value social hierarchy.

This Dumontian characterization of two different societies, constituted along a dualist framework implies that societies like India, ridden with caste hierarchy and holism, are essentially not equipped with the prerequisites to function with a democratic form of government. Dumont observed that what makes India hierarchical is its basic foundational institution of caste which is governed by the principles of purity-pollution as represented within Hinduism. What this implied was that social and economic practices were legitimized by their religious authority, thereby ensuring the perpetual reproduction of caste society with its basic value rooted in hierarchy. Such an insistence on the way the fundamental values of Indian society characterize Indian culture only further enhances the debate over India's ability to participate in a modern value system ((Brass, 1984; Cohn, 1968; Frankel, 2000; Kaviraj, 2010; Shah, 2013).

In fact, these disciplines in India have been preoccupied with these questions for a long beginning from the very outset of modern state taking center-stage in India society in the late 1940s.

² The Idea of India being different from other societies was above all an essentialist construction that has penetrated into different disciplines of social sciences. It has constituted the strong propensities of social sciences that have used these distinctions as two analytical categories with different sets of sub categories and markers. In a society like India nationalist leaders who used it strategically to mark the difference of India from western societies further took these essentialist constructions. These disciplinary trends trace their origin with 19th century discourse on Orientalism and Indology, which was pioneered by a set of British scholars who showed great interests in India's past and its classical age. They came up with a set of categories that in their understanding belonged exclusively to India as part of its civilizational heritage. These categories include the institutions of Castes, social hierarchy and mysticism.

2. Critique of Dumont's Sociology of Values

Construction of Indian society in terms of essentialist values met with challenge from different theoretical and empirical standpoints, particularly by historians and social anthropologists. Dumont's formulation is intriguing as it did not simply make an empirical observation, as other anthropologists and social scientists have persistently made establishing Indian society's unequal character against several parameters, its 'hierarchical social structure woven around caste and gender among others social markers, rather, it sought to establish that Indian society was deeply 'resistant to change' because of the social and religious values it subscribes to. It is unable to transit from a hierarchical society to an egalitarian one (Dumont, 1967).

Such an essentialist construction of Indian society has a larger implicatoin on the modern democracy and its functions on Indian society. It tends to support the argument that democracy in Indian remains as a borrowed idea which further implies is that India would not have a genuine egalitarian or democratic society if its political values are not derived from its own history and cultural experience. This in turn, becomes a fundamental question which attracts the proponents and practitioners of the different spectrum of disciplines to engage with and search for an authentic or indigenous social and political theory to explain the nature of Indian political ideas and values. One of the obvious shortcomings of an essentialist construction, such as one by Dumont's, remains its ahistorical character. It is often not informed with historical explanations as it assumes that social cultural values and socially embedded ideologies are intrinsically connected to the social institutions themselves and they remained unchanged. What is taken as its 'essence' is the ideology of socially embedded hierarchy, which Ronald Inden (1991) identified as a 'transhistorical phenomenon'.

Since Dumont's essentialist construction is largely based upon his privileging of caste as the core social institution—in turn legitimized by the religious ideology of Hinduism—most of the responses to Dumont's formulation suggest that his observations were sweeping and they did not represent the empirical facts pertaining to caste(s) and its inherent assumptions about hierarchy.(Gupta, 1984; Khare, Madan, 1983; Daniele, 1984; Inden R. , 1991).Dipankar Gupta (2006) argued that there was not one kind of hierarchy in India as there are different castes and the relationships between them define hierarchies of different kinds. Similarly, there is not just one kind of ideology such as the ideology of holism, and collectivism, as Dumont tends to suggest, rather there are different kinds of ideologies that not only share common grounds, but are also articulated at variance with, and even in opposition to each other. Further, Dumont's characterization of caste as fundamentally operating on the principle of purity and pollution was also countered with ethnographic accounts of village and caste studies which suggested that it is power which is at the center of caste and not purity and pollution. The category of dominant caste was shown to be the backbone of caste society which used power to further its own economic interests (Srinivas 2006, Gupta 2006).

Dumont sought to make the idea of 'individuality as purely a western concept. However, scholars, through empirical study showed that even the lower caste people developed and carried conscious individuality and equality (Khare (1985). Such an construction was based on a different cultural notion equalitarianism and individualism than those of western counterparts. The conception of 'individualism' which the untouchable caste visualized and practiced was based on a deep tradition in Indic thought which regard the individual soul as permanent and transcendental. The notion of individuality available in the Indic tradition entailed the 'spiritual individualism' signifying individual soul and not the '(material) person' as a concept, which Dumont invoked to draw a comparison. What Khare sought to establish was that Indians' sense of 'individuality' was derived from their 'spiritual equality' and thereby it cannot be claimed that Indians did not have a notion of individuality and equalitarianism.

Most of the ethnographic work on India (Marriot, 1976; Mencher, 1974; McGilvray, 1982; Inden R. , 1986; Khare, 1985; Khare, 2006) has tried to establish that there are different notions of individuality and egalitarianism in India, differing from the western notions of individuality and egalitarianism.

3. Individualism and Egalitarianism

With something as wide a concept as individualism, it becomes necessary to emphasize, that even in the same (western) society, people have held divergent beliefs and act differently with regard to individualism. Towards this end, Lukes (1973) cogently demonstrated that in countries like Britain, France, and Germany, where individualism is held to have emerged in the first instance, cultural and political groups such as Catholics, socialists, and conservatives placed emphasis on the importance of the collective life and remained deeply suspicious of the absolute individualism as a political ideal. It may also be added that even within a society, commitment to the values of equality and individualism may vary between different classes, races, religions and linguistic groups and even with in gender. The variation in commitment and appreciation for these values may be empirically and easily demonstrated in any society. More importantly, the relationship between the individualism and democracy is historically given, there is no obvious relationship between the two (Simmel 1971). There exists a possibility that an individualist society will appreciate the value of equality, but similarly there also exists a possibility that it may value inequality. It appears that there could be two kinds of

relationship between the individualism and equality, such as 'Individualism of Equality' and "Individualism and Equality" (Simmel, 1971). Simmel goes on to elaborate that 'Individualism of Equality' emerged in Europe only in the 18th century especially in the writings of Kant and his contemporary philosophers of moral imperative which highlighted such maxims as "treat each man as an end in himself, and never as a means only". This moral maxim emerged with the claim to, and need for, moral autonomy, sought from the constraints of the Church, the guilds and the estate. In this formulation, every individual was supposed to have, as a moral agent, an equal claim to autonomy and respect. While Simmel may be right in pointing out that 18th century European philosophers contributed these ideas, Beteille (1979) argues that these ideas were more grounded in the political debates over citizenship, equality before law and equal opportunities in the context of 19th century Europe. This is the context that even Dumont derives from Tocqueville's formulations on the emergence of these ideas in French and American revolutions.

It is clear from the above discussion that even in the European contexts, the discourse on Individualism and Equality emerged in the political contexts of 19th century when the questions over the political rights of equality before law, equal opportunities, and individual freedom were posed against traditional institutions like the Church and the Estate. Also, what is clear is that individualism as an ideology is not enough to bring about the discourse of equality in a society, rather what is required is a kind of political movement around the concepts of equality before the law, equal opportunities and individual freedom. Taking from Simmel's formulation, one may well argue that egalitarian discourses are subject to historical evolution in certain political contexts.

4. Egalitarian Movements as Source of Egalitarianism in 19th century India

As shown above, the idea of egalitarianism evolved, historically, in the European context 19th century India as it came into the contact with western political ideas also had a bout of egalitarianism in India. There is a history of egalitarianism in 19th century India, enunciated through social movements which fundamentally addressed the questions of social equality and individual liberty as utmost values. The account of social movements provides counter-fact to essentialist formulation of Dumont's binaries. The paper presents case studies of two social reform movements which made the egalitarianism as their central ideology. It argues that the social reform movements led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and later by Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) offered two different conception of egalitarian society. These social reform movements emanated from the given historical conditions and conceived egalitarian ideals which laid the foundations for social and political equality in modern India by problematizing the hierarchical social structure of Indian society. The sought to reconstruct the embedded ideological structure of social and religious institutions in course of offering a political imagination of an egalitarian society for India. The political and historical context of the 19th century colonial India was critical to both these movements which provided both prompting and enabling milieu to question the legitimacy of the traditional social order while engaging critically with the oppressive colonial regime.

These two social reform movements had provenance in two different kinds of social and political milieu which also cast on their character and conceptions of egalitarian society. Raja Rammohan Roy led reform movement represented the social and political response of the newly emergent elites and social class known as *Bhadrolaks* which largely constituted of the upper caste Hindus who aligned with the British colonial regime towards further their economic and cultural interests. Their engagements with economic activities of the British administration largely with *Zamindari* yielded an unprecedented material fortunes to them, English education and interaction with the orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries led them to view Indian society critically. These together made this class appear 'westernized' in their outlook. They sought the elements of modernization to be introduced to Hinduism's practices and changes in social structure and practices. Orientalist scholars showed that the different social practices such as *Sati*, polytheistic practices and ritualism were not part of ancient Hinduism and its philosophy (Colebrook, 1837) rather it was Hinduism in ancient times was a monotheistic religion which made God accessible to everyone.³ Such observations on Hinduism made religious reforms plausible for the *Bhadrolok* social reformers. That the predominance of ritualistic and polytheistic beliefs and practices were later addition to the religion which brought many of the problematic elements to Hindu society, provided, further argument for religious reforms in Hinduism which led to setting up an array of initiatives ranging from setting up the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 to undertake an organized effort to reform Hindu religious society by according preeminence to the monotheistic element to advocate the abolition of *Sati* practices. They sought to reform Hinduism by moving away from ritualistic practices and inbuilt social hierarchy within Hinduism. Brahmo Samaj sought to make monotheism as the primary theological precept of Hinduism which promised equality in faith (Robertson 1995, p. 105). Further, the introduction of a church like institution as the core feature of Brahmo Samaj, open prayer for everyone ensured access to the sacred place and philosophy and theology of Hinduism to everyone regardless of one's social origins or castes. This was radical move towards conceiving an egalitarian society.

³ Scholars who argued for monotheistic Hinduism included William Jones and

Building upon the spirit of religious reforms and drawing upon the legal and political discourse from the western society, Roy sought social realization of parity in gender relation in terms of equal entitlements in parental inheritance and making the practice of Sati illegal towards respect to individual's right to life (Biswas 1992, p.28). More notably, he mobilized social and political opinions around the idea of equal subjectship for Indians as the subject of the British empire towards addressing the questions of the institution of equal opportunity and equality before the law. Roy knew that the possibility of an egalitarian society in India was in fundamental contradiction with the inherent social structure, governed by the religious canons and conventions that did not recognize all its members equally. It was not only discriminatory, but also placed the people practicing Hinduism under a rigid caste hierarchy unsurpassable rigid social order (Raychadhury 1988). Hence, the social institution of caste was antithetical to an imagination of an egalitarian society. For this class, which was concerned about conceiving an egalitarian society, a re-imagination of a religious life was itself an ideological imperative and hence re-inventing Hinduism as a monotheistic religion, where all believers were equal before the supreme beings.

Emancipation from the shackles of dominant social structure is the precondition for the realization of an egalitarian society. One way to achieve this emancipation is through equal opportunity to participate in learning and knowledge production. Towards this end, while Bhadrolaks advocated the freedom of expressions to share individual and communal grievances with the colonial administration and the state, and with the larger public, they also supported universal education in a modern scientific discipline. For them, modern education did not only offer chances for social and economic mobility in the colonial state, it also inculcated the values of citizenship (Koff, 1969).

The second conception of an egalitarian society emerged in the late 19th century Maharashtra led by Jyotirao Phule and a set of social reformers who identified themselves with the non-Brahminism. This movement essentially represented the vision of an egalitarian society as conceived by non-Brahmin or lower caste activists. It was a profound conception of universal egalitarianism deeply informed with historical and political realities and oppressive social structure. Its vision found its enunciation through an articulation of an ideology which remained deeply anti-Brahminical yet critical of colonialism. The articulation of anti-Brahminism as an ideology emanated primarily from the experience and critical reflections on how the ideology of Brahminism worked to legitimize the social dominance of upper caste sanctioned by religious precepts. The promise of an egalitarian society, as conceived here, finds in the radical changes in the prevalent hierarchical social order. This group represented largely the lower castes of Maharashtra who were hitherto disadvantaged and excluded from traditional Indian society. The movement of Jyotirao Phule drew upon the long history of anti-Brahminism in Maharashtra rooted in Bhakti movements, and it was anchored in the emerging political historical context of how colonial regime sought to reproduce the exploitative social structure.

The British conquest of the Maratha empire in 1818 did not only bring Peshwa's rule to an end but more fundamentally it also brought about the significant change in the social and political life in the regions erstwhile ruled by the Peshwa rulers. At the time when the British took over from the Peshwa rulers the power structure in Maharashtra was totally predisposed to the Brahmins, who enjoyed exceptional privilege under the Peshwa rulers, themselves Brahmins. The social structure was fully governed by the traditional caste ideology which placed the Brahmins at the top of the social hierarchy and the lower castes at the bottom. Scholars have identified the Peshwa rule as a process of Brahmanization (Deshpande 2007, O'Hanlon 1985).

Even in the British colonial rule, Brahmins' continued to dominate the social life of the lower castes, and exercised exploitative authority over the tillers and farming community, Phule identified this social relations in terms of caste relations positing it in binary of the privileged Brahmins and exploited non-Brahmins. The former derived their sustenance through money lending and extracting revenues from the tillers who remained exploited. Phule argued that all the farming and tilling communities belonged to one caste group (Phule 2002). Phule's attempts to create an agrarian community into one caste was seen as an attempt to create Maratha community which further aided to the duality of Maratha-Brahmin community, as for Phule Marathas were the original cultivator class of this land (Phule 2002,). Phule's bloc of non-Brahmins also included the untouchables.⁴ The egalitarian idea of Phule which rode primarily between the two classes led him to advocate the equal share in the welfare programs of the government among the non-Brahmins (Phule, 2002, pp. 186).

Phule's celebrated text *Slavery* is primarily a political text which historicizes the conflict and subjugation of *Shudras* and *ati-Shudras* drawing upon the history of struggle of blacks and other poor people from western Indian history. Deeply influenced by American civil rights activist Thomas Paine (1737-1809) primarily, known for his book *Rights of Man*, which had abiding influence on Phule who argued that individual freedom was god given rights and thus no one should be deprived of it. He further argued that opportunities for education and learning was the basic rights of liberty which needed to be realized in Indian society. He advocated for

⁴ Phule's close associate Gopal Baba Valangkar a Mahar from Konkan worked with him on the object of unification between the untouchable and other non-Brahmin caste groups. See Rosalin O' Hanlon, 1985, pp.271.

mass education to be provided by the state and he was critical of the colonial state's attitude towards no education for masses (Phule 2002, p.25). However, at the core of movements for education remained a social movement as Phule and his associates were aware that it was not the state which could provide equal opportunities rather they had to battle against entrenched social order organized around the ideology of Brahminism which works to impede the access to education for the people from non-Brahmin communities, thus, an egalitarian movement was needed to be directed against the social order and its ideological power. Phule wrote a short ballad, '*Brahman teachers in the Education Department*' to demonstrate the temporal power of a Brahmin school teacher in the village who used both his caste privilege and the status of a government official to withhold education of non-Brahmins students. He highlighted the deep prejudice of these teachers against the non-Brahmins students as they reported to higher British officials that they did not possess learning aptitude (O'Hanlon 1985, p.210).

Further, the responses of non-Brahmins activists toward conceiving an egalitarian society pertained to Brahmins dominance over scholarship and Marathi literature. And it was towards dominance that Phule founded *Satya Shodhak Samaj*, primarily as an epistemic organization to challenge the Brahminical hegemony in the domain of knowledge production. elite Brahmin scholars and social reformers were concerned about reforms and modernization of tradition and did not subscribe to the idea of revolutionary changes in Indian society, which the non-Brahmins seemed to be passionate about (Gail Omvedt 2004, p. 3).

The egalitarian ideology was at the heart of the non-Brahmin movements in the 19th century. The conception of an egalitarian society was based on conflict between the Brahminical ideology and newly formed non-Brahmin's modern conception of an egalitarian society.

Conclusion

While there has been a sustained debate on the how modern political values such as equality, individualism and liberty which are fundamental to a modern democratic society are essentially western concepts, as they have emerged in the western society. Such a debate in sociological and political discourse have got further enunciated through cultural essentialism which does not take into account the historical formations of political discourse. The idea of an egalitarian society across different historical societies have emerged through a social and political movements when different ideas encounters. In India, the conceptions of egalitarian society should be basically studied and understood through understanding social movements and their rippling effects on intellectual, social and political life. Societies are not static rather they made and remade with intellectual and social churning. These two social movements did not only seek ameliorations in ill-conceived social and religious practices rather they sought to conceive an egalitarian society for India.

The promise of an egalitarian society, as conceived here, finds in the radical changes in the prevalent hierarchical social order.

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