

Development Policy and the Nature of Society: Understanding the Kerala Model

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The quality of life is usually measured by three interrelated dimensions such as the human development index, the human freedom index, and the human distress profile. In Kerala, in spite of high HDI, the rates of suicide, crime, drug addiction, unemployment, etc, are high compared to other states. This essay argues that a high quality of life should register a high HDI, the maximum HFI and minimum HDP. It is necessary to work towards this complex objective if Kerala wants to sustain its claim to a high quality of life.

States and societies always existed; if societies are viewed as products of gradual evolution, states are believed to be consciously constituted structures for regulating the behaviour of the relevant population as and when required. Although some western anthropologists preferred to refer to tribes as “stateless societies”, it is a conceptual nullity in that all societies have had legitimised authority structures. They manifested in a wide variety of forms – tribal chiefs, council of elders, ecclesiastical heads, emperors, monarchs, dynasties, city-states, party-states and democratic states. If states represented all segments of societies and catered to their welfare, there cannot be any tension between the two, but the lack of fit between them did exist for a long time and persist till this day.

1 Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the effort to establish isomorphism between state and society began only 360 years ago, when the Peace of Westphalia gave birth to the institution of the nation state. Ever since that as Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish social scientist, had aptly observed “...with hardly any exception, all the concepts and analytical tools currently employed by social scientists are geared to a view of the human world in which the most voluminous totality is a ‘society’, a notion equivalent for all practical purposes, to the concept of nation state” (1973: 78).

I suggest that the conflation of society and nation state sowed the seeds of initial confusion. Gradually, the institution of the nation state came to be endorsed as an ideal and nation state and state became equivalents. Thus the conflation of society and nation state and hyphenation of nation and state are the twin sources of the prevailing conceptual confusions and much of the societal tensions in the world today.

And yet, diametrically opposite articulations are made about linking state and nation/society. Let me illustrate it by recalling the views of two British authors. J S Mill held: “It is in general, a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide with those of nationality...” (cited in Smith 1971: 9). But Lord Acton differed violently: “Nationality does not aim at either liberty or prosperity, both of which it sacrifices to the imperative necessity of making the nation the mould and measure of the state; its course will be marked with material and moral ruin” (ibid: 9). I can go on with this exercise of recalling both positive and negative pronouncements regarding linking the state and the nation and its consequences. But this excurses will not be helpful in arriving at a consensus.

And as Tilly (1994: 137) reports “only a tiny proportion of the world’s distinctive religious, linguistic and cultural groupings have formed their own states, while precious few of the world’s existing states have approximated the homogeneity and commitment conjured up by the label ‘nation state’”. This is also true of west Europe, the cradle of nation states. Independent India, after some initial hesitation, decided to reconstitute its politico-administrative units on linguistic basis. This was based on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission (SRC) which submitted its report in 1956. This was indeed a giant leap forward in improving the governability of India. At the time of the reorganisation of the states in the 1950s, two broad views were articulated. One view was that the unity of India must not be imposed but must be a fundamental unity recognising its social pluralities and cultural diversity; the strength of Indian Union must be the strength that it derives from its constituent units, an approximation of J S Mill’s view and an implicit endorsement of the idea of a multi-national state. The other view was that in the past, India had not been an integrated political unit and so the effort should be to create a united India; the new concept of unity cannot be based on the reaffirmation or re-enunciation of old values such as religion and language which are divisive rather than cohesive. Therefore, the

This is a revised version of the text of the keynote address delivered on 5 November 2008, at Thiruvananthapuram for the national seminar on “State and Society in South India”, organised by the Institute of Parliamentary Affairs, Government of Kerala.

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unity of India should transcend community (read religion) and language and recognise the nation as one integrated unit. This view reflects an acknowledgement of Lord Acton's position and endorses the homogenisation project of nation states.

However, Indian political praxis does not neatly fit either of these positions. Both empirical reality and political expediency called for a cautious approach. There are four important bases of socio-cultural identity in India – religion, caste, tribe and language. Of these, the first two are not viable for the formation of politico-administrative units (see Oommen 2005: 142-52) and language and tribe are accepted as the basis for the formation of provincial states.

The purpose of this short conceptual theoretical excursus is to suggest that there is an enormous gap between the empirical reality of India and the concept of nation state. Therefore, it is appropriate to designate India as a multinational state. But even those who used to invoke the notion in the past have abandoned it because it is not viewed as politically correct any more. Perhaps, the disintegration of multinational socialist states and the emergence of mononational states in their place has accelerated the process of rejecting the notion of multinational state. As I see it there exists a conceptual vacuum created by (1) the lack of fit between the concept of nation state and the empirical reality, and (2) the delegitimation of the idea of multinational state. However, there is no serious efforts made in political theory to grapple with this issue (see Oommen 1997, for an exception).

If India's complex empirical reality cannot be denoted by the concept of nation state, and if the notion of multinational state is no more in vogue, what is an appropriate designation for India? Charles Tilly's coinage, namely, national state, seems to be helpful. However, his definition of national states as "...relatively centralised, differentiated and autonomous organisations successfully claiming priority in the use of force within large, contiguous and clearly bounded territories" (1990: 43) fits more the bureaucratic structures of states and completely ignores the emotional appeal implied in the idea of nation. Further, national states are viewed

as transitory structures; they are nation states-in-the-making in Tilly's rendition, which does not fit in the Indian reality. Therefore, I have suggested that national states should be viewed as entities which do not simply accommodate, but consciously celebrate cultural diversities in contrast to nation states which are perpetually engaged in creating monocultural states. This would require the coexistence of federal political structures along with social and cultural diversities (see Oommen 2008: 21-36). The essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structures but in the society itself. The federal government is a device through which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected (Livingston 1966). On the other hand, what Smith (1979) designated as "methodological nationalism" an offshoot of treating nation states as the ultimate units of analysis is utterly unsuited for comprehending Indian social reality. This provides the methodological justification to treat India's provincial states as units of analysis to understand their differing policies and the impact they make on their respective societies.

2 State and Society in South India

The expression state usually connotes a sovereign state and the entity designated as south India does not have one, it exists within the Republic of India, which is a sovereign state. South India, however, has six politico-administrative units, four provincial states and two union territories. On the other hand, south India is more a geographical entity than a society. In fact, it contains at least four major societies – Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayali – if language is invoked as the basis of society. To put it pithily south India is encapsulated within a sovereign state and it consists of several societies.

The states of south India have different "regime types", to recall the phrase from the theme paper, which differ in their value orientation, seen in terms of the political parties in power. For example, Tamil nationalist parties were/are in power in Tamil Nadu for quite sometime; a nationalist party (Telugu Desam) and an all-India transnational party have been alternatively in power latterly in Andhra Pradesh; two

coalitions both of which contains all-India parties have been in power alternatively in Kerala too and an all-India Hindu nationalist party (Bharatiya Janata Party) dislodged the Congress Party from power, recently in Karnataka. This being so one has to undertake comparative studies of the provincial states of south India to unfold the relationship between regime types, policy variations and the consequent development trajectories.

The theme paper poses a significant question: "Are the variations in policy outcomes a product of difference in regime type alone?" And, it also makes a claim: "The presence of a strong Left movement in Kerala and its assumption of office has made serious inroads in the caste-feudal system in the state and paved the way for the democratisation of the society with significant welfare components....No other state in south India could legitimately claim parentage of social transformation of such a magnitude". However, available articulations on this theme pull in opposite directions. For example, while Kohli (1987) argues that regime types are crucial in contributing to the welfare of the poor, Vyas and Bhargava (1995: 2559-72) have found that no causal connection between regime type and poverty alleviation can be firmly established. On the other hand, Harris (2006: 135-68) seems to suggest that the very idea of regime type is ambiguous because (a) even as the same party is in power in two states, their achievements are uneven, and (b) the same political party may be compelled to follow different policy packages in different states they rule, due to local variations and political pressures. He seems to suggest that regional factors account for the differences. But the notion of "region" seems to be inappropriate to establish the relationship between policy initiatives, regime type and development outcomes in south India, because while the states and societies of south India vary considerably, although they belong to the same "region".

To answer the question posed and to explicate the claim made in the theme paper one needs to resort to at least one of the two methodological devices. One, compare two "societies" of south India with differing regime types but have

Table 1: Disparities – States and Social Categories*

	India		Kerala		Tamil Nadu		West Bengal	
	Composite Index	Composite Index	Ranking	Composite Index	Ranking	Composite Index	Ranking	
Rural areas 2005	33.97	72.57	1	58.27	4	36.98	13	
Urban areas 2005	44.84	67.49	2	53.26	5	51.40	8	
Scheduled castes 2001	24.89	61.55	1	37.22	6	29.52	11	
Scheduled tribes 2001	19.56	50.24	1	30.06	4	19.03	12	
Non-SCs/STs 2001	34.38	68.02	1	47.62	4	36.75	11	

* Data presented are taken from H M Mathur, ed. (2008). Composite Index is worked out based on six component indices – demography, healthcare, basic amenities, education, economic deprivation and social deprivation – and the Aggregate Index as obtained by range equalisation method for 20 large states.

achieved more or less the same magnitude of social transformation, or at least, are moving in the same direction. If social transformation is discerned through social development indices, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have comparable achievement directions, although Kerala’s achievement level is far higher. But their regime types drastically vary. Tamil Nadu did not have a strong Left movement and a Left government did not ever come to power there. For the past 45 years Tamil Nadu has been governed by Tamil nationalist parties. If different regime types can produce proximate magnitude of social transformation, one cannot causally link social transformation with regime type.

The second methodological device is to compare two societies with similar regime type. If the magnitude of their social transformation is more or less the same, then one can legitimately attribute it to the regime type. The only state other than Kerala in India with a strong (in fact, stronger) Leftist movement and an uninterrupted Leftist regime since 1977, i e, for the past three decades, is West Bengal. Logically, the magnitude and the quality of social transformation in West Bengal should be much bigger and better as compared with that of Kerala, if regime type is the causal factor.

Keeping these considerations in mind, let me bring to your attention the rankings obtained by the south Indian states as reported in *India: Social Development Report 2008*. Kerala ranks one with regard to rural areas, scheduled castes (scs) and scheduled tribes (srs) and non-scs/srs and two for urban areas for the whole of India. Tamil Nadu comes second among the south Indian states and its rankings are four for

rural areas, five for urban areas, six for scs, four for sts and four for non-scs/sts. The ranking for the other two south Indian states are as follows – Andhra Pradesh: rural areas nine, urban areas 11, scs nine, sts nine and non-scs/sts 10; Karnataka: rural areas six, urban areas 12, scs eight, sts five, and for non-scs/sts, eight. If so one can conclude that the differences both in regime types and societal types could have jointly produced the variations in rankings.

I have noted above that as for regime type West Bengal is not only similar, but even stronger seen in terms of the presence of Leftist movement and government as compared to Kerala. And yet, the rankings West Bengal obtained are below all the south Indian states and far below than that of Kerala as is evident from Table 1. The rankings obtained by West Bengal are: rural areas 13, urban areas eight, scs 11, sts 12 and non-scs/sts 11 among the 20 large states of India. Incidentally, the only other state with similar regime type is Tripura which ranks eighth out of the nine smaller states about which rankings are

provided in the report under reference. Therefore, it can be concluded unequivocally that the three states with similar regime type – Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura – vary vastly in the magnitude and quality of social transformation achieved by them. If so one has to look outside the ambit of regime type to understand the magnificent achievement of Kerala with regard to the human or social development indices. But before I do that let me make a couple of general comments.

The data presented in Table 1 refers to rural-urban spaces irrespective of social categories. Of the three states compared, rural-urban disparity is the least in the case of Kerala, it is the most in the case of West

Bengal and Tamil Nadu comes in between. However, the disparity between the scs and sts on the one hand, and the general population on the other, persists in all the cases, but the worst in the case of West Bengal which also indicates that the achievement of equity is not necessarily accelerated by the regime type. The situation of West Bengal, as compared with that of Kerala and Tamil Nadu is also adverse in eradicating poverty as shown in Table 2.

India’s rural-urban disparity is proverbial. But in the case of Kerala, there is hardly any difference: The very poor and poor together make 35.10% in rural and 34.58% in urban areas. In the case of Tamil Nadu, the figures are 45.32% for rural and 58.45% for urban; the situation is reverse in that the presence of poor is 13% more in urban areas. In contrast, in West Bengal the rural-urban disparity is steep; 54.49% of the people in rural areas are poor as compared with 29.89% poor in urban areas making for a difference of 25% more poor in rural areas which is far worse than even the all-India situation wherein the difference is only 5 %.

I would also like to note here that the disparity in the socio-economic condition of the largest religious minority in India, namely, Muslims and the Hindus, is much more in the case of West Bengal as

Table 2: Estimates of Very Poor and Poor in the Rural Areas and Urban Areas in 1993-94 (in percentage to population)*

State	Rural			Urban		
	Very Poor	Poor	Total	Very Poor	Poor	Total
India	15.26	37.23	52.49	14.85	32.28	47.13
Kerala	9.42	25.68	35.10	10.08	24.50	34.58
Tamil Nadu	12.67	32.55	45.32	18.67	39.78	58.45
West Bengal	13.62	40.87	54.49	7.51	22.38	29.89

* Taken from Mehta and Shepherd, ed. (2006), p 276.

Table 3: Hindu-Muslim Disparities*

	Rural MPCE 2004-05			Urban MPCE 2004-05		
	Kerala	Tamil Nadu	West Bengal	Kerala	Tamil Nadu	West Bengal
Hindus	970	597	610	1,363	1,166	1,214
Muslims	968	724	501	1,081	1,020	748
Rural Literacy Levels (%)						
Hindus	89	65	67	93	82	84
Muslims	89	79	56	91	84	66

MPCE: Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure
*Data presented are adapted from Government of India, 2006.

compared with that of Tamil Nadu and Kerala as is evident from a recent report of the government of India.

The data presented in Table 3 reveal that there is hardly any disparity with regard to monthly per capita consumption expenditure and literacy levels between Hindus

and Muslims in Kerala. As for Tamil Nadu the condition of Muslims is a shade better than that of Hindus. In contrast, the Hindu-Muslim disparity is considerable in West Bengal. Given this clinching evidence with regard to the rural poor, scs, sts and Muslims in West Bengal, one can conclude that there is no relationship between regime type and the welfare of weaker sections in society. Incidentally, the empirical evidence also contradicts the familiar argument that stability of regime type is a prerequisite for rapid economic development in a particular direction. While West Bengal had stable regime type for the past three decades, Kerala's regime type varied intermittently. This being so it is necessary to explain the Kerala exceptionalism.

3 Social Transformation in Kerala

Kerala is widely acclaimed for its high quality of life, measured in terms of a few select human/social development indices. Even if one endorses the description as correct the causal explanation is faulty. If Left movements and the Left governments

are accepted as the prime movers of social transformation one cannot explain why West Bengal and Tripura are lagging behind in terms of the indicators of human/social development? Similarly, available evidence does not support the frequently made claim that the Left movement initiated people's protest, making inroads into the caste-feudal structure of Kerala society. In fact, the first set of popular protests were rooted in identity politics and not class politics, the bulwark of Left politics.

The Ezhava Memorial of 1896, the formation of Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalanam in 1903 and the Sahodara Prasthanam initiated in 1917 were all revolutionary stirrings of Ezhavas, who were groaning under the oppressive caste system. That there was a small elite among them was a facilitating factor. Thus Ramakrishna Pillai, widely hailed as a political rebel of Kerala, who incessantly interrogated the style of functioning of the Travancore monarchy, wrote in *Keralan*, the Malayalam journal, in 1904 supporting the demand for the admission of Ezhava children into the

state-run schools thus: "The disabilities faced by Ezhavas, who make a substantial contribution to the economy of the state, should be reduced to the extent it is the responsibility of the government. It is our considered opinion that those castes (read Ezhavas), which have the requisite cleanliness, etc, should be taught along with others (read ritually clean caste Hindus) as per government rules (cited in Raghavan 1979). That is, Ramakrishna Pillai, a Nair by caste, supported the admission of Ezhava children because of the economic standing and ritual cleanliness of that caste. In contrast, he opposed the admission of untouchable children into schools through his writing on 2 March 1910 in *Swadeshbhimani*, the journal he edited, "To mix those castes which were cultivating their intellect for generations and those castes who were cultivating fields for centuries, is like yoking together the horse and the buffalo" (cited in Chentharasser 1979: 73).

It is also of great importance to recall here that the first revolt by agricultural



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workers was organised in 1907-08 in the Travancore region by Ayyankali (1863-1941) who belonged to the untouchable Pulaya caste much before the Leftist movement crystallised. It should be underlined that (a) the strike was organised by the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, an association of depressed castes to fight for the eradication of untouchability; (b) those who participated in the strike were demanding the right of admission for untouchable children in government schools and not demanding better wages, stipulated working hours, etc, the usual demands of agrarian proletariat; and (c) the then existed caste-class congruence meant that agricultural workers were drawn almost entirely from the ex-untouchables.

The purpose of referring to Ramakrishna Pillai's opposition to untouchable children's entry into schools is to highlight the fact that even political radicals of those days were socially conservative. While one cannot ignore the sterling contributions made by him to fight against monarchy and for the depressed castes, the anti-colonial movement paled into significance because of the social stigmatisation they were subjected to. Understandably, the celebrated Ezhava poet, Kumaran Asan, pertinently remarked in 1920 "It was social oppression that the people of this state (i.e., Travancore) experienced more than political oppression" (cited in Balram 1973: 39).

The points I want to make at this juncture are the following. One, given the vice grip of caste in the Kerala society of early 20th century a cultural revolt was a prerequisite for the political mobilisation of the depressed classes. Two, that cultural revolt in Kerala was initiated by the Ezhavas and Pulayas, two numerically large depressed castes. Three, although economic exploitation was rampant as the exploiters were drawn predominantly from the upper castes, crystallisation of class consciousness did not occur. Four, the cultural revolts by lower castes were a prerequisite for the initiation and success of Leftist movements (see, Oommen 1985) in Kerala. This being so to attribute the transformation of Kerala's caste-feudal structures to Leftist movements and governments alone is an unsustainable retreat into the present. Kerala's social history is at variance with this claim.

Having acknowledged the achievements of Kerala as compared with other states with similar regime type (for example, West Bengal and Tripura) it is necessary to identify the specificities which can explain Kerala's high human/social development indices. It is well known that Kerala ranks at the top among the Indian states based on sex-ratio, level of literacy, life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, maternity mortality rate and the like. As I have already noted, West Bengal with the same regime type is precariously proximate to the Bihar states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh), the states with the lowest human development index (HDI) ratings. This being so the "political" explanation does not help. Some suggest that Kerala's low level of economic development in spite of high HDI is due to the insufficient supply of local industrial entrepreneurs or the inability to attract outsiders to invest in Kerala because of the persisting labour unrest. But Gujarat which provides a high proportion of India's entrepreneurs had 39% of its population below the poverty line in 2001, the corresponding figure for Kerala being 31%. Therefore, the economic explanation also does not help understand the better performance of Kerala.

The Kerala model is flaunted around the world in the name of quality of life which actually is a conjoint product of several factors and forces. But let me also administer a caution here. Those who are familiar with the history of measuring

quality of life know that there are three interrelated dimensions: (1) HDI, (2) human freedom index (HFI), and (3) human distress profile (HDP). When one surveys the contemporary world situation in terms of quality of life, one can see a strong correlation between HDI and HFI. But there seems to be an inverse relationship between these two on the one hand, and HDP on the other (see, Oommen 1992: 141-72). This is true of Kerala too. For example, in spite of an appreciable HDI, Kerala's rates of suicide, crime, drug addiction, missing persons, unemployment, etc, are high as compared with other Indian states. A realistic claim for high quality of life should register high HDI, maximum HFI and minimum HDP. It is necessary to work towards this complex objective, if Kerala wants to sustain an authentic claim for high quality life. Be that as it may, how can we account for Kerala's achievements?

I suggest that the unique development experience of Kerala should be located in its specificities. I shall list nine of them (I dare not make them 10!) for the benefit of those who are enthralled about the Kerala development model. The conjoint impact of these specificities of Kerala coupled with the pressure exerted on political parties in power account for the state's achievements.

Kerala's linguistic homogeneity is a great facilitator of the spread of school education; 98% of the residents of Kerala are native speakers of Malayalam. This makes the spread of literacy easy and



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communication smooth which are imperatives for development.

Although bilingual, Kerala is utterly multi-religions. But the fact that Christianity in Kerala is pre-colonial and Islam pre-conquest, these religions do not lend themselves for easy stigmatisation as transplants of colonialism and conquest, respectively, a tendency in vogue, particularly in north India. This facilitates their participation in the process of development and accrue legitimate share of benefits.

The early establishment of institutions of education and health by Christian missionaries had a demonstration effect on other groups. Witness the enthusiasm of Nairs, Ezhavas and Muslims to establish such institutions. Kerala's communal and caste groups have pursued competitive politics to achieve secular goals.

The absence of the Vaishya element in Kerala's varna-jati system rendered entrepreneurship a caste-neutral phenomenon, prompting Syrian Christians, Nairs and Ezhavas to enter the fields of industry, trade and commerce.

The proverbial rural-urban dichotomy between Anglostan and Hindustan, also christened as India and Bharat, is totally absent in Kerala. The rural-urban continuum of Kerala facilitates appropriate location and optimum utilisation of infra-structural facilities.

The proclivity of Malayalee for spatial mobility and the inclination to settle down in different parts of India and the world, coupled with the habit of repatriating one's savings back home is an important source of capital for Kerala. Truly, Kerala's is a substantial "post-office economy".

The ubiquitous presence of the printed word and the press, lately reinforced by the electronic medium in Kerala is almost unparalleled in the social history of India; for example, *Malayala Manorama* newspaper and its magazines have the highest circulation among the Indian language publications although Malayalam is only the ninth major language of India. The role played by drama and Harikatha earlier and socially sensitive literature and cinema now needs to be highlighted in Kerala's social transformation.

The crystallisation of two firm "secular" political blocks provides the much needed political equilibrium for democracy in Kerala.

This checks excesses and prompts innovations on the part of both the blocks which is in sharp contrast to the situation in West Bengal. Therefore, the proclivity to attribute the success of Kerala exclusively to one of the political blocks is unsustainable.

Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, Kerala had and continues to have a movement society par excellence; not only political, but also social, cultural and environmental movements. I have already referred to the cultural revolts by depressed castes in early 20th century which were precursors for class mobilisations later. Also, recall mobilisations for spread of literacy, library, scientific temper and the stalling of the Silent Valley Project, perhaps the first successful movement in India for the protection of environment. The rights of low caste women to cover their breasts, the low caste men to keep moustaches, hutments for agricultural workers just to mention a few, were all won through protests and mobilisations.

4 Conclusion

I want to conclude this paper by providing a quick and short explanation as to why facile claims remain unchallenged in Indian social science. It has to do with the question: who produces and disseminates knowledge and for whose benefit? Gender and class bias in the production and dissemination of social scientific knowledge is widely recognised. But ideological prejudice is not readily acknowledged because each ideological camp steadfastly holds that it is the upholder of ultimate truth. The very idea of objectivity is stigmatised in contemporary social science. I am not referring to value-neutrality at all; it is absolutely necessary that our discourse should be value-informed. Objectivity in social science can only mean intra-subjectivity or inter-subjectivity which can only lead to what I have designated as "particularising objectivity" as against "generalising objectivity" in material and life sciences (see, Oommen 2007: 8-12). There are also biases based on our disciplines; we are all victims of what T Veblen evocatively phrased as "trained incapacity".

But there is a problem specific to India. In our 1990 tradition, brahmin males were the only accredited producers and communicators of knowledge; the kshatriyas and vaishyas could be consumers of knowledge

but the vast majority of the population, including upper caste women, was proscribed from even consuming knowledge. In spite of all the changes that occurred in Indian society, the vice grip of tradition continues with regard to the production of knowledge resulting in a cognitive blackout of the wretched of the Indian Earth. The view from above should be supplemented with a perspective from below (ibid: 94-108) which would at least partly remedy the prevailing distorted understanding of Indian social reality. That is, we need to overcome gender, class, ideological, disciplinary, communal and caste biases to equip ourselves with the capacity to produce authentic knowledge.

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