Teaching Gender and Caste: Pedagogy Between Thought and Practice

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My heartiest congratulations to the National Law School of India University for launching its BA Programme in 2025 and for creating a space where the humanities and social sciences can enter into a productive conversation with legal education. Often seen as inhabiting a world of ideas and being abstract, social sciences actually illuminate lived realities. In an age obsessed with quick results and skills, they cultivate critical inquiry, historical perspective and ethical reflection, helping us understand how societies function, power operates and inequalities persist. In this sense, equitable thought and ethical practice remain closely intertwined and pedagogy itself often needs to be imagined through a language of ethics and care.

Law, both in its teaching and in its practice, is deeply entangled with questions of gender and caste, inequality and justice. Any engagement with legal institutions in India inevitably confronts the lived realities of social hierarchy and discrimination. I want to reflect on these questions through the lens of pedagogy, by drawing upon my own experiences of teaching the intertwined histories of caste and gender in Indian universities over the past few decades, particularly within the discipline of history. In institutions such as NLS, where professional training has historically been combined with social scientific reflection, such questions of pedagogy become particularly significant.

When I began teaching in the 1980s, the inclusion of 'gender' as a single rubric within history courses was often considered sufficient, as most courses were political or economic centric. Over time, however, much as Marxism had earlier transformed historical thinking, feminist scholarship began to offer a powerful critical grammar for both researching and teaching history. A rich body of scholarship emerged, particularly on modern India, written from diverse feminist perspectives. Yet this early gender historiography, while critiquing Eurocentric paradigms, mirrored some of their silences. The implicit subject of gender history became the dominant-caste, middle-class woman, whose experiences came to represent those of Indian women at large. Dalit women and the question of caste were subsumed within a homogenising category of women. Such silences also remind us that the social sciences, even as they interrogate hierarchies of society, must continually reflect on their own hierarchies of knowledge.

The 1990s marked a crucial moment of transformation. The decade witnessed the growing visibility and political assertion of Dalit voices across India. Simultaneously, the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations transformed universities and the public sphere, foregrounding questions of

representation, social justice and affirmative action. The campus became a charged space where caste politics were enacted and debated. Social science curricula began to incorporate caste not merely as context but as conceptual core, producing new courses that examined caste hierarchies, anti-caste movements and their intellectual traditions. Yet these curricular shifts carried their own hierarchies. The new frameworks privileged large anti-caste movements, iconic political figures and moments of collective mobilisation. These narratives were often male-centred, focusing on public and political arenas rather than the intimate and everyday spaces where caste and gender intersect most ubiquitously. Both caste and gender, though deeply entwined systems of hierarchy and exclusion, were thus treated as distinct and self-contained categories within much of historical scholarship until the late 1990s. Further, the conceptual frames applied to these two categories diverged significantly. Caste was largely understood as a uniquely Indian form of ritualised hierarchy to be examined empirically and historically, while gender was approached as a universal analytic category central to the reproduction of patriarchy. Caste was, in this sense provincialised, while gender was rendered universal.

The emergence of Dalit-Bahujan feminist thought challenged this divide in profound ways. Dalit feminism transformed oppressed identity into a standpoint of critique. It insisted that while patriarchy subordinates women to men, caste hierarchies simultaneously allow dominant-caste women to participate in structures of social power. The anti-Mandal protests exemplified this complexity. Among the demonstrators were women who, holding placards reading ‘We don’t want unemployed husbands’, revealed how caste and gender could function as mutually sustaining social codes, grounded in the ideology of endogamy and respectability. Dalit feminist thought also pushed scholars to rethink sources and methodologies, encouraging us to attend more carefully to everyday experiences, vernacular expressions and embodied histories.

In the years since, teaching and research in several institutions have been shaped by Dalit feminist pedagogical frameworks that interrogate the mutual constitution of caste and gender. Yet institutional responses to such initiatives have often been ambivalent. In their early years, courses on caste and gender were sometimes regarded by university authorities as peripheral to the ‘mainstream’ discipline of history. Among some faculty, they were dismissed as ‘soft’ or insufficiently archival, reflecting entrenched disciplinary hierarchies. Such critiques also overlooked how feminist and Dalit scholarship were simultaneously expanding the archive itself, drawing attention not only to official records but to vernacular texts, autobiographies, pamphlets, oral narratives and the fragmentary traces of everyday life.

The urgency of such concerns became tragically visible with the suicide of Rohith Vemula at the University of Hyderabad in January 2016. His death brought

national attention to the continuing presence of caste-based inequalities within Indian universities, igniting protests across campuses. As courses on caste and gender have expanded in reach and resonance, the classroom itself has become a site of contestation. The implementation of reservations has diversified the social composition of universities, bringing many Dalits and OBC students and unsettling older hierarchies of privilege. Yet networks of exclusion persist. It thus becomes important to recognise that silence around caste is itself a mark of caste privilege.

Language introduces another layer of inequality. University of Delhi, for example, allows dissertations in Hindi, unlike many elite institutions, yet linguistic hierarchies persist. English-speaking students are often dominant-caste and economically privileged; Hindi-speaking students are more frequently from OBC and Dalit backgrounds. English fluency becomes a marker of confidence, authority and belonging, while Hindi-medium students are disadvantaged by the lack of resources and social capital. The social sciences themselves have historically been shaped by the dominance of English as their academic language. Engaging with the vernacular therefore becomes crucial, not merely as translation, or a repository of regional languages, but as a more grounded and vibrant discursive space, less alienated from the popular and the contemporary and embedded in the textures of everyday life. Questions of caste and gender circulate vividly within vernacular worlds, in pamphlets, newspapers, satire, autobiographies and everyday debate.

Dalit women are particularly marginalised. Yet, as Sharmila Rege observed, for the first time 'those long considered "unteachable" are talking and writing back'. This reversal of gaze has unsettled disciplinary and pedagogical hierarchies, compelling greater reflexivity among both teachers and students. It also opens up the possibility of recognising a feminist and Dalit vernacular, not simply as an object of analysis, but as a critical methodology that emerges from the experiences of the marginalised.

What, then, does a social sciences classroom do? First, it encourages students to question dominant narratives and explore new intellectual and archival terrains. Second, it dissolves rigid boundaries between creative and analytical forms of expression, connecting the archive with everyday life. Third, it trains students to recognise how power operates in ordinary practices -- the mundane, the anecdotal and the everyday -- through language, rituals, domestic arrangements and bodily norms. Fourth, it turns our attention to the margins, as we discover how these voices form a vibrant part of the underbelly and subcultures of Indian social life. Finally, it reminds us that history is not simply about the past but about the struggles that continue to shape the present. In this way, the classroom becomes a space where inquiry, debate and critical reflection transform how students understand the world around them.

To conclude, teaching caste and gender reminds us why the humanities and social sciences remain central to higher education today. These disciplines do not

merely transmit information; they cultivate ways of seeing the world. They encourage students to confront uncomfortable histories, develop empathy and practise critical reflection. In this sense, they remain subversive by their very nature, for they continually interrogate hierarchies of knowledge as well as hierarchies of society. This questioning spirit is not a threat to ethical life; rather is it essential to it. At a time when universities are increasingly shaped by market logics and the language of employability, the humanities can appear vulnerable. Yet a purely market-driven vision of education risks narrowing the horizons of learning. Education is not only about producing immediate outcomes; it is also about nurturing democratic citizenship and ethical awareness. While students must inevitably navigate the realities of the job market, new and creative arenas are also emerging in public scholarship, policy engagement, journalism and cultural work, where the insights of the humanities and social sciences can make a meaningful difference. History, in particular, offers temporal depth. It reminds us that social arrangements that appear natural today have emerged through long struggles and can therefore be changed. Across India, the social sciences attract large numbers of women students, for whom these classrooms often become spaces to question constraints and imagine new possibilities. Institutions like NLS, though often seen as elite, are also public spaces of learning. They remind us that the pursuit of justice is not confined to courtrooms or legal texts. It also unfolds in classrooms, archives, languages and the countless interactions that shape our understanding of the world. The social sciences, by connecting ideas with lived realities, help cultivate critical citizens and reaffirm that the pursuit of knowledge is inseparable from dignity, equality and justice.