

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture36

### **History of the term, different theories on conflict, Hobbsian Social Contract Theory**

Hello everyone. This week we'll be discussing resistance and social media change. We'll explore cyberculture alongside the Marxist theory of conflict from its point of emergence, focusing on how resistance and activism came into play. We'll also cover the changing phases of activism and how it has evolved in the era of mass media and mass culture.

We'll start by examining the connection between conflict, society, and literature or art. How do these concepts intertwine? In all three spheres—society, literature, and conflict—we find an interrelation. Society reflects in literature, and conflict, whether social or political, influences literary production.

Conflict literature often portrays civil wars and other societal struggles in poetry, drama, and novels. Literature, as a mirror of society, captures the violence and conflict surrounding it and shapes these into narratives for the world to engage with.

The root of conflict often lies in societal imbalances, particularly in the unequal distribution of resources. This is one of the primary sources of tension. As we move on to discuss Hobbes and Marx, both of whom are conflict theorists, we'll see how Hobbes explains inherent human nature as a source from which the concept of conflict arises.

Looking at structural inequalities, there is also intersectionality, including gender and race. Gender oppression, along with tension and differences between societal segments, often leads to conflict. Historically, conflicts like the two world wars have centered around land, space, and demography. In the era of globalization, with the creation of borders and the concept of nation-states, much of this conflict stems from disputes over land, which has been a fundamental issue alongside the fight for natural resources.

Political factors also play a role, particularly through the ideological state apparatus and the emergence of repressive state apparatuses. These authoritarian forces attempt to control the masses, which often leads to conflict. Additionally, culture and ethnicity can be significant drivers of conflict. Ethnic and cultural diversity can sometimes lead to tensions, though in other cases, they can foster resilience and social cohesion, acting as a bulwark against conflict.

Social cohesion and trust are critical. Societies with strong social cohesion, trust, and social capital tend to be more resilient in the face of conflict. This social cohesion helps mitigate conflict and promotes unity. Another interesting aspect is the role of media and information in the globalized world. With mass media and the internet connecting even the most remote areas, the way information is disseminated plays a significant role in either quelling or contributing to conflict. Media in the postmodern era can escalate tensions by spreading information rapidly, sometimes adding fuel to existing conflicts.

We will explore how all of these factors, from structural inequalities to media's role, get reflected and integrated into literature, revealing the deep connections between society, conflict, and artistic expression.

There are numerous instances of conflict, particularly when we examine India's partition, which has been a major focus of partition literature. This body of work explores the turmoil, trauma, and violent conflicts experienced by people who lost their lives and families during the partition. These stories have become an integral part of conflict studies within literature. When we consider other South Asian countries, the Rohingya genocide of 2017 also stands out as a conflict, though more literature is yet to emerge on this topic. The Bangladesh-Pakistan conflict has produced a significant amount of literature, often reflecting on the sorrow, remorse, and pessimism that this conflict left behind.

The Sri Lankan civil war, marked by ethnic rivalries between the Sinhalese and Tamils, has also generated considerable scholarly work and literature. Similarly, the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict has birthed a substantial body of resistance and conflict literature, as have conflicts such as the Rwanda genocide and the Biafra war. Much of this literature comes from individuals who experienced these events firsthand or from their descendants, now writing in diaspora.

This interweaving of conflict, history, and literature reveals how these themes reflect and analyze societal tensions. Thomas Hobbes, in his book *The Leviathan*, especially in chapter 13, discusses human nature's tendency toward violence and conflict. According to Hobbes, this is intrinsic to human beings. In contrast, Henry Grant distinguished violence as evil, while conflict could be seen as constructive. However, the question arises whether this still holds true in the age of social media, where conflicts are increasingly deadly, and people are losing their lives.

In the context of Karl Marx's vision of a classless society, the goal was to eradicate conflict by equally distributing resources, but in many ways, conflicts persist, rooted in inequalities and power struggles. Marx's framework offers an important lens through which to understand how these conflicts emerge and how they might be resolved.

In Marx's theory of class struggle, society is divided primarily into two opposing groups: the proletariat (working class) and the bourgeoisie (capitalist class). The capitalists control the means of production, while the proletariat, or laborers, are forced to sell their labor for wages. This creates a significant divide in terms of wealth and power, with the proletariat suffering under the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. Marx argues that this exploitation leads to class conflict, driven by the unequal distribution of resources.

In a capitalist society, the thesis refers to the established order, where the bourgeoisie controls the market and profits from the labor of the proletariat. The antithesis arises when the proletariat, dissatisfied with their exploitation, attempts to change the system. This conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat leads to a prolonged struggle.

Ultimately, a resolution or compromise is reached through what Marxists call the synthesis, where the conflict between the opposing forces results in a new social order. However, this process is cyclical. After each synthesis, a new thesis emerges, followed by another antithesis, leading to continuous cycles of conflict and resolution. This dialectical process explains how society evolves, driven by economic forces and class struggle.

Marx's vision for the future was the abolition of the capitalist system and the establishment of a classless society, where resources would be equally

distributed, and the exploitation of the working class would cease. This, he believed, would end the perpetual cycle of class conflict.

In the capitalist society, the working class, known as the proletariat, began to protest against the capitalists because the surplus value of their labor always went to the capitalists. This created a widening gap between the rich and the poor, with the poor becoming poorer. In an effort to address these inequalities, the proletariat-initiated movements for change, seeking to equalize the distribution of resources.

From this struggle emerged the bourgeoisie, originally a middle class that took on managerial roles and acted as intermediaries. Over time, however, the gap between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat continued to widen, leading to repeated cycles of conflict. This perpetuated a societal structure in which class divisions persisted, with limited resources causing ongoing tension. Because of these limited resources, a truly classless society seemed unattainable, and economic forces kept driving conflict within society.

Turning to Thomas Hobbes, his theory of conflict views it as a natural part of human existence. Hobbes is one of the earliest and most influential theorists of sovereignty and the modern state. He explained that the functioning of the modern state and its establishment is built on the foundation of conflict and the need for order. Hobbes' theory is also central to the state system that underpins contemporary international relations.

Conflict theory, when studied through the lens of geography and resources, becomes integral to understanding international relations. Additionally, as conflict arises in various regions, literature often emerges from these areas, capturing the experiences and traumas, and embedding conflict within the cultural narrative.

This well-known interpretation of Hobbes suggests that he viewed war as inevitable in the state of nature. According to Hobbes, this inevitability arises from the nature of man and the state, where competition over limited material resources leads to conflict. When two nation-states compete for resources, each wanting a larger share, conflict becomes unavoidable.

Another interpretation of Hobbes' work indicates that war emerges because even well-meaning individuals, lacking a common sovereign to protect them, live in fear of death and uncertainty about others' intentions. This fear can lead to defensive actions, which may result in violence and conflict.

A third interpretation argues that conflict stems from an innate desire to dominate others. This urge for dominance often meets resistance, leading to struggle and conflict. Hobbes attributes this drive to human vanity, aggression, and an inherently evil nature that compels individuals toward war.

Each of these interpretations aligns with Hobbes' text and corresponds to the three primary causes of conflict identified in Leviathan chapter 13: competition, fear, and the desire for glory. Hobbes situates conflict within fundamental human nature—fear of death, the desire for dominance, and inevitable conflict in the state of nature. His social contract theory further helps us examine conflict closely, highlighting the role of governance in managing these natural tendencies.

In a small gist, social contract theory in moral and political philosophy refers to the idea that the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual comes from a kind of contract. This theory suggests that individuals, either explicitly or tacitly, surrender some of their freedoms or rights to the state in exchange for protection and social order. The state, in turn, has the authority to govern, while individuals agree to submit to this governance for their safety and welfare.

According to social contract theory, the individual essentially makes a pact with the authority, agreeing to give up certain personal freedoms in return for protection against external threats. This is where the constitution and citizens' rights come into play—the government, by this agreement, must protect its people, which forms the basis of its legitimacy.

When we bring Hobbes' idea of the "state of nature" into this, he argues that all men are equal in nature. While some may be stronger or wiser than others, individuals often believe their own wisdom and capabilities to be superior to others. When two people desire the same thing or position of power, this competition naturally leads to conflict, which Hobbes believes is at the root of human interactions in the absence of governing authority. Thus, the social contract is necessary to prevent this constant state of war.

In Thomas Hobbes' view, the destruction of the other is included in their desired end. A person's desire to get that one place is not the end goal; the end goal is to disrupt the other person, to eradicate or eliminate them. This ultimately leads to conflict. Hobbes suggests that humans are made to fight and identifies three aspects that lead to conflict: competition, where inherent competitive nature leads to conflict; defense, where the need to protect oneself due to fear of death leads to conflict; and glory, where the desire for recognition drives individuals to exercise power, resulting in conflict.

Many critiques suggest that Hobbes' theory is more of a "Hobbesian theory" rather than the theory of Hobbes. His ideas have undergone a lot of criticism. According to Hobbes and Marx, inequality and limited resources are key to understanding conflict. Other theorists provide different perspectives. Fisher argues that identity is crucial, as individuals may engage in conflict to establish their identity. Žižek suggests that poverty leads to conflict, with impoverished individuals potentially using deviant means to achieve financial stability, resulting in conflict with mainstream society. Rajmohan Gandhi argues that revenge drives conflict. Each perspective offers a different dimension, including identity, poverty, and revenge, contributing to the understanding of conflict.

It might be that the person who has done something wrong might not be very controversial or harmful, but the desire for revenge itself leads to conflict. Edward Azar, a Palestinian scholar and international relations expert, introduced the concept of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) through his detailed study of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Azar identified four key components of PSC: effective participation, security, distinctive identity, and social recognition of identity. Effective participation involves interactions between state actors (such as government officials and repressive state apparatus) and non-state actors (civilians involved in the conflict). Security pertains to issues related to land or resources where security is needed. Distinctive identity refers to the importance of maintaining one's individual identity, aligning with Fisher's perspective. For example, being identified as an Indian or as a female within societal roles contributes to one's sense of identity. Social recognition of identity involves the broader acknowledgment of one's identity within a society or ethnicity, further fueling protracted social conflict.

Returning to Marx, he discusses how unequal distribution of resources leads to conflict. When conflict arises, it often involves underlying resistance. Resistance, while distinct from conflict, can also manifest as a form of opposition. As we explore cyber culture and activism, understanding and situating resistance within these contexts becomes crucial.

The concept of resistance and its application in literature can be traced back to 1966 when Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani used the term in his work *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine*, which covers the period from 1948 to 1968, starting with the formation of the State of Israel and the ensuing occupation. Kanafani's use of "resistance" highlighted how literature could be a form of defiance against occupation.

Resistance literature often emerges from those living under occupation or in exile. Writers in these situations may use literature as a means of resisting subjugation and censorship imposed by occupying forces. Harlow explains that such resistance literature is not merely about opposition but also involves significant intervention in the literary and cultural development of the oppressed. This can include confronting and challenging the existing systems of power.

In contrast, activism, which encompasses a broader range of actions aimed at social and political change, often involves both immediate, disruptive actions and long-term efforts to implement new solutions. While resistance literature tends to focus on challenging existing structures, activism works towards systemic change over time.

In the context of social media resistance, the concept is applied to how digital platforms are used to challenge and oppose dominant systems. Social media resistance leverages these platforms to spread information, mobilize support, and effect change, reflecting the historical use of resistance literature but in a modern, digital context.

Activism, which is closely linked to resistance, plays a significant role in how we understand social media resistance. In postmodern theory, power is conceptualized in various ways: as both a force of domination—controlling, regulatory, and disciplinary—and as a force that is constructive, empowering, revolutionary, and subversive. This duality of power is often reflected in resistance movements, especially in the context of social media.

The question arises whether everything categorized as activism on social media can be classified as social media resistance. There are subtle distinctions that often go unnoticed, leading to a broad generalization of all activism as social media resistance.

Michel Foucault's concept of micropower offers insight into this issue. Micropower refers to localized, bottom-up forms of agency exercised by individuals or small groups against larger structures, institutions, and ideologies. In this sense, social media can be seen as a form of micropower. While individuals or groups on social media may lack the formal power of bureaucrats or politicians, they use these platforms as a means of resistance against established power structures. Thus, social media becomes a tool for exercising micropower, allowing subjects who resist institutionalized authority to make their voices heard and influence change.

So, the only form of micropower available to these subjugated subjects is social media. They utilize this micropower for resistance in various forms. Resistance can manifest through protests, boycotts, activism, or even sabotage. For instance, social media can facilitate virtual protests or hashtag campaigns to boycott products or services. Additionally, it can be used to sabotage the reputation of individuals, such as celebrities or public figures, by disseminating negative information or critiques.

An article published in First Post, titled "The Evolving Facets of Social Media in India," highlights how the role of social media has shifted over time. It argues that social media platforms have evolved from mere novelties to crucial spaces for meaningful dialogue and discourse. This transformation reflects a maturation of social media as it becomes a more integral part of public conversation.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the effectiveness and success of social media will increasingly depend on its ability to integrate accountability and transparency. This means that when individuals post content or make comments, there needs to be a consideration of the accountability for those actions. The challenge moving forward is ensuring that social media platforms uphold these values while continuing to serve as venues for robust and significant discussions.

It's crucial to examine whether social media platforms are truly transparent and accountable. There are concerns about the accuracy of information shared



through platforms like WhatsApp, often referred to as "WhatsApp University," where misinformation and distorted historical facts can spread unchecked. The question of transparency remains significant, as it affects how information is consumed and acted upon.

One notable instance of social media-driven activism occurred at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. On September 20, 2014, around 100,000 people gathered in Kolkata to stage a four-month-long protest against the university administration, the state government, and the police. This movement, known as "Let There Be Clamor," emerged as a powerful example of how digital platforms can be used effectively for activism.

The protest was sparked by issues of sexual harassment that the authorities attempted to downplay or ignore. Social media played a critical role in mobilizing the masses, raising awareness, and creating a discursive space for open discussion. By utilizing digital platforms, the activists were able to pressure the state and university to address the demands of the protestors.

This case illustrates how social media can serve as a modern public sphere, where hashtags and online discussions can drive significant societal change. However, while digital spaces offer new avenues for activism and public engagement, they also come with challenges and limitations. The role of social media in activism highlights its dual nature: it can both facilitate societal transformation and present potential pitfalls, underscoring the need for ongoing scrutiny and improvement in how these platforms are used and regulated.