

## **Marxist Discourse on Caste in India: A Critique**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Marxist theory has no place for caste. Its basic unit of social analysis is class. However, in the Indian social scenario caste is regarded as the most important social reality. This has created dilemma for the Indian Marxists. They have tried to solve this dilemma by demonstrating that caste system is nothing but a class system in disguise and therefore, the adoption of the same Marxist methods will bring an end to the caste system. This essay argues that such a position emanates from the inability to understand the basic nature of the caste system and that any attempt to visualise caste system through the prism of Marxism will call for certain theoretical modifications and adjustments which are beyond the ideological fold of Marxism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Caste, Class, Marxism, Leftist, Politics*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Caste in modern India is not only a social phenomenon but an inseparable part of the political process. Caste which is considered central to the any basic understanding of social situation in India is increasingly becoming a powerful tool of electoral mobilization in the organized domain of politics. Therefore, in order to understand India's socio-political system, any political ideology has to go beyond the enduring forms of universal social organizations such as class, ethnicity and religion and provide valid theoretical perspectives about the peculiarities and complexities involved in the societal operation of the caste forces, their actual and potential political implications and their interaction with other modes of identity. This has presented the established theories and ideologies with the challenge to make adjustments and modifications in their theoretical framework while maintaining the core of the theoretical structure intact. However, such modification becomes difficult if the alien question of caste encroaches upon the core assumptions of the theory rendering incremental and peripheral theoretical adjustments insufficient. Marxism faces this dilemma in the Indian social context when class, its basic unit of social analysis and the fulcrum of its ideological edifice encounters difficulty in discovering its boundaries and creating an autonomous sphere of existence amidst ocean of castes and sub-castes. Indian Marxists are therefore faced with the challenge of defining the relationship between the caste and class in the Indian social system and answer some very crucial questions which have been summed up nicely by Sudipta Kaviraj in the following words- "One of the main problems of historical sociology is the relation between caste and class. How is the logic of one system different from another? And are they so different that that there could not be any mixtures or graftings of one onto the other? Secondly, is this transition linear? Would caste system eventually disappear?"<sup>1</sup>

### **II. PLACING CASTE WITHIN MARXISM**

In the orthodox Marxist theory it is the base or the economy that determines political and social phenomenon which constitute the superstructure, not the other way round. Therefore, if we see from the Marxist perspective we shall come to the conclusion that class being an economic category is the primary building block of the base or larger economic structure while caste is a primarily social formation, a part of the superstructure that is sustained by the logic of economic structure of the society. But the tricky problem is to determine whether the caste superstructure has attained some sort of autonomy from the deterministic economic structure to independently spark off events and phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Communists linked communal outlook and caste prejudices with relations of production prevailing in colonial India. They particularly stress the occupational division of labour associated with the caste system and consider it to be the single most important aspect of the caste system. Such a division of labour in their analysis led to the subordination of the entire working class .i.e. the Shudras and untouchables to the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas who constitute the ruling class.<sup>3</sup> This simply means that caste hierarchy is nothing but class division in disguise. Therefore, in the Indian society caste can't be thought of in isolation from class because they are overlapping. Dwelling on the caste based occupational division of labour the Marxists further argue that such a division of labour was the key to the functioning of the feudal economic structure and land relations prevailing in India. The entire purpose of such a system was to generate huge surplus value for the ruling class. In their analysis, caste and communalism in India are sustained by feudal relations of production which can only be overthrown through Marxian form of class struggle. "The abolition of caste hierarchy could not be separated from the Marxian form of class struggle".<sup>4</sup>

In the rural Indian setting the form that the class struggle should take is agrarian revolution according to the Indian Marxist thinkers like Ranadive.<sup>5</sup>“Struggle against untouchability and other social evils and the class struggle against economic exploitation are inseparably interlinked.....Most of the dalit organisations lack in such understanding and, as such, their approach is invariably skewed. They never bother about such issues as land and wage and other issues affecting the dalits’ day-to-day lives.”<sup>6</sup> Arguing on similar lines Ranadive had also pointed out the necessity of integrating class struggle with struggle against caste. Though the creation of a large and powerful bourgeois class seemed to be a natural outcome of the advent of the British rule in India, such a class was not produced simply because the rise of such a class infused with the ideas of liberty, equality and democracy would invariably go against the interest of the British rule in India. Therefore, the consequence of colonialism was the “superimposition of minimum modern capitalist relations on the old feudal land relations which sustained caste system.”<sup>7</sup>“The effect of this was the emergence of a nation plagued with the divisive forces of casteism and communalism.....The democratic movement of the Congress was not built on anti-feudalism; in fact it was grafted on the compromise with feudalism and feudal institutions. This resulted in the surrender of the modern intelligentsia before the indigenous feudal land relations”.<sup>8</sup>As a result of the sustenance of such a feudal social order with primitive capitalist production relations, post-independent India emerged with a dwarfed semi-capitalist economic system. “The Indian bourgeoisie and its leadership, Indian monopoly capital due to the compulsions of its narrow social base had to align with the landlord sections in order to maintain its class rule in independent India.....The inability to eliminate the vestiges of feudalism meant at the level of superstructure, the existence and perpetuation of the social consciousness associated with feudalism. The feelings of communalism and casteism continued to dominate the social order.”<sup>9</sup>

### **III. DIFFICULTIES OF FORMULATING A MARXIST THEORY OF CASTE**

The above analysis suffers from a number of theoretical difficulties. First of all feudalism in no part of the world has led to emergence of caste system. This means that the basis of caste system has to be found in characteristics peculiar to Indian social situation. Moreover, with the steady progress towards the capitalist production relations caste is not showing any significant signs of decline. It is important to elaborate this argument little more. Andre Betellie and many others have pointed out the declining influence of caste in a number of significant spheres of its operation and their observation does conform to objective reality.<sup>10</sup> Following Betellie I would also argue that the ritual dimension of caste associated with the rules concerning purity and pollution has suffered some setback in a rapidly developing economy, the marriage restrictions are still maintained but they are being violated with greater frequency than before, the occupational division has become exposed to the challenges posed by the forces of demand and supply. But this apparent retreat of caste in all these domains, as Betellie has rightly argued, has been compensated by the phenomenon of what has been termed the democratic incarnation of caste in the domain of organized polity made possible by the continuing success of caste based identity politics. According to Rajni Kothari this has resulted in a situation where politics that has not become caste-ridden caste has become politicised.<sup>11</sup>

However, as Beteille points out, we must understand the class character of identity politics. The advocates as well as the opponents of reservation belong to different castes but they all belong to the middle class.<sup>12</sup> However, this numerically significant class has not received adequate attention from the Marxist social theorists who still advocate the polarization thesis. Moreover, what is important here is to stress that caste has been politicised to achieve economic and social rather than ritual concerns of the members. As a result, political articulation of caste interests and the resultant electoral mobilization on the basis of caste have produced spill over effects which affect other spheres of social existence. The politics of reservation is a case in point. The policy of ‘compensatory discrimination’ in favour of certain castes has solidified caste sentiments and drawn caste into the vortex of mainstream politics creating insurmountable difficulties for the growth of a secular society that refuses to accommodate communal attachment in public life.<sup>13</sup> The politics of reservation by accentuating caste consciousness has created widespread hostility towards the backward castes and this hostility in the modern nation state has taken the form of silent discrimination rather than the earlier form of overt violence. The private sector that has bloomed on account of the adoption of capitalist market relations is often criticized for penalizing Dalits and other lower castes on the ground of efficiency. This proves that the retreat of feudalism and the introduction of capitalism rather than making a dent in the caste structure have gone hand in hand with the increasing use of caste for political purposes. What is striking is to note that it is the very polity that has aided and abetted the capitalist relations of production has also endorsed and nourished caste based identity politics without encountering any difficulty what so ever. Therefore, the link between decline of feudalism and the gradual weakening of the caste system can’t be supported by empirical analysis of post-colonial history of Indian nation state.

Furthermore, this link drawn by the Marxist has produced to paradoxical prescriptions on their part. The linking of feudal economic relations with the prevalence of caste prejudices simply means that casteism can be ended through the abolition of feudalism and for the achievement of this goal they prescribe agrarian struggle and land reforms. Since the abolition of feudalism has to be followed by the introduction of capitalism as prescribed by Marx, the question that obviously arises is- how agrarian revolution in the form of land reforms will produce capitalism? Marxists have been prevented by the brand of politics they practice to recommend bourgeois democratic revolution to end feudalism. On the other hand they have been prevented by the constraints of their own theoretical framework to argue that agrarian revolution will lead to introduction of socialist relations of production simply because this would violate another sacred premise of Marxism that socialism is necessarily preceded by capitalism.

#### **IV. DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF CASTE AND CLASS**

Now I shall dwell on the most fundamental issue which is routinely overlooked due to political reasons. Caste and class are entirely different types of social stratification. It is a fact that in Indian social scenario caste and class are sometimes, if not always overlapping. This partial empirical reality is frequently used to achieve legitimacy for the political necessity of conflating caste with class. The so called Other Backward Class category is not an aggregation of economically backward individuals but a conglomeration of numerous castes whose all members are supposed to be backward. There is a deep influence of the leftist position on the general tendency to blur the boundaries which separate caste and class. The leftist influence on Mandal Commission became clearly evident when it linked relations of production to the formation of caste structure and called for liberation of casteism through agrarian struggle and land reforms. The Commission reported "Under the existing scheme of production relations, Backward Classes, comprising mainly small landholders, tenants, agricultural labour, village artisans, etc. are heavily dependent on the rich peasantry for their sustenance. In view of this, OBCs continue to remain in mental and material bondage of the dominant castes and classes. Unless these production relations are radically altered through structural changes and progressive land reforms implemented vigorously all over the country, OBCs will never become truly independent. In view of this, highest priority should be given to radical land reforms by all the states."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is quite obvious that the Mandal Commission conflated caste with class and set in motion the tendency of finding and constructing identical basis of two structurally different social organizations, namely caste and class through the force of arguments chosen from the intellectual armoury of leftist philosophy. However, the fact remains that the principles on the basis of which these two social organizations are formed are dissimilar both at the sociological and epistemological level. A particular caste consists of individuals belonging to different social classes. It can never be treated as a homogenous social category in terms of economic capacities and status. Most importantly there is no possibility of mobility within the caste structure. Higher income and wealth does not allow a person to move upward within the caste hierarchy resulting in change in his caste identity. Conversely, in a class divided society changed economic status leads to change in class status. We find the acknowledgement of the different theoretical underpinnings of both the concepts even among the Marxist scholars. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya, a distinguished Marxist scholar writes "There is a caste structure within each class, and a class structure within each caste. They generate different forms of socio-political belonging, loyalties, and consciousness. Both on the epistemological and the empirical planes, caste consciousness proves to be antithetical to class consciousness, and stymies the growth of proletarian class solidarity. The poor 'upper' caste peasant or worker does not consider his poor 'lower' caste co-worker or neighbour as his equal, tends to look down upon him, and generally refuses to build or accept any sociocultural linkages with him."<sup>15</sup>

#### **V. CASTE AND REVISIONISM**

The above analysis manifests the dilemma faced by the communists in their struggle against caste. The Marxist scholars have tried to solve this dilemma by adopting revisionist logic. For them, recognition of the fact that superstructure has gained relative autonomy from the base is crucial to the understanding of caste based social structure of India. "the crystallized prejudice structure of caste has acquired a certain autonomous character over the centuries, and often stymies the growth of class consciousness and thwarts the growth of the class struggle for the radical restructuring of the relations of production in India.....the class struggle on the economic front will have to be supplemented by a great intellectual and cultural movement among the masses against the religious and cultural prejudices that sustain the caste hierarchy and perpetuate caste oppression.....Even partial success of such a cultural revolution would in fact lead to an awakening of class consciousness among the masses, reinforce the class struggle on the economic and political fronts, and pave the way for the rapid growth of the left forces all over India."<sup>16</sup> Thus the Indian revisionism also calls for some kind of 'war of position'<sup>17</sup> or cultural/intellectual struggle to dismantle the ideology of caste that has penetrated deep into the Indian mind and social consciousness before the 'war of manoeuvre'<sup>18</sup> can actually be launched. But it simply misses the point that if the cultural struggle is entirely directed towards caste identity and sentiments

instead of capitalist values inculcated by the modern individuals, then such a struggle completely places itself outside the theoretical jurisdiction of Marxism. In this case revisions are made in the structural designs of the theoretical narrative but such revisions don't support an end which is internal to Marxism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Therefore, in the final analysis it can safely be concluded that Marxist position emanates from the inability to understand the basic nature of the caste system. It also fails to recognize that any attempt to visualise caste system through the prism of Marxism will call for certain theoretical modifications and adjustments which are beyond the ideological fold of Marxism. Though the Indian revisionists make extensive use of Marxist vocabulary and articulate their position in leftist language and spirit, they end up with premises and prescriptions characteristically similar to those suggested by other theoretical formulations engaged in the conceptualization of the Indian society. In the first place, they find their economically deterministic theoretical framework limiting in the Indian social context and therefore, they adopt some revisionist arguments which seem to be oblivious of the uniquely fundamental elements of the Marxist theory.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

- [1] Kaviraj, Sudipta. 2006. "Caste and Class" in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed), Politics in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p 72
- [2] Marx has shown in his writings that though the state is an instrument in the hands of the ruling class under certain conditions it can attain relative autonomy from the control of the ruling class. The Neo-Marxists have further developed this thesis and advocated that it is possible for the superstructure to gain autonomy from the base.
- [3] See Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja. 2002. "Class Struggle and Caste Oppression: Integral Strategy of the Left", *The Marxist*, 18(3-4) for detailed analysis
- [4] Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja. 2002. "Class Struggle and Caste Oppression: Integral Strategy of the Left", *The Marxist*, 18(3-4)
- [5] See Ranadive, B.T.1991. "Caste, Class and Property Relations". Calcutta: National Book Agency for detailed analysis
- [6] Sampath, P. 2002. "CPI (M)'s Intervention Against Caste Oppression in Tamil Nadu", *The Marxist*, 18(1)
- [7] Ranadive, B.T.1991. "Caste, Class and Property Relations". Calcutta: National Book Agency, p 2
- [8] Hasan, Zoya. 1991. "Communalism and Communal Violence in India" in Asghar Ali Engineer (ed.) "Communal Riots in Post-Independence India". New Delhi: Sangam Books, p 72
- [9] Yechury, Sitaram. 1992, "Communalism, Religion and Marxism", *The Marxist*, 10(4)
- [10] See Beteille, Andre. 2007. "Classes and Communities", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(11)
- [11] See Kothari, Rajni. 2004. "Introduction: Caste in Indian Politics" in Rajni Kothari (ed.) Caste in Indian Politics. New Delhi: Orient Longman for detailed analysis
- [12] See Beteille, Andre. 2007. "Classes and Communities", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(11)
- [13] See Galanter, Marc. 1986. "Pursuing Equality: An Assessment of India's Policy of Compensatory Discrimination for Disadvantaged Groups" in Dilip Basu and Richard Sisson (eds) Social and Economic Development in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications for detailed analysis
- [14] Report of the Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission), Government of India, New Delhi, 1980, Part I, vol. 1, p 64
- [15] Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja. 2002. "Class Struggle and Caste Oppression: Integral Strategy of the Left", *The Marxist*, 18(3-4)
- [16] Bandyopadhyaya, Jayantanuja. 2002. "Class Struggle and Caste Oppression: Integral Strategy of the Left", *The Marxist*, 18(3-4)
- [17] War of position, suggested by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci is some sort of cultural struggle which aims to dismantle the capitalist culture of bourgeois civil society that penetrates so deeply into the minds of the common people under the conditions of advanced capitalism that people become unaware of the exploitation involved in the capitalist system.
- [18] War of Manoeuvre, suggested by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci is a violent armed struggle to overthrow the coercive machinery of the capitalist state.