

## The Caste Question Returns<sup>1</sup>

With the growth of the Dalit movement and an increasing awareness amongst Dalits, the caste question, specifically in Maharashtra, has been pushed to the forefront of political debate amongst the Marxists. As part of this debate is the latest book released by Sharad Patil entitled, *Das-Shudra, Gulamgiri Part-II*. Earlier, Gopal Guru's article, 'Understanding Ambedkar — A Caste and Class Paradigm' (reproduced in the May issue of *Satyashodak Marxvad*) sought to analyze Ambedkar's views and various assessments of them. In this article, Gopal Guru has commented on another article, written some eight years ago, on Ambedkar, which appeared in the *Frontier*. That article has been misunderstood by Gopal Guru and has been quoted out of the context in which it was written. Of course, in the past eight years, our understanding on the issue has deepened and the debates and studies on the caste question, in the course of the last decade, have helped throw much light on the issue. In view of the issues raised by Gopal Guru, we wish to raise some more points on the caste question and the role of different individuals/ideologies in India's democratic revolution.

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## AMBEDKAR, MARX AND DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION<LEVEL A>

Marxism has been an issue of debate in the Dalit movement for a very long time. As early as 1956, Dr. Ambedkar gave a speech at Kathmandu comparing the ideas of Marxism and Buddhism. In 1958, when Dadasaheb Gaikwad and Dadasaheb Rupavate split the RPI, the major criticism of Rupavate was that Gaikwad was a communist. Again, in 1974, when Raja Dhale and Namdev Dhasal split the Dalit Panthers, the main accusation of Dhale was that Dhasal was a communist. And later, Raosaheb Kasbe, Sharad Patil and others have sought to link the views of Ambedkar and Marx. And, even now, in the course of the 'Riddles in Hinduism' controversy, it was decided at a meeting attended by all Dalit organizations, that the Dalit movement and the Left movement should come closer. So, the question of Marxism keeps surfacing again and again in the Dalit movement.

Today, many of the present-day leaders of the Dalit movement go on a tirade against communists but see no harm in associating with such caste-ridden parties as the Congress-I and the BJP. Why does this happen? For two reasons. Firstly, the traditional 'communists' (specifically, the CPI and CPM) have not understood the caste question in India and have often taken a reactionary stand on the Dalit question. Secondly, the established leadership of the present-day Dalit movement does not seek a total smashing of the caste system, but only certain concessions within the existing caste structure. It is primarily for these two reasons that the leadership of the present-day Dalit movement tends to take anti-communist positions.

Is it not a fact that the CPI and the CPM have turned a blind eye to Dalit oppression? Why do the likes of Dange, Ranadive, Namboodripad, etc., not hesitate to quote from the Hindu scriptures, but are afraid to take an open stand in support of Dalit rights (thinking that they may frighten off the Hindus)? Why do the establishment 'communists', in their electoral games, run after the Hindu (majority) vote? Can such people really be called communists?

On the other hand, how could a supposed Dalit leader like Gavai get totally linked with the Congress-I and the government? How could a person like Khobragade have regular joint meetings with the Hindu chauvinist BJP? Or why did Dhasal and Ramdas Athavale lend support to that most casteist and reactionary outfit, the Congress-I? While doing all this can they really be said to represent Dalit interests?

Thus, it is not a question of whether the 'communist' leadership is bad and the Dalit leadership good; or vice versa. The history of the last three decades had shown that the bulk of the traditional leadership of both the 'communist' and the Dalit movements have been, basically, reactionary. But, in both these movements, there have been bright sparks of hope. The Naxalites broke from the traditional communists while the Dalit Panthers broke from the traditional RPI. Today, however, both of these have split into numerous factions. While the Naxalites are today at the cross-roads on how to advance, they too did not develop a theoretical framework on how to deal with the caste question in India. Also, the original Dalit Panther movement has lost its character of revolt while losing itself in ruling class politics.

In Maharashtra, it was really the Dalit Panther movement that once again pushed the question of caste oppression to the forefront. In 1973-74, the movement broke out as a revolt against caste oppression and against the passive, compromising attitude of the RPI leadership. The revolt took the form of an upsurge, resulting in pitched battles with the Shiv Sena and the government; and also of a cultural upsurge against Hindu cultural norms and literature. It is this movement that also pushed to the forefront the debate on caste among certain Marxists in Maharashtra.

It is a fact that, in India, caste is an important aspect of the life of most people. Social relations, marriage customs, religious norms and even one's friends and associates are determined by caste. Voting patterns take place on caste lines, in job preferences, the caste factor counts and even in the sphere of cinema, bureaucracy and administration the caste factor is of key importance. Even today, people's identity is primarily through their caste.

Whether 'I' am a *Kumbi, Teli, Mahar, Brahmin*, etc., is what is of importance to society and not myself as a person (as an individual with all my individuality). 'I', as an independent being, is of little importance to society. And, as caste is all pervasive, those at the bottom of the caste ladder face the maximum discrimination, while those at the top gain the maximum privileges. While Rajiv Gandhi can speak eloquently against apartheid (racism) in South Africa, he says not a word against the inhumanity that exists within the caste system in India. While, in South Africa, blacks are treated as inferior, in India, Dalits are not only looked on as inferior but are also debarred from living in the locality of higher castes (especially in villages), from even drinking water in higher caste houses and from all forms of social and political rights. If racism is inhuman, casteism is not only inhuman but barbaric and medieval.

Therefore, an important aspect of the democratization of society is the total abolition of the caste system and, specifically, all forms of caste oppression. Today, India is a backward society where pre-capitalist and semi-feudal relations affect social relations of production and where feudal and backward thinking dominates our outlook. Caste is a major social prop for the continuation of this backward semi-feudal system.

Today, 40 years after independence, there is much talk of modernization, industrialization, growth, etc. But, in India, 'modernization' has not taken place with any significant democratization of society. Nor has capitalist growth taken place with much significant revolutionization of the relations of production. Capitalism in the West was a revolutionizing force, wherein, the bourgeois democratic revolution smashed all the old feudal relations and reorganized society on a new basis. In India, capitalist growth (initiated, nurtured and led by the imperialist powers) is of a distorted and warped character, and has only superimposed new factors on the old, existing relations of production — it does not seek to smash the old relations. So, along with the supercomputer, you also have the wooden plough; with modern telecommunications and television, you also have *Sati*; in spite of the

‘modernization’ of the cities, you also have the deep-rooted caste sentiments.

Democratization of society means, primarily, smashing these old feudal institutions — in economic relations, in the re-organization of political (state) power and in social relations between man and man. Basically, the essence of the democratic struggle must be to build a truly independent India along with a thorough revolutionization of all economic, political and social relations. This democratization of Indian society is the first step for the advance of the country. Thus, all those, who participate in this process and attack even some aspects of this imperialist/semi-feudal structure, are progressive. The dividing line between who is democratic and who is not cannot be posed as whether a person or movement is pro-communist or not (as even we have tended to do). Thus, for example, those forces that fight caste, fight, say, for the equality of women, fight against the oppression of nationalities, fight against the oppression of minorities, etc., are all part of the anti-feudal struggle and are, therefore, progressive, no matter what their ideology. Also, for example, those who are genuine patriots (i.e., who oppose all forms of superpower domination) are also part of the democratic stream, no matter what their ideology.

It is true that the communists must be the foremost fighters for democracy and democratic revolution — but they need not be, and are not, the only fighters for democratic change. The trouble with the traditional ‘communists’ is that they do not see the present stage of revolution as being basically anti-feudal and anti-imperialist but see it as being anti-capitalist. They measure the progressiveness of various individuals and ideologies not by their role in the democratic revolution but by their attitudes towards the CPI, the CPM and towards socialist thinking. So these so-called communists could find progressiveness in those arch reactionaries like Nehru, Gandhi and the Congress Party but not in the various non-Brahmin movements, nationality movements, women’s movements and the movements of the oppressed minorities. Thus, although Gopal Guru and the other scholars may

compare the ideas of Ambedkar and Marx — the central question is how to assess these movements as part of the process for an overall revolutionary democratization of society.

To repeat, in India, the stage of revolution is democratic (and not socialist) and, although the communists should come forward as the most consistent fighters for democracy (which they have not), there will be many movements/individuals/ideologies that will be a part of the democratic stream, especially from the oppressed castes and the oppressed sex. Communists must seek to understand these movements, participate in them and link them to the overall democratic reorganization of society through the seizure of state power. Ambedkar, and the Dalit movement against caste oppression, attacked an important pillar of the semi-feudal structure — CASTE — and, therefore, became a part of the democratic stream.

## **FAILURES<LEVEL A>**

The caste factor in Indian polity manifests itself in two ways — first, as the caste system, which acts to divide the oppressed masses in India, and second, as caste oppression, which is an inhuman and medieval form of outrage on a section of the Indian population — the Dalits.

In India, the traditional communists (CPI, CPM, etc.) have, generally, viewed class struggle as, primarily, an economic struggle. They have, most often, viewed the caste struggle as dividing the people. What they did not realize is that the people are already divided on caste lines and the basis of unity must be equality (and that higher caste prejudices must be fought in order to gain that equality). Also, class struggle is not merely an economic struggle, it is a struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor for control over the main means of production and the political life of society. It includes the struggle in economic, political, social and ideological spheres; and the key aspect of revolutionary class struggle is not economic struggle but political struggle — the struggle for the seizure of political power. In rural India, this

struggle for political power involves the smashing of the feudal and caste authority in the countryside; and, also, the setting up of new bodies (where the higher castes are not allowed to automatically dominate) through which people's power is exercised.

The reasons why the revisionist CPI and CPM have basically negated the caste question are three:-

1. First, they did not view the agrarian struggle as primarily anti-feudal and so, did not see the significance of attacking caste oppression as part of the anti-feudal struggle.
2. Second, because of their reformist politics, and their immersion in economic struggles and electoral battles, caste oppression was not merely negated but brushed aside, as the bulk of the organized workers are from the higher castes and the biggest vote banks are also from the higher castes, and,
3. Third, because of a mechanical linking between the base and the superstructure, they did not feel the need to fight casteist outlook and maintained that common economic struggles will automatically bring together all castes and remove the caste bias. Ideologically, they replaced dialectical materialism with mechanical materialism and assumed a one-to-one relationship between the base and the superstructure by further maintaining that, with the transformation into socialist society, all caste biases will automatically disappear. Influenced by the 'theory of productive forces', whereby, they maintained that social relations of production will automatically change with a development of the productive forces.

These are the three major reasons why the CPI and the CPM were unable to understand not only the caste questioning in India, but many of the other problems of the Indian revolution. The CPI (ML) — the Naxalites — made a clear break with these establishment communist parties and were able to rectify the above weaknesses. But the CPI (ML), although it was able to pin-point semi-feudalism as the main target of the revolution and, thereby,

build a wide base amongst rural Dalits and tribals, too, dogmatically viewed the caste question. It mechanically linked it to merely one aspect — the land question — and was, thus, unable to grasp the specificity of the caste question.

### ROOTS<LEVEL A>

The roots of the caste system lie deep in Indian society — they go back over 5000 years. The beginnings of the caste system lie in the period of transition from a simple tribal economy to a surplus extracting agricultural economy; in the subjugation of tribes through wars; and in the assimilation of tribal customs and taboos by the growing village culture. The evolution of the caste system is closely related to the growth of an exploitative agricultural economy (from the primitive tribal economy) where a class of people who controlled land and state power, needed caste to keep the vast masses enslaved. Elaborate rituals and religious philosophy were important aids in this process. The caste system, gained its rigid, developed and hierarchical form by the age of the Guptas, i.e., third-fourth centuries A.D.

In feudal India, land was the most important means of production. Those who owned/controlled the land and exploited the surplus, constituted the feudal exploiting classes, while those who tilled the land and did other occupations connected with cultivation belonged to the exploited class. While it was members of the higher castes who were the feudal exploiters and those of the lower castes that were the exploited, this categorization is general. Ownership or control was not caste based in an absolute sense, as members of various higher castes, as well as Turks, Afghans, Moghuls, etc., constituted the surplus appropriating class. Also, members of the lowest castes tilled the soil. At the same time, the caste system provided a division of labour with reference to various services necessary for agriculture and village administration and also to sustain the political-economic system. Thus, we can say that the caste system was part of the economic base although it did not encompass all aspects of the relations of production.



Caste and class were not synonymous, but there is no doubt that the caste system and caste ideology played a significant role in the enslavement of the masses and their exploitation.

With the growth of trade and commerce in the earlier period of British colonialism, and with the growth of capitalist relations as a result of British policies in the late 19th century, the old feudal structure was disturbed. And with this came the rise of anti-feudal struggles and consciousness, as reflected in the non-Brahmin movements and the growth of a national consciousness. Slowly, with the growth in capital investment, the rise of a middle-class, etc., the existing feudal structure was transferred into a semi-feudal structure. The post-1947 strategy of the Indian ruling classes — land reforms, green revolution, etc. — has speeded up this process but the democratic transformation has been far from completed. The distorted and incomplete capitalist growth in the country has acted not only to prevent revolutionary change in the relations of production (as has happened with the bourgeois democratic revolutions in Europe) but has integrated a large part of the pre-capitalist relations. Capitalism in India, having grown as an off-shoot of worldwide imperialism, has not come as a revolutionizing force, but has grown with all the semi-feudal and pre-capitalist trappings. This is why, the old trading castes like the Banias, etc., are, today, the textile workers, while the old time Bhangis/scheduled castes are the sweepers in the municipality, etc. And hence, 'modernity' has not come with much democratization of society and of our social values and has been, rather, superimposed on the old feudal relations — thus creating a distorted society in which computers co-exist with the wooden plough; untouchability and animal sacrifice co-exist with television; dowry and wife-burning co-exist with video and modern films; etc.

Caste, though interwoven in the economic structure of society, is deeply embedded in human psyche. The uninterrupted history of caste over thousands of years have given it a resilience and autonomy of its own, which has its own impact holding back the process of change. To destroy the roots of caste, it is first and

foremost necessary to smash the backward semi-feudal socio-economic system. But that alone is not sufficient — we need to consistently attack caste ideology, oppose caste-based social relations and, above all, fight all forms of caste discrimination and oppression.

### **DALITS<LEVEL A>**

The Scheduled Castes, which comprise about 14 percent of the population, face a crude form of oppression in untouchability. In the villages this casteism is cruder while in the urban centres it is more subtle and cunning. Modern thinking may have reduced the intensity of caste oppression (as compared to a century ago) but it has not made it any less pervasive.

First, let us take the question of caste oppression in the countryside. The scheduled castes are not merely denied economic and political rights but also basic civic rights. At the village level, the struggle must be led not only for economic demands and for land (together with all the oppressed class) but also for their basic civil and political rights. The struggle must be led for the Scheduled Castes to freely participate in the religious, social and political life of village. Even today, the Dalits live outside the main village, cannot draw water from the community well, have no rights to enter in the temples (in many places) and even face discrimination in the purchase and sale of land and also their labour power. So, to smash the oppression of the Scheduled Castes from its roots at the village level, it requires a struggle to undermine the existing caste and patriarchal authority of the village rich, and set up, in its place, the authority of the oppressed masses organized into village committees on a democratic basis. Therefore, the struggle against the local power elite, and against the control of the economic, social and political life of the village, is the key aspect of fighting all forms of oppression, including caste oppression.

In the cities and towns, caste oppression, especially on the Dalits, though less crude than in the villages, operates in many, more subtle, ways. It operates in the sphere of jobs, education,

housing and various aspects of social life. This has led to the struggle mostly taking the form of a fight for reservations and their implementation and also the fight for self-respect and dignity. This movement broke out as a revolt in the Dalit Panther movement in the mid-1970s. This assertion of one's identity had begun much earlier — the DK movement under Periyar's leadership in Tamil Nadu, the Satyashodak movement and the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra and the *Namantar* movement for self-respect and an equal identity. In the urban areas, discrimination against the Dalits takes many subtle forms — whether in the realm of housing or job preference, or in that of education, especially, higher education. Reservations have not solved the problems of discrimination that haunt the Dalit students, in medical and engineering colleges, for example. It is, in innumerable ways, in the minor aspects of social interaction that the Dalits face discrimination and oppression. And, as a reaction to these various forms of discrimination, the Dalit movement has grown with a distinct identity, for justice, social equality and dignity. Ambedkar has become a symbol of this movement.

What then should be the main focus of the revolutionary movement on the question of caste oppression? Should it be for reservations? Or should it be against the Hindu religion? Or should it be opposed to the Hindu communal organizations? Although the revolutionary movement has to defend the continuation of reservations, and also fight Hindu communal organizations, the main focus of attack must be the state-Congress-I combine which is the chief perpetrator of caste oppression and the upholder of the caste system. Without the overt, and covert, support of the government and the Congress-I the Hindu communal organizations would never have seen the type of growth that we witness today. There is a strong trend in the Dalit movement that considers the Congress, which has granted and continued reservations, as not as casteist as the RSS. But reservations are no charity granted by the government, they are a right wrested through struggle. The weakness of the Dalit movement, evident in Ambedkar's views also, was that it seeks change within the

existing constitutional framework. The caste system can be thoroughly attacked only by destroying the existing political system which sustains it. Yet, this too, is only a starting point, since caste ideology and thinking is deep-rooted in people's thought and will require a continuous ideological struggle to uproot it completely.

The Congress-I portrays itself as a saviour of the Dalits. But behind nearly every castiest outrage in different parts of the country we can find the hands of the Congress-I or the ruling party. The aggressive Maratha lobby that dominates the reins of power in rural Maharashtra or the Rajput and Brahmin lobbies of the North are all tied to the Congress-I. The Congress-I represents the most reactionary forces in the country. The RSS too has close links with it (Hedgewar was a Congressman and Deoras has supported Rajiv Gandhi). The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, too, has close links with the state structure and the Congress-I. Communal organizations are floated by the Congress-I. That the Shiv Sena was floated by Vasantrao Naik and is now sustained by the Vasantdada Patil lobby is an open fact. In the North, fascist Hindu organizations have acted as the direct storm-troopers of the government and the ruling party. The state-Congress-I combine is the most staunch upholder of the existing feudal culture in all its reactionary essence, and the RSS, VHP and Shiv Sena type communal fascist outfits get direct and indirect patronage of the Congress-I, either through influential individuals linked to the government or through funds channelized to these bodies discretely. It is a convenient division of labour — the RSS, the VHP, the Shiv Sena, etc., yell for 'Hindu Rashtra', while the Congress-I looks more secular as it gives concessions to Hindu fanatics (cleaning the Ganga, broadcasting the Ramayana on TV, supporting the *Rashtriya Ekatmata Yagna*), and also to the fundamentalist demands of other religious, while stopping short of giving the full demand of Hindu Rashtra. Therefore, the Indian state and the Congress-I represent the most reactionary classes (the feudal, big bourgeois, anti-national pro-imperialist classes) in Indian society, and are the chief upholders of the caste system.

While fighting back the attacks of fascist Hindu communal bodies (through self-defence squads, etc.) the revolutionary movement has to win over the other oppressed sections among the Hindus and also target their attack against the Congress-I and the government. In this struggle, the need to unite the Dalits, the Bahujan Samaj, the minorities and the secular individuals and organizations, irrespective of their ideological differences, is important. The caste based mobilization of the Dalit movement has prevented this unity and led the movement into a quagmire of sectarianism. Without this unity the Dalits can be (and are increasingly being) pitted against the Bahujan Samaj, which have become the mobilizing section of the rising Shiv Sena and such bodies. No doubt this unity is difficult to achieve but it is also essential.

Precisely in order to bring about this unity of all oppressed sections and classes the movement against caste oppression will have to shed its sectarian character and join the overall democratic movement in the country. Experience in Maharashtra itself has shown that mere anti caste movements, unlinked to other struggles that unite the exploited and oppressed, such as the 'one village one well' movement (of Baba Adhav), have not effectively undermined caste discrimination. Nor can the movement of one oppressed caste for equality hit at the caste system. The workers, the peasants, the oppressed nationalities and the oppressed minorities have as their enemies, basically, the same forces that are also the targets of the Dalit movement. The Dalits alone, constituting 14 percent of the population, cannot break the stranglehold of caste, let alone win the battle against caste oppression. The broader unity of the oppressed, cutting across caste lines, is a precondition for winning the fight against the caste system. Thus, the struggle against caste oppression has to be united with the struggle of all the oppressed classes for the overthrow of the existing order and the reorganization of society on a thoroughly democratic basis.

