

COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST)

WEST BENGAL STATE COMMITTEE

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FEATURES

On Marxism and the Caste Question

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The intellectual effervescence, leading to the emergence of a new Left discourse incorporating the caste question, that has appeared in several campuses around the country in the wake of the Hindutva forces' attack on institutions of higher learning and creativity, brings to the fore once more the relationship between the Marxist approach and the issue of caste oppression. A discussion of this relationship may not have much immediate practical bearing on current struggles, but the fact that it has come on the theoretical agenda cannot be denied.

There has been a long-standing debate on this relationship arising from the charge leveled by many, especially dalit intellectuals, against Marxism that it privileges the category of "class" over "caste", that its primary perception of society is in terms of class divisions rather than of caste divisions, and that because of this it tends to underplay the significance of the latter. In this debate one often discerns three distinct intellectual positions being taken (which of course are not all-exhaustive). One position states, no doubt with considerable justification, that class and caste oppression in India more or less overlap, that the oppressed castes are not only a subset of the oppressed classes, but very substantially constitute the latter, because of which several authors arguing along these lines use the hyphenated term "caste-class" in describing the process of exploitation in the country.

A second position underscores the significance of the distinction between the two concepts, but sees either one of the two as being more important than the other as the primary focus of political intervention for transforming society. Some prioritise struggles organised along class lines, while others prioritise struggles organised around caste oppression.

A third position belongs methodologically to a genre which was inspired by the theoretical work of Louis Althusser the French Communist philosopher who gave a "structuralist" interpretation to Marxism; but this genre is critical of Althusser for not having taken his philosophy further forward than he did. This third position states that in society there are several contradictions that co-exist at any time, and there is no question of privileging any one of these over the other. Any one of these may come to the fore at a particular moment, and progressive forces have to focus their energies on that. Through a process of their doing so, these authors visualise the possibility of the emergence of a conjuncture when the structure as a whole may get transformed.

What this

last argument would mean in our context is that caste, class, and gender may emerge at different points of time as the primary sites of struggle, and progressive forces have to engage in struggle at whatever site has come to the forefront. The question of privileging in any way the "class contradiction" over other contradictions does not arise.

SNAPSHOT VIEW OF SOCIETY

All these three intellectual positions have one basic element in common: they look at a snapshot view of society in discussing which contradiction, if any, should be privileged. They discuss the issue of contradiction in other words within the frozen frame of a society. Even the last of these three intellectual positions, which talks of different contradictions assuming primacy at different points of time within a broadly untransformed society, takes a frozen frame view of society. It may appear at first sight that this is not so, that because it talks of different contradictions acquiring primacy at different times, it is talking about a changing society and not a frozen frame; but this shift in primacy it anticipates is a shift across frozen frames. In one particular frozen frame of society one contradiction may have primacy according to it, while in another particular frozen frame another contradiction may acquire primacy.

In short, the discussion on

"class" and "caste" in India has often been conducted within the context of a snapshot view of society; and the Marxist position has been erroneously interpreted as privileging "class" over "caste" within this frozen frame. This is erroneous because Marxism is not concerned with the question of privileging one category over another within a frozen frame. Its concern is how we move from one frame to another. Putting it differently, within any given frame, there is an ensemble of relationships, of class, caste, gender and others, which constitute a totality (to use a concept of the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs). This totality, or, specifically in the context of our discussion, the caste-class ensemble, changes over time. The question that Marxism raises is: how and why does it change? The point in other words is not which element in the ensemble is per se, or intrinsically, more important (this on its own would be considered an arid question); the point is what propels the ensemble forward. And the answer that Marxism provides to this question has to do with the materialist interpretation of history which is too well-known to recount here and which GV Plekhanov in his opus *The Development of the Monist View of History* had underscored as the *differentia specifica* of Marxism. What is worth attempting briefly here, however, is a discussion, within this overall perspective, of the contemporary times characterised by capitalism.

In discussing capitalism, which had been the main focus of his analytical work, Marx had emphasised the spontaneity of this system, the fact that it is a self-driven system that is subject to a set of immanent tendencies. These tendencies are independent of human will and consciousness (nobody for instance wanted the Great Depression of the 1930s to occur, or the current world capitalist crisis which even persists despite all conscious efforts to get out of it); what is more, the human behaviour that goes in to the constitution of these immanent tendencies is itself not a matter of volition on the part of the human (economic) agents. They are coerced into acting in particular ways because not doing so would cost them their place within the economic system. Capitalists for instance accumulate capital not necessarily because they like doing so, but because not doing so would cost them their place in the system, and they would fall by the wayside owing to competition. Capitalists too in other words are alienated agents within the capitalist system.

The development of capitalism, it follows, may keep shifting the nature of the caste-class ensemble, but human freedom is impossible without overcoming the "spontaneity" of the system, and hence the system itself. Such overcoming is as much a condition for the end of class exploitation as it is of caste oppression, since, in its absence,

even if some persons from the oppressed castes "climb out" of their working class status to join the ranks of the bourgeoisie or of the upper professional stratum (as was the vision of the World Bank and others with regard to the blacks in South Africa), the fact of the bulk of the oppressed castes remaining mired in caste oppression, even as they remain mired in class exploitation, can scarcely be altered.

IMPORTANCE OF TRANSCENDING

CAPITALIST SYSTEM

The reality of caste oppression as an extant phenomenon can scarcely be replaced within the existing system by an alternative reality where caste oppression has disappeared altogether, and class exploitation prevails in some pristine form. It follows therefore that those struggling for an end to caste oppression cannot succeed in their struggle without a transcendence of the capitalist system. The annihilation of caste in short requires a transcendence of the capitalist system. True, such transcendence is not a sufficient condition for the end of caste oppression; but it is a necessary condition. This is the primary conclusion of Marxism.

The question of primacy between the categories of "class" and "caste" has to be discussed in this perspective and not in the context of a snapshot picture of society per se,

within which it has little meaning anyway. Now, the transcendence of capitalism cannot be a caste demand. The cognizance of capitalism as a system that needs to be transcended, the conception of the alternative that has to be put in its place in the event of its transcendence, are all issues that go beyond any analysis based on the category of caste. To be sure, one will arrive at these very issues if one honestly and consistently pursues the objective of the annihilation of caste; but, in doing so, one would have gone beyond the caste perspective itself. To put it differently, if one remains exclusively within the framework of a caste perspective one would never succeed in overcoming caste oppression itself.

The privileging of the class perspective that Marxism is accused of doing arises from its understanding of the necessity of transcending capitalism, not just for overcoming class exploitation but for overcoming caste and other forms of oppression as well. Even the transcendence of capitalism will not make caste oppression disappear; that only underscores however the need not to reduce caste oppression to merely class exploitation, but rather to recognize its sui generis character.

Caste-oppression is so entrenched in our society, so deeply rooted, that, let alone disappearing, or even getting ameliorated, within capitalism, ie, prior to the overthrow of capitalism, it would not even do so without a prolonged struggle after such an

overthrow. Caste oppression in short constitutes a deep-rooted contradiction in our society that is not easy to overcome.

But giving it primacy is different from recognizing either its durability or its importance. Marxism's giving primacy to class struggle and class contradiction is just another way of saying that the key to the resolution of all other forms of oppression, including caste oppression, lies in overcoming the capitalist system.

Giving primacy to the struggle against capitalism however does not mean ignoring caste oppression or treating it as a subsidiary matter. On the contrary, since the struggle against capitalism is undermined by any ignoring of caste oppression, such ignoring, far from being an inevitable outcome of emphasizing class struggle, actually undermines class struggle itself. The primacy of the category of "class" in Marxism only means that all struggles against oppression, including struggles against caste oppression, must not lose sight of the overarching necessity of overthrowing capitalism, but, rather, must be located within it.

24th April, 2017

