

**Marxism, Anti-Class and Anti-Caste Movements: Rethinking the
Dichotomy in Indian Context**

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The Indian caste system is historically one of the main dimensions in which people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. It has become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige (Sekhon, 2000). The Indian caste system is can be better defined as a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to the caste they were born into. The occupation of a person, its family is permanently determined by the caste to which it belongs. It further leads to multiple discriminations such as discrimination in the labour market, in asset ownership, in accumulation of human capital resulting into unequal outcomes. Thus, the vicious cycle of discrimination, stratification goes on and on. Such discrimination is a complex process, where multiple positions of people are shaped by a variety of social attributes. At the root of discriminatory treatment lies the recognition that individuals are treated differently on perceived characteristics of their group rather than their individual capabilities. In such societies, the labour market becomes a crucial site for the play of social relations (Polanyi, 1944). In India, we can easily find the interlocking of social discrimination with economic discrimination where the socially marginalised classes are over-represented among the poor and when this poverty is passed over generations, it makes it difficult for lower castes to move up (Thorat, 2007). Thus, these social groups also take a shape of economic classes. It is difficult to distinguish them apart as Teltumbde (2016) has remarked that if class is determined by the objective reality determined by the place a group occupies in a historically determined system of social production, then caste is India's objective reality as the marginalised social sections in the country differ by those in the central place through their position in historically determined system of social production by their relations to the means of production and hence their share in social wealth.

Thus, Class and caste should be seen as two inextricably bound categories in Indian society. Indian Marxists are often charged with neglecting and avoiding the caste question and relegating all such questions to the superstructure by focusing more upon the issues of the economic base. This duality of class and caste among the Marxists and other schools of thoughts, has actually done more harm than good, it has diverted any movement aimed at

annihilating the both. The debate of class vs caste automatically is related with the question whether to wage a war against classes or castes as most of the economically deprived classes belong to the marginalised social sections as well. But all those belonging to the upper castes can not be denoted as the 'haves' and not all those belonging to the socially marginalised groups (lower castes) as the 'have nots'. However, largely the class notion, which is related with economic exploitation, can not be isolated from the notion of social hierarchy. Ironically, the issue of anti-caste movements have become more of the political agenda to reap the benefits of winning votes from certain segments of the society and so they work more upon strengthening these categories than abolishing them. Actually, delving upon a single idea of caste or class will not lead to any social change. There is a need to rethink this dichotomy to find ways to free the society from such categorisation and its resultant exploitation. It calls for a need to expand the boundaries of caste as well as class to understand the current mode of exploitation in the country. This can happen only through the thorough understanding of the intersection of two categories. The struggle has to be waged from the axis of exploitation of both the categories. Hence, this paper is an attempt to highlight the inner contradictions of the heterogeneous category of marginalised social sections and how they changed their essence over a period of time and how the experience of humiliation or indignity replaced it with the experience of exclusion and deprivation which in its essence is a class question. In this respect, we can first have a look at how the caste based discrimination in the labour market prevails in India.

Labour Market Discrimination in India: The Caste Matters!

Indian society is broadly divided in to four castes -

- (1) Brahmin i.e. the priestly class
- (2) Kshatriya i.e. the military class
- (3) Vaishya i.e. the merchant class
- (4) The Sudra i.e. the artisan or a person doing other menial things.

The first three classes are termed as the upper castes while the last one is socially marginalised, depressed class. This is a class of untouchables and outcastes, popularly called '*dalits*' or '*harijans* (son of god)ⁱ'. Later, the Indian constitution used the terms 'Scheduled Castes'ⁱⁱ and 'Scheduled Tribes'ⁱⁱⁱ for various depressed classes in different parts of the country.

The division of occupations in India have been determined by the caste to which a person belongs since the ancient times and even seven decades of affirmative action through reservation of jobs for the socially marginalised groups, has not changed the caste-based occupational segregation in the country. These marginalised social sections of the society not only have limited access to productive employment opportunities but also to the productive humans as well as physical assets. As the social institutions rule at the core of the labour market and therefore, the workers belonging to lower castes are placed in informal, low paid jobs with poor working conditions (Deringer and Piore, 1971 and Piore, 1983). In this regard, taking the data from 1993-94 to 1999-2000, Madheswaran and Attewell (2007) have shown presence of caste based inequalities in employment, occupation and earnings between SC/ST, OBCs and forward castes in India and showed that major share of the earning differentials is due to differences in human capital endowments. These discriminations can still be observed in Indian labour market. Hence, first we can examine the caste based differences in ownership of the productive assets (land and education) and then in labour market. This can be observed from Appendix Tables 1 and 2. Appendix Table 1 shows that about 35 per cent of workers in rural areas and 14 per cent of workers in urban areas are illiterate. The proportion of the illiterate workers is much higher among SCs, STs and OBCs than that of the upper caste workers while in higher education, the relative share of the upper caste workers is higher. This is equally true for both rural and urban areas. Due to the policy of universalisation of education up to the school level, these differences are less obvious. But one can not be contended at lower degree of disparities in school education as this level of education hardly translates into any significant improvement in earnings. The education which marks an important difference in earnings (e.g., professional education of higher education) is marred with wider caste based discrimination. Similar differences can be observed in case of ownership of land in Appendix Table 2. shows that the SCs in rural areas and SCs along with OBCs in urban areas are mainly landless or near landless. Hardly 18 per cent of SCs in rural areas and less than 10 per cent in urban areas (9.05 per cent for SCs and 5.78 for OBCs) own any land which can be used for increasing their earning capacity. Such differences in accumulation of human as well as physical capital lead to even wider differences in the labour market. The differential access to quality jobs by the workers belonging to different caste groups can be observed from Appendix

Table 3. The Table shows that nearly half of the workers belonging to Scheduled Caste and one-third of those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes as well as Other Backward Classes in rural areas are working as casual workers as compared to only one-fifth in case of those belonging to the Upper Classes. The share of 'Others' in regular jobs in rural areas is higher vis-à-vis other social groups but in urban areas only the other backward classes seem to be in relative disadvantageous position while that of the SCs and STs is better than the 'Others' category. This may be due to the reservation policy followed by the government and semi-government institutions in their recruitment process of the regular vacancies. Most of the workers belonging to the marginalised social sections are found to be working in the informal sector that is characterised by low earnings and lack of any social security. Hence the population belonging to the marginalised social sections is over-represented in the poor (Anupama, 2015). Thus, the labour market in this country is an important place where the caste-based discriminations take the form of classes and hence the castes and classes overlap each other. There are evidences that about 47 per cent of agricultural landless labourers are dalits (i.e. the downtrodden castes) (Sinha, 2017). Low level of education, landlessness, poverty being a dominant feature of the lower castes clearly shows that caste groups and the class groups overlap each other. The labour market data clearly indicates that a big majority of the workers belonging to the socially marginalised (termed as dalits) belong to the class of rural as well urban proletariat and semi-proletariat. Thus, the economic exploitation and the social injustice are just intertwined with each other. Although not all those who belong to lower castes are oppressed and not all those belonging to the upper castes are the oppressors yet it can be safely stated on basis of the data on labour market that among all the workers who face economic exploitation, a majority belongs to the dalits or among the dalits, a majority belongs to the oppressed class.

Looking at Caste: where is the Marxist Lense?:

The proponents of the market generally propagate the idea that the neo-liberal policies in the country would automatically reduce the caste-based disparities as market differentiates on basis of the efficiency. But in reality it sharpened these inequalities when they got associated with the new contradictions generated by the liberalisation process (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2002). The caste contradictions have accentuated the class contradictions during the neo-liberal reforms due to deprivation of ownership of

productive assets. There is ample evidence to show that the productive resources has always remained concentrated in to the hands of upper castes (Deshpande et al., 2001). However, initially all the movements against caste were actually anti-brahmin anti-religion movements without considering the class questions and same was the case for the anti-class movements which were talking about the exploiters and the exploited in general without looking into its its specific locations in gender as well as caste. It was only in the late seventies or early eighties that the left intellectuals started making interventions in the anti-caste movements as well and the anti-caste movements also started considering the class factor. But still there are certain gaps in their efforts to join together.

Those who stand for the annihilation of caste, criticise the Marxists on the point that their primary perception of society is class and not the caste while the latter is a lived reality of the downtrodden in the Indian society. They are being criticised for ignoring the struggle against caste as superstructural and hence unimportant. Patnaik (2017) rightly points out that there are three intellectual stances on looking at the question of caste - some say that the question of caste and class overlap each other, another section says that for transforming the society one has to prioritise one of the two issues while the third stance says that a society is full of diverse contradictions that co-exist and there is no question of prioritising one over the other as any one of these itself would come to the fore at different points of time. But he further states that neither of these three intellectual stances on the issues of caste and class is free of methodological flaws as they see the issue of class and caste in a frozen framework while Marxism is a dynamic methodology to look at these questions. It says that the capitalist system is a coercive system and we can not get rid of any class exploitation or a caste based exploitation until we are not able to transcend the system. The struggle to overthrow the capitalism is against all type of suppression. It does not mean in any ways the neglect of the question of caste. Actually if it neglects the question of caste, the struggle to annihilate caste is also weakened. Any struggle for the abolition of the classes, without addressing the question of caste, will not achieve its objective and the same is true for the movements against the existing caste system. They too will fail to create a social system without exploitation without challenging the exploitative relations of production (Das, 2013).

The revolutionary left is very validly criticised for not addressing the caste question by narrowing them down to the contradictions of base only. They are faulty in their methodology if they think that class-struggle is merely an economic question. It is a struggle between the exploiter and the exploited for the control over economic, political as well as social means which designate a superior position for one class/caste and an inferior one for the other. So an anti-class as well as anti-caste struggle must include the struggle in economic, political, social and ideological spheres and it requires the smashing of classes as well as the castes to create new bodies through which people's power is exercised (Ghandy, 2012). Actually, the criticism is not due to the ideological bent of the anti-class and anti-caste movements because in principle, the left revolutionaries will say that since they are against any type of exploitation so they would stand against the caste-based exploitation as well and in the similar fashion, the anti-caste struggles can not afford to ignore the economic segmentation of lower castes versus the upper ones as well as the classes within their own caste categories. Both of these movements are actually being criticised for their being prey to the political interests and sacrificing the main issues of the exploitation of one segment/class of the society from the other. Both are being criticised not for excluding each other but for not concentrating or being committed even to their own issue. Had they been committed to the central issue, the unity between them would have naturally taken place. The affirmative action which is always the main demand of the anti-caste movements has actually sharpened the caste divisions in the society rather than eliminating them. Sinha (2017) has very rightly pointed out that the caste system in the country co-exists with class, state and patriarchy and until these three are not withered away, the castes can not be annihilated. Hence, a struggle for a classless society should also be a struggle for a casteless society. Merely a change in economic base can not ensure a caste-less and hence a class-less society. It will need a change in superstructure in terms of elimination of the inter-personal disparities based on gender, caste, ethnicity etc.

It is totally misconceived to relegate the question of caste to the superstructure only as we have seen that the class contradictions and the generation and appropriation of surplus is also being affected by the caste divisions in the Indian society. Therefore, thinking that the political and social revolution will precede the economic revolution or saying that social equality precedes the economic equality is a falsely grounded argument. The anti-caste

movements in the country are looking upon the state as a saviour and an instrument to bring social equality. While looking through the Marxist lens, we all know that a state supporting an economic system based on exploitation rather uses the existing forms of social oppression for their own specific needs and this has happened in India during the colonial rule as well as after Independence. Hence, in the broader perspective, the question of caste is undoubtedly the question of revolutionary transformation of society (Das, 2013). The present crisis of the anti-caste movements is that without addressing the question of class and depending upon state for equality through the affirmative action not only turn the anti-caste movement into an identity based movements but also sharpen the caste based identities defeating the very purpose. Hence, it is only the class-based anti-caste movement which has the ability to reach its goals of setting an equal and just society. The struggle against the annihilation of caste as well as class should be fighting against the atrocities against the dalits in all the arenas; the fight against the brahmanical/upper caste fascism - the hindutava, should be an intrinsic part of these movements; the fight for universal entitlement as well as applicability of civil and democratic rights viz. Right to education, employment, housing, health benefits, equal access to productive resources etc. and since every revolution can not be sustained without cultural revolution, there is also a need for having wide spread propaganda for rational and scientific worldview through literature, art, media etc.

If the left revolutionary movements in India have failed to address the question of caste so far, is not due to the problems with the Marxist philosophy but due to the ways that Indian left has used it. The Indian left has itself always remained in a survivalist mode and so has succumbed to the political vested interests. So, its addressing the caste question weakly is validly criticised but this does not mean that Marxism does not have answers to the question of caste rather, it is the only philosophy which gives a scientific base of understanding and answering the caste question or the question of any social and economic inequalities prevailing in the society. The caste can never be seen as a pure and isolated category. To understand the issues related with caste based discriminations and finding their solutions, it is necessary that the over-determined character of caste as well as caste and their interactions is adequately examined (Rege et al., 2013). So, attending the question of class necessarily calls for engagement with caste and vice-versa. Both of these categories do

not exist independent of each other. However, there are questions regarding the convergence of the anti-caste and anti-class movements. Teltumbde (2005) has remarked that the 'caste' tag actually divides the struggling masses on basis of their caste identities while the struggles on basis of 'class' unites them. He said that the dalits too should have come out of their own caste boxes. In his own words:

"On the part of the dalit movement, it ought to be clear that caste can never be used as a category for emancipation project. Caste is intrinsically divisive; it tends to highlight differences among people to keep them away. Class, on the other hand tends to integrate people along their existential similarities. Even while pursuing their anti-caste agenda dalits must transcend castes so as to unite all dalits. This process can then easily extend to other democratic people who would come forward to reinforce the anti-caste struggle. The caste identity only serves to blur the identities of friends and foes. Both could come wearing the same caste label. Only the class perspective can bring in the requisite polarization of forces for effective struggle for dalit emancipation."

Actually, both the anti-caste and anti-class struggles fight for achieving democratic revolution - the latter fights against the imperialist power while the former fights against those who support the imperialist power to get their hegemony intact. Sometimes, even the distinction between the anti-caste and anti-class movements also appears to be artificial and divisive in itself as we generalise that all the anti-class movements are anti-imperialist. India being a pluralistic society/economy, the revolutionary left can actually be found to be fighting against the semi-feudalism, capitalism as well as imperialism. While fighting against semi-feudalism, which is the principal contradiction in many parts of the country, it is also fighting against the caste. Overthrowing feudalism weakens the caste system and attacking the caste system weakens the feudal base.

In order to annihilate caste as well as class, there is always a need to understand their character, their current form and the agents that strengthen them. The caste system in India is continuously changing its character along with the change in economic base. It has always remained extremely resilient and has adjusted itself to the changes in the environment (Teltumbde, 2011). So, its existing character and its agents can not be analysed in isolation from the analysis of exploitative character of the economic base. Many castes have lost their ancient character and some of them have mingled with the another ones. With the advent of capitalism while the caste divisions have sharpened, yet we can easily

see the class like divisions in the *dalits* and the non-*dalits*. On the other hand, the understanding of the existing caste structure is also complicated due to their intermingling with the institutions within the government which have created a class division within themselves as well. The class struggle today is not related with struggle against the upper castes but also within the same caste. Actually in a diverse society caste can never be a base of establishing an equal society. It becomes a weak base for organising people for a radical change. But this does not mean that the question of caste should be ignored. A fight against caste can be fought by uniting all the progressive forces - dalits as well as the non-dalits. The reservation system in economic as well as the political arena has not actually reduced the social inequalities. It has rather accentuated it. It only gives the illusion that they are getting the power while millions of them remain powerless and mired in poverty and oppression.

To sum up it can be stated that an anti caste movements and the anti-class movements must integrate with each other. For this purpose there is a need of mobilising all the exploited classes. While the Marxists are being blamed for relegating the question of caste to superstructure and focusing their attention to the economic base only, the movements against caste are also blamed for being degenerated in to political opportunism many times in the electoral history of the country. Whole discussion so far points towards the fact that the issues related with caste have to be fought both in the realm of the economy as well as culture/society. Supporting the dalit movements by the anti-imperialist forces is the need of the hour. This annihilation of caste is possible only by creating the class consciousness among the dalits. They are to be made aware and united against the caste based atrocities, discriminations and deprivations (Lakshaminarayanan, 2005). While the points of differences between the anti-caste and anti-class movements are falsely grounded and so can be removed with a positive attitude, the common points are too convincing and work as an adhesive force e.g., the dalit question is also a land question and the question of exploitation through surplus extraction can largely be located in the dalits. Since caste is not merely an ideology but also contain the exploitative production relations, the anti-class movements must include this aspect of Indian society in to their fold. As we have seen that the working class in India collectively comes from the socially marginalised groups (*dalits* and *shudras*), it is necessary that they form an important component of class struggle too. The notion of

class can not be separated from the notion of social hierarchy in rural India which constitutes a major segment of the dominant production relations. Hence, it is unwise to ignore caste and talk merely about the class. Both of these categories and the struggles related with them are needed to expand their boundaries in order to fight against every type of exploitation. This will happen only through the amalgamation of the struggles based on caste with class consciousness (Teltumbde, 2000). Both the movements have to reconsider their stance upon state, religion, caste and class. It has to work upon the interactions between them rather than ignoring and blaming each other's agenda keeping in mind that in past both of them have not been much successful in their own arena as well. Apart from self-criticism, there is also a need to recognise each other's contribution to the struggle against oppression from time to time. However, it is the revolutionary movements who must take the initiative to join hands with the anti-caste movements and it must be beyond the electoral logic. It needs not only directing the class struggle against the caste system as an integral part but also a struggle against all forms of casteist thinking in every arena of life. It also means struggle against the caste linked feudal authority, struggle for redistribution of land to the tiller, struggle for civic rights of the lower castes along with propagating the materialist scientific ideology, atheism and a democratic culture based on equality.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Distribution of Workers (age group 15-59 years) according to Education Status

Social Groups	Illiterate	Up to Primary	Middle and Higher Secondary	Diploma and Certificate Course	Graduate	Post-graduate and Above
	Rural					
Scheduled Tribes	46.43	28.15	23.13	0.35	1.58	0.37
Scheduled Castes	41.47	29.22	26.41	0.50	1.91	0.49
Other Backward Classes	35.03	25.34	34.68	1.04	2.97	0.94
Others	22.68	25.17	42.28	1.59	6.46	1.82
All Social Groups	34.93	26.44	33.30	0.97	3.38	0.98
Urban						
Scheduled Tribes	20.92	19.34	39.84	2.08	13.79	4.03
Scheduled Castes	21.30	23.38	41.77	2.31	8.17	3.08
Other Backward Classes	16.52	21.98	41.66	3.12	11.75	4.97
Others	8.58	14.27	41.66	2.79	22.66	10.05
All Social Groups	14.15	18.97	41.61	2.83	15.72	6.72

Source: Calculated from the household level data of 68th Round of NSSO on *Employment and Unemployment Situation in India, 2011-12*.

Table 2: Distribution of Workers according to Ownership of Land

Social Groups	Landless	Less than 0.5 Acres	0.5 to 1.0 Acres	Less than 1.0 Acre	Landless & Less than 1.0 Acre	1.0-5.0 Acre	More than 5.0 Acre
	Rural						
Scheduled Tribes	9.05	27.80	7.07	34.86	43.91	40.02	16.07
Scheduled Castes	14.81	56.03	7.24	63.27	78.07	17.56	4.37
Other Backward Classes	3.78	43.19	7.75	50.94	54.72	33.34	11.94

Others	7.43	38.57	6.78	45.34	52.77	27.26	19.97
All Social Groups	7.52	42.88	7.34	50.22	57.73	29.54	12.73
	Urban						
Scheduled Tribes	8.69	58.13	7.61	65.74	74.43	22.25	3.32
Scheduled Castes	9.20	75.71	5.06	80.77	89.97	9.05	0.98
Other Backward Classes	31.80	58.64	1.41	60.04	91.84	5.78	2.38
Others	22.11	52.76	6.33	59.09	81.20	14.27	4.52
All Social Groups	23.77	58.74	4.15	62.89	86.66	10.27	3.07

Source: same as Table 1.

**Table 3: Distribution of Workers according to Activity Status and Social Groups
(2011-12)**

Social Groups	Rural					Urban				
	Working Owners	Employers	Unpaid Family Workers	Regular Workers	Casual Workers	Working Owners	Employers	Unpaid Family Workers	Regular Workers	Casual Workers
Scheduled Tribes	32.67	0.35	24.63	5.61	36.75	19.55	0.52	5.32	50.01	24.61
Scheduled Castes	26.75	0.44	10.98	8.72	53.10	23.58	0.53	5.48	46.82	23.59
Other Backward Classes	37.37	1.09	20.77	9.04	31.73	33.21	1.82	9.52	39.29	16.16
Others	44.03	2.30	19.39	13.64	20.63	32.40	3.41	8.22	48.60	7.37
All Social Groups	36.13	1.14	18.92	9.61	4.19	31.00	2.23	8.26	44.53	13.98

Source: same as Table 1

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ⁱ **Dalit**: The term *dalit* was used by Ambedkar for all the untouchables and outcastes in Indian society. In English it means 'the oppressed'. Later Gandhi gave them a name of 'Harijan' but Ambedkar did not accept it.

ⁱⁱ Article 341 of the Constitution of India define as to who would be Scheduled Castes with respect to any State or Union Territory. The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory and where it is a State after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be

Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be. Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Castes specified in a notification issued under clause of any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

iii The term Scheduled Tribes first appeared in the Constitution of India. Article 366 (25) defined scheduled tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution". The criterion followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness.

For end note ii and iii above see Government of India website 'Chapter XI, Special Representation in Services for SC/ST <http://dopt.gov.in/sites/default/files/ch-11.pdf> as accessed on June 15, 2017.