

## **Caste, Class And Property Relations**

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[Nationalist tradition in India looked upon the struggle of the lower castes against the domination of the upper castes as a diversion from the general anti-imperialist struggle. The caste question was considered to be an internal affair of the Indians who, in spite of all the differences and inequalities among them, were expected to first fight for the freedom of the country, under the leadership of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, there was another current which held that India was unfit for freedom till the people first overcame the inequalities of the caste system. This current was represented by certain social reformers coming from upper castes whose bourgeois democratic consciousness was appalled by the monstrous iniquities of the caste system and other obscenities of Hinduism. In essence, both these traditions sought to delink the anti-caste struggles from the contemporary democratic and class struggles; they sought to circumscribe the anti-caste struggle within the framework of the existing political and economic system.

This essay by B T Ranadive makes a broad survey of both these traditions as well as certain other anti-caste currents which launched a direct attack on the inequality of the caste system. Ranadive argues that while anti-caste struggles, including those which take the form of a demand for reservation of jobs, etc, should be supported, what is called for is a deeper struggle, embracing the oppressed of all castes, against the present socio-economic system which is based on certain property and production relations which sustain both caste and class oppression.

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B T Ranadive (right) with A K Gopalan, during a group photo session of the first Polit Bureau of the CPI(M).

The survival of the caste-system and prejudices today as well as the fight against it cannot be understood unless viewed in relation to the major political and economic developments in the country during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The major political development was the rise of nationalist anti-imperialist consciousness and the rising anti-imperialist struggle accompanied by the struggles of workers and peasants which forced the British to withdraw from India.

## **Single Process**

The anti-imperialist struggle, the growing sense of national unity, the anti-caste agitations and revolts, were all parts of a single process – the formation of a modern nation, with its different sections demanding equality and common status in a new polity. The process was gradual and slow with different castes and sub-castes expressing the urge in different ways in the beginning. Some directly addressed themselves to the fight against imperialist rule, others started awakening to their unequal status in Hindu society and embarked upon a struggle against caste inequality. At a later stage these various struggles merged to a great extent in the common struggle against imperialism, though some continued their separate existence till the end. In reality this was a process of the dissolution or, rather, undermining of the old Hindu order with its hereditary caste system. Marx underlined this process of undermining and dissolution. He said “All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid and destructive as their successive action in Hindustan may appear, did not go deeper than its surface. England has broken down the whole framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstruction yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindoo, and separates Hindustan, ruled by Britain from all its ancient traditions and from the whole of its past history”. Marx was not sorry that this old world of the Hindoo was crumbling. He knew it was based on monstrous caste distinctions and slavery. “We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinction of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man of external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transferred a self-developed social state into a natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man the sovereign of nature fell down on his knees in adoration before Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabala, the cow”. [1]

It was not in the interests of the colonial rule to transform the Indian society. The process of changing the old society, its stratification and economic basis was slow and painful. The result was superimposition of minimum modern capitalist relations on the old feudal land relations which sustained the caste system. The exploitation interests of British colonialism required that a powerful indigenous bourgeoisie should not arise. It was interested in exploiting the Indian people on the basis of their backwardness, i e, keeping the rural land relations intact as far as possible, modifying them only to advance its own interests.

Two contradictory processes were therefore in action. The introduction of modern relations – railways, communication, telegraph, workshops and a few factories, growing commodity exchange, exports and imports – accentuated the tendency towards undermining the old structure, and with it the caste relations. Secondly, the vital interests of the colonial powers in maintaining the old land relations, in seeking political and economic support from the feudals, meant support to the fabric of caste institution.

## **Revivalism and Compromise**

The leaders of the national movement, the new bourgeois intelligentsia coming from Hindu upper castes, were also interested in compromising with the caste system. One can imagine the backward economic conditions prevailing a hundred years ago. The intelligentsia just learning the alphabet of anti-imperialist struggle, without yet a solid foundation of support of the indigenous industrial bourgeoisie, stood in isolation from the downtrodden masses and was extremely afraid of hurting the religious susceptibilities of its immediate followers. Besides, the Indian nationalists, in their struggle against the British, barked back to India's past to draw sustenance for its claim to democracy and freedom. It led to revivalist thinking and ideology.

So from the existing foul welter and decaying and corrupt metaphysics, from the broken relics of the shattered village system, from the dead remains of court splendors of a vanished civilization, they sought to fabricate and build up and reconstitute a golden dream of Hindu culture – a 'purified' Hindu culture- which they could hold up as an ideal and a guiding light.

Against the overwhelming flood of British bourgeois culture and ideology, which they saw completely conquering the Indian bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, they sought to hold forward the feeble shield of a reconstructed Hindu ideology which had no longer any natural basis for its existence in actual life conditions. All social and scientific development was condemned by the more extreme devotees of this gospel as the conquerors' culture: every form of antiquated tradition, even abuse, privilege and obscurantism, was treated with respect and veneration.[2]

The opposition to Western ways was of course combined with demands for democracy and industrial advance. The revivalist bases meant defense of the caste system, its maintenance and failure to fight it. Tilak expressed his opposition to any kind of social reform including the proposal to raise the age of marriage. Tilak believed in the caste-system and defended it. Even Gandhi who represented a different stage of the national movement equally relied on revivalism. During the first non-co-operation movement he carried on an open campaign against everything Western, including Western medicine, Western education and the railways.

Gandhi once declared: "God limited man's locomotion power when he gave him two legs. But man became ambitious and built the railways". In these days he repeatedly harped upon bringing back Ram Raj to India. No doubt in subsequent years his appeal became more modern, more 'bourgeoisified'; but notwithstanding his onslaught against untouchability, he remained a prisoner of revivalist outlook. As early as 1921 he declared himself to be a Sanatanic Hindu. "I call myself a Sanatanic Hindu, because (1) I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name Hindu scriptures, therefore in Avatars and rebirth. (2) I believe in Varnashrama Dharma, in a sense in my opinion strictly Vedic, but not in its present popular and crude sense. (3) I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular. (4) I do not disbelieve in idol-worship".[3]

This was the ideology of the father of the nation who headed the Congress during the days of the national anti-imperialist struggle. In spite of this ideology he could move lakhs for the national struggle and make them momentarily forget their caste distinctions. It was he again who was able to bring lakhs of Muslims into the common struggle in 1920-21. But it was clear

that with this revivalist outlook, with this delinking of the anti-caste struggle from the anti-imperialist struggle, caste distinctions would continue to survive.

With this outlook of course it was not possible to eliminate the barriers between Hindus' and Muslims.

Notwithstanding the advanced and secular views of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Gandhian outlook dominated the nationalist movement. Critics have wrongly understood this obscurantist outlook as only surrender to caste pressures and considered it as being due only to the casteism of the upper caste national leaders. It was basically the surrender of the modern intelligentsia before the indigenous feudal land relations which sustained the caste system. Not that subjectively there was no caste-consciousness, for it was inevitable if you accepted the basically unjust agrarian structure.

### **Fear of Agrarian Revolution**

Such was the double faced intelligentsia of the earlier years. Espousing the aims and interests of the rising bourgeoisie, proclaiming new democratic values, it attacked the imperialists but at the same time allied itself with the old feudal order and institutions and explained such alliance as concentrating fire on the foreign enemy first. In Maharashtra and elsewhere its opposition to anti-money-lender Bills was part of the class alliance and not just caste alliance. It defended the peasant only against government exactions and attacked land-tax and other measures, but till very late in the day it refused to maintain agrarian relations in its programme. Though subsequent generations of national leaders could not maintain exactly the same position and had to maneuver both against caste discontent and land-relations, their position essentially remained the same.

In 1920 the Congress expressed its partiality for the big landlords openly and chided the peasants for withholding the oppressive rent of the landlords. The February 12, 1922 Bardoli decision calling off the national campaign against British imperialism contained the following clauses. "The Working Committee advises Congress workers and organizations to inform the ryots that withholding of rent payments to zamindars is contrary to the Congress resolutions and injurious to the best interests of the country. The Working Committee assures the zamindars that the Congress movement is in no way interested to attack their legal rights, and that even when the ryots have grievances, the Committee decides that redress be sought by mutual consultation and arbitration". This was said at a time when huge peasant masses had started moving against the landlords in the United Provinces and elsewhere.

This crude defense of landlords was not repealed in the succeeding years when the peasant masses had to be appealed to by the leaders of the Congress.

The Congress began to talk about doing justice to the tenants, etc, but the opposition to agrarian resolution, continued and the alliance with landlords remained. It was not for nothing

that Gandhi once described the Princely States as “Indian India’ and paid tributes to them and for years the Congress opposed widespread struggles in the Princely States.

This fear of agrarian revolution and alliance with indigenous obscurantist forces was not fortuitous. The weak industrial bourgeoisie without the confidence of meeting the challenge of imperialism had to rely on the established propertied classes from which also came a section of the intelligentsia. Besides in the twentieth century, in the decline of capitalism the bourgeoisie was unable to play a resolutely anti-feudal role. This was noted by Marxists. In fact Lenin, noting this development, declared that the democratic revolution in Russia could be led only by the working class and working class hegemony was essential for its success. Succeeding revolutions have shown that only under the leadership of the working class anti-imperialist revolutions including the agrarian revolution has been carried out, opening the way to socialism. China, Korea, Viet Nam are the recent instances. When the agrarian revolution could not be carried out, the anti-imperialist revolution got aborted, leading in some countries to fascism as in Indonesia. In the majority of underdeveloped countries where the bourgeois retained the hegemony, and sabotaged the agrarian revolution, pre-capitalist ideologies and relations continued, leading to the overthrow of democracy. Pan Islamism, Islamic Republic, ‘Guided Democracy’ and many other reactionary feudal ideologies continue to dominate the minds of the people today because the soil from which they spring—the pre-capitalist or tribal relations – continues to remain fertile. Social reformers have not understood this link between the agrarian revolution in India and the retention of caste and communal inequalities, outlook and prejudices. For them casteism and communalism were just injustices unlinked with any production relation system, a prejudice to be removed by denouncing it, by asking those who practice it to reject it, and nothing more. The struggle was not to be linked with the present day social system – its pre-capitalist and capitalist basis, its source of class exploitation. It was not to be conducted as part of the general democratic movement or modern class struggle.

### **The Communist Party**

The Communist Party was the only party which linked the struggle against untouchability and caste-system with agrarian revolution and end to imperialist domination. It alone saw in agrarian revolution and class struggle the key to overcome Hindu-Muslim separateness in practice. The Platform of Action of the CPI, 1930, said:

As a result of the rule of British imperialism in our country, there are still in existence millions of slaves, and tens of millions of socially outcaste working pariahs, who are deprived of all rights. British rule, the system of landlordism, the reactionary caste system, religious deception and all the slave and serf traditions of the past throttle the Indian people and stand in the way of its emancipation. They have led to the result that in India, in the twentieth century, there are still pariahs who have no right to meet with their fellowmen, drink from common wells, study in common schools, etc.

Instead of putting an end once for all to this shameful blot on the Indian people, Gandhi and other Congress leaders call for the maintenance of the caste system which is the basis of and

justification for the existence of that socially outcaste pariahs. Only the ruthless abolition of the caste system in its reformed, Gandhist variety, only the agrarian revolution and violent overthrow of British rule, will lead to the social, economic, cultural and legal emancipation of the working pariahs and slaves. The CP of India calls upon all the pariahs to join in the united revolutionary front — with all the workers of the country against British rule and landlordism.

The CP of India calls on all the pariahs not to give in to the tricks of British and reactionary agents who try to split and set one against the other the toilers of our country.

The CP of India fights for the complete abolition of slavery, the caste system and the caste inequality in all its forms (social, cultural etc). The CP of India fights for the complete and absolute equality of the working pariahs and all the toilers of our country.

The Communists knew that in a colonial country the slow process of industrial development does not lead so much to the proletarianisation of the peasantry as to its pauperization. Even those driven into the urban factories do not lose their rural stamp easily as in the earlier years they retained their connection with the land and retired to the village two months in a year. Besides their ranks being daily increased with arrivals from rural areas the formation of a firm class ideology was being repeatedly distorted. It was obvious that the blow had to, be given in the rural areas to the pre-capitalist land relations.

Owing to the interference of imperialism ... the drawing of the village into the sphere of monetary and trading economy is accompanied here by a process of pauperization of the peasantry ... On the other hand the delayed industrial development in the colonies has put sharp limits to the process of proletarianisation. Capitalism, which has included that colonial village into its system of taxation and trade apparatus and which has converted pre-capitalist relations (for instance the destruction of the village commonness) does not thereby liberate the peasants from the yoke of pre-capitalist forces of bondage and exploitation, but only gives the latter monetary expression ... to the 'assistance' of the peasants in their miserable positions (e g, in some localities of India and China) even creating a hereditary slavery based on their indebtedness.[4]

The CPI(M) 's memorandum on National Integration submitted in 1968 stated:

Recently, Parliament and the whole country were rightly indignant with the ghastly burning alive of a Harijan farm-servant in open daylight in Kanchikacharia village in Andhra Pradesh. The press has been giving numerous incidents of atrocities that are being perpetrated on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and on other backward communities. This phenomenon is not just some stray incidents confined to some particular areas or to particular states. It is a common practice, throughout the country – the legacy of the evil practice of untouchability and social oppression and brutality that persists in our rural areas, even after 20 years of independence and in spite of our laws and commissions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes! It is the result of the growth of feudal and semi-feudal landlordism and of the 'new rich', on the same feudal caste and social basis, and of their grip over the village economy and life! It is a reflection of the failure

of the government to liquidate the medieval feudal economic base, of its failure to abolish landlordism, give land to the tiller and assure him land and employment, fair wages, and decent living conditions (house sites, education and medical services). It is a reflection of the growing domination of the village landlord vested interests, through the policies pursued by the Congress government in the name of community development, Panchayat Raj, Co-operatives, etc, all with the laudable objective of amelioration of rural masses, but which are designed to strengthen the old feudal and semi-feudal landlords developing into a new rich and their domination over the village life. The whole state machinery, and especially the police and courts, are turned to serve this purpose. Hence no wonder these atrocities are increasing and a terrible brutalization of village life, negating all human values and decencies, is taking place. We need not be taken by surprise if these unfortunates, their patience exhausted, resort to desperate methods and caste riots break out on a large scale in the rural areas, which are already looming on the distant horizon. We will be having caste or race riots along with the present communal and language riots. It is only if the minimum economic living conditions are guaranteed, land and employment and social equality assured by eliminating the domination of the old feudal and semi-feudal as well as of the new rich, this danger can be avoided. The democratic opinion and forces must assert and force the government to give up its present policy of using the state machinery in support of the village oppressor against the rural poor, against the Harijans and backward communities but use it, use its full strength, against the vested interests and bring about radical economic and social transformation in the rural side of our country.[5]

It will be seen that the Communists did not say that caste, untouchability or communal outlook would disappear without a revolutionary struggle against the antiquated land system and British rule; or that the struggle to eradicate the caste system can be fought in isolation from the class struggle in the villages and the cities, by mere denunciation of the system. They knew that this class struggle was of a people' who were not yet free from caste prejudices and who therefore had to be united in the course of the struggle to discover their common identity as exploited. Real and abiding unity was to be achieved during the course of the revolutionary struggle which is fought with no holds barred.

The Communists also saw that caste disintegration was taking place rapidly; in each caste differentiation was taking place between the haves and have-nots and that the process of pauperization was affecting all castes. Almost all peasant castes have been the victims of this process. Thus a new common bond was being created between the lower sections of all castes – a bond which had to be stressed and consolidated during the course of the common struggle. It was therefore necessary to stress this common bond while fighting against caste inequalities. Here there is no question of replacing caste by class, refusing to recognize the caste distinctions and recognizing only the class distinctions. It is a question of addressing yourself to the concrete reality which combined the growing formation of an exploited class with the existence of caste distinctions – the formation process of the class. Those who did not understand this double process landed themselves into reformism.

## **National Unity and Caste**

The expansion of the national movement inevitably led to certain changes regarding the approach to caste and communal problems. In order to forge the minimum necessary unity behind it the national bourgeois leadership had to give up its former no-change outlook in regard to caste and inequality. The necessity of appealing to the peasantry and the rural masses composed of diverse castes of the lower order faced the bourgeois intelligentsia to take a more flexible outlook towards this question, and make it consistent with the democratic claims they were putting on behalf of the people. Equality of castes was preached without its abolition. Both the problems of caste in general and untouchability in particular had to be tackled by the national leadership. In consonance with its outlook of compromise with feudal land relations the bourgeois leadership adopted a policy, which though differing in words from the earlier policy, in content remained the same. Untouchability was declared a sin by Gandhi.

To remove untouchability is a penance that caste Hindus owe to Hinduism and to themselves. The purification required is not of 'untouchables' but of the so-called superior castes. There is no vice that is special to the untouchables, not even dirt and insanitation. It is our arrogance which blinds us, superior Hindus, to our own blemishes and which magnifies those of our downtrodden brethren whom we have suppressed and keep under suppression. And I would be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, not get it if they allow their noble religion to be disfigured by the retention of the taint of untouchability. As I love Hinduism dearer than life itself the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not deny God by denying to a fifth of our race, the right of association on an equal footing.[6]

This passionate protest leaves nothing unsaid. But the equally passionate desire to keep the landlords and Hindu religion intact reduces the protest to a formal declaration only. Unable to think of a basic liquidation of land relations the national bourgeoisie adopted social reforms as their watchword in the struggle for national unity. Education, social mixing, inter-caste dinners, statement in public meetings that 'We are Indians first and last' beyond this the class alliance of the bourgeois leaders did not permit the national movement to go. It will be seen here that the interests of the bourgeois class operated against the unleashing of a struggle against casteism. The outlook and compromise was strengthened because almost all leaders came from the better-off castes. How is it, that despite these limitations of this blatantly reactionary class policy the Congress succeeded in getting the masses and forcing the British to retreat? How is it that the vast numbers from the peasantry, consisting of diverse lower castes, joined the Congress? The appeal of nationalism and anti-imperialism attracted the peasant who found no difficulty in identifying his misery with foreign rule. This was the new class reality – the unity forged by imperialist exploitation – which the Congress fully utilized, and those who pitted themselves against it were inevitably routed. The grafting of modern imperialist exploitation on the old feudal relations led to the emergence of a sense of national unity in the midst of a hierarchical caste structure.

## **The Imperialists**



The British imperialists were not keeping quiet when the Congress leaders were making a bid to unite the diverse castes and communities under the national umbrella. The British countered the plan of the national bourgeoisie by offering separate electorates, reservation of jobs in government services, and educational facilities to the Muslims, backward classes and untouchables. Their aim was to raise hopes of advance in backward communities, to wean them away from the common struggle, split popular resistance and perpetuate separate caste and communal consciousness.

The prevalent caste inequality, the monstrous oppression of the untouchables at the hands of the Hindus, and the communal barriers between Hindus and Muslims enabled them to play this game.

But the imperialists could not play this game for ever. They themselves firmly stood by the existing land relations, and therefore were unable to bring about any real change in the status of the untouchables or other downtrodden castes. Ambedkar himself had to warn:

I am afraid that the British chose to advocate unfortunate conditions not with the object of removing them, but only because such a concern serves well as an excuse for retarding the political progress of India. So far as you are concerned, the British government has accepted the arrangement as it found them and has preserved them faithfully in the manner of the Chinese tailor who, when given an old coat as a pattern, produced with pride an exact replica, rents, patches and all ... Nobody can remove your grievances as well as you can and you cannot remove them unless you get political power in your hands. No share of this political power can come to you so long as the British government remains as it is. It is only in a Swaraj Constitution that you stand of getting any political power into your own hands without which you cannot bring salvation to your people'.[7]

It will be seen that three powerful class interests, the imperialists, the landlords and the bourgeois leadership, were acting as the defenders of the caste-system by protecting the landlords and pre-capitalist land relations.

### **Post-Independence Compromise**

The story continues after independence. The use of the administrative apparatus to offer a few concessions to the untouchables' and others to raise illusory hopes is now continued by the new ruling classes. The Constitution has declared equality of all before the law, irrespective of caste; Parliament has declared untouchability a penal offence. But the basic structure of land relation, overhauling of which would have given a blow to untouchability and caste system, has not been changed. The new rulers therefore resort to the same subterfuges which the British had resorted to – reservation of jobs, reservation of seats in colleges, reservation of higher posts in government services, etc. The land reforms Acts of the bourgeois landlord governments were intended only to adjust old relations to their immediate needs. Statutory landlordism was abolished but the basic structure and inequality has remained. And the Acts that were passed have also not been implemented with the surplus land legislation ending in a huge farce and

land concentration increasing after the Congress enactments. Once again the full weight of the administration and class rule supports the economic structure which keeps the castes and untouchability in being. The bourgeois landlord alliance which dominates the State is incapable of doing anything else, whatever may be its pretentious claims. The miserable results of the much advertised 20-Points Programme again prove the same truth. In this situation it is but inevitable that the masses themselves should be victims of customs, the toilers should get divided on caste-basis and forget their common bond which is being daily created. It only means that the formation of a new class of proletarians is being delayed by the retention of land system and therefore the hold of earlier hierarchical ideology continues.

The dominant class interests have after independence worked for the retention of caste inequality, untouchability and communal outlook.

### **The Anti-Caste Current**

What happened to the other current which launched a direct attack on the inequality of the caste system, in some places even before the advent of the Congress? Why did all these protest movements which courageously condemned the monstrous caste system produce such pitiful results? The non-Brahmin movement which at one time appeared to sweep certain parts of the country has hardly succeeded anywhere in giving quietus to the caste system. The great struggles of the untouchables notwithstanding the fact that they were led by such an outstanding leader like Ambedkar, have failed to produce the desired result of abolition of untouchability.

Atrocities against the untouchables continue. Neither these struggles nor the short cut of conversion to Buddhism have solved the problem. It is a great irony that the leaders of the neo-Buddhists have had to again demand that they should be treated as Scheduled Castes in the matter of reservation of seats, etc.

The so-called lower orders or castes of Hindu society actually form the majority; then why has not the majority succeeded in removing the stigma of caste-inequality and defeat the conspiracy of a few Brahmins or upper castes? The reality is that the poison of caste division has deeply infected its victims – the masses and the lower order who further are divided into several castes and sub-castes. Each recognizes the injustice done to it but is not ready to remedy the injustice done to others by its own superior status. In Maharashtra you find that though the non-Brahmin movement was supposed to include all the lower orders and castes, in reality the untouchables were left to themselves. At one time Ambedkar had to say that the Marathas were bigger oppressors of the untouchables than the Brahmins.

In fact the National bourgeois leadership of the Congress could get away with its compromising policy on caste and revivalist appeal just because it could go down well among the masses. The anti-caste leaders of the earlier days were totally different from the Congress leaders in this respect. It was inevitable that along with the rise of anti-imperialist national consciousness there should rise the democratic current attacking caste system and untouchability. The two were

parts of the same process – the process of formation of a new nation in the midst of an ocean of pre-capitalist relations.

In attacking the inequalities of the caste system and caste consciousness the anti-caste non-Brahmin leaders were attacking the ideology and the superstructure of the earlier feudal age. The ideology and consciousness had to be attacked and the superstructure had to be exposed and undermined, if society were to change. It can be nobody's argument- let the economic situation gradually change, let new economic realities and new classes emerge and the caste-system and caste-consciousness will automatically be eliminated.

A reactionary ideology if not fought becomes an obstacle in the way of democratic and social advance, in the way of changing the economic reality. It acts as a brake on change. In India caste domination and caste-consciousness was acting as a brake and preventing the revolutionary unity of the masses. The earlier anti-caste leaders therefore did a splendid job in launching an attack against the caste system. This was all the more so because their nationalist contemporaries, coming from the upper castes, representing another section of the. Bourgeois intelligentsia, had not yet freed themselves from upper caste consciousness, and some of them, like Tilak, were strong defenders of the system. Tilak, it must be remembered, not only opposed the age of Consent Bill but a proposal for compulsory primary education also. It has already been pointed out that at the basis of this defense and, later on, compromise with the caste system lay the intelligentsia's compromise and alliance with the feudal relations. It will not be amiss in this context to treat in brief the evolution of the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra to understand the limitations and results produced by it.

### **Jyotiba's Movement**

The origin of anti-caste movement in Maharashtra is associated with the giant figure of Jyotiba Phule: Jyotiba the great secular democrat. The friend of the poor and oppressed castes never wavered in his loyalty to the downtrodden in giving priority to their interests. Whether it was widow remarriage, education, liquor shops, caste exploitation, bureaucratic oppression or usury and land alienation, the economic loot of India, the building of a new market or decorations to greet a Viceroy at the expense of the people, or a dinner to a royal visitor, he defended the interests of the masses without prevarication and fears. His passion for the untouchables was unheard of and his sense of justice included every oppressed caste and he had absolutely no caste bias. He also demanded equal treatment for Muslims and Christians. No wonder the movement was originally named only as the satyashodhak movement – a movement against the untruth, injustice and hypocrisy of the Hindu social order dominated by Brahmin supremacy. He carried on a crusade against the Brahmins and their ideology.

A movement for equality, against caste-domination, was bound to have an anti-Brahmin edge at the time, the Brahmins being the supreme caste in the Hindu hierarchy. Certain other factors added to the situation. Jyotiba's generation could not forget the nightmare of Peshwa rule under Bajirao II. Keer, the biographer of Jyotiba, quotes Loakahitwadi on the conditions under Bajirao II as follows: "If the farmers failed to pay him the desired amount even during a drought or

famine, he poured over their children boiling oil from the frying pan; flogging was perfected on their stooping backs, and their heads were bent over suffocating smoke. Gunpowder was blown on their naval and ears". Loakahitwadi is again quoted as saying that when Bajirao was deposed by the British, women rejoiced and said: "We are happy that there is now no more the rule of Bajirao. The scoundrel has met the fate he deserved".

The second factor was that despite the loss of political power, the Brahmins continued to dominate Hindu society, treating the non-Brahmins as inferior beings. Finally, the new intelligentsia under the British came mostly from the advanced Brahmin community, occupying strategic positions as officials, professors, lower bureaucrats, writers and editors, creating the fear of the return of the old nightmare.

Though Jyotiba inevitably directed the fire of his righteous indignation at the Brahmins, his vision was not a narrow sectarian one, but consistently democratic. That is why he was the most uncompromising opponent of Brahminism. There could be no compromise between him and his opponents, for he did not seek a place for any particular community in the Hindu hierarchy. Jyotiba was part of the new intelligentsia. The intelligentsia and democratic trends were not arising only among the upper castes. Down below also there was ferment. Jyotiba represented the plebeian current – plebeian because it came straight from the lower order of Hindu society to which the peasant belonged. His political understanding was the same as that of the other sections of the intelligentsia.

Where he sharply differed from the other section was his uncompromising war on the Hindu social structure. His championship of untouchables, his ruthless attack on Brahmin domination, his exposure of the origin of castes, the Aryan doctrine, his demand for complete equality, his demand [of complete equality] for Muslims and Christians, his demand for education for the lowest, and his insistence on equality between men and women, constituted a thorough declaration of war on the old hierarchical order. This was a far more radical programme for equality and unity than the Lucknow Hindu-Muslim Pact or the Gandhian National Unity Programme. Although the originator of the programme did not realize it, it could be achieved only by a revolutionary liquidation of the feudal land relations in India and colonial rule. He considered that the main instruments of realizing the programme were the spread of education and enlightenment, the anti-caste consciousness and the fight against Brahmin domination and against the upper caste monopoly of advance under the British rule. It was not accidental that the later day non-Brahmin leaders lost their fervour for the programme, because further advance was possible only by attacking the land monopoly of the dominant castes and classes in the villages which included non-Brahmins also.

Ideologically Jyotiba's programme was a consistent application of democratic values to Hindu society. In other words, it was an uncompromising attack on the ancient and feudal superstructure based on feudal land relations. Here was the big contrast between the upper-caste intelligentsia and Jyotiba – the former allied itself with indigenous reaction and its feudal base and superstructure while attacking the British; the latter took an uncompromising

stand against the superstructure and demanded its demolition. In somewhat more favourable circumstances, this would have led the latter to challenge the basic agrarian relations.

### Opportunism in Anti-Caste Movement

With the passing away of Jyotiba the movement lost its all-embracing character which was highlighted by the fact that it was now headed by the Maharaja of Kolhapur, a feudal prince. His demand that he should be treated as a Kshatriya marked a new compromising stage of the movement. Jyotiba died in 1896; and within ten years of his passing away the new leader started fighting for Vedokta rights (to be recognized as Kshatriya) for the Marathas and in another two decades the movement had turned full circle — only the Brahmins were to be replaced by the Kshatriyas. A new opportunism to seek a favourable place for his own community, especially the Maratha community, in the Hindu hierarchy and later on in the struggle for office and patronage under the British rule, now overwhelmed the movement.[8]

With this change in outlook anti-Brahmin oratory became merely anti-Brahmin and did not represent anti-Brahminism. It represented more an effort to secure positions in the new society for the new intelligentsia rising from the lower order. This led to relying on the British for the anti-Brahmin struggle. In reality this led to the non-Brahmin leadership ranging itself against the first wave of anti-imperialist resistance of the 1920s. The result was that when huge numbers in cities and villages were boiling with indignation over the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, when the working class of Bombay was engaged in angry demonstrations against the visit of the Prince of Wales, the Maharaja of Kolhapur succeeded in drawing a large number of peasants to Poona to greet the British Prince of Wales, who was given the honor of laying the foundation stone of the Shivaji Memorial.

But, obviously, this divorcement from the anti-imperialist struggle could not last long. There was enough vitality in the movement to overcome this degradation, the more so that it was linked with the peasant mass; and the peasant mass of India after 1920 was a different one from that in the previous years. By 1930, when the new Congress movement began to reach the peasantry, the radical and fighting elements in the non-Brahmin movement overcame their separation from the national movement, joined it, and the movement merged in the Congress. But though this was far better than waiting on the British, or remaining in opposition to the national movement led by the Congress, this was certainly not a fitting sequel to the all-round rebellion which Jyotiba tried to unleash.

His programme of a total annihilation of the Hindu hierarchical system could have been carried out only by combining it with a programme for the destruction of feudal and semi-feudal relations and for political power in the hands of the democratic masses, in short, a programme for the completion of the democratic revolution. Neither the compromising leadership of the Congress, nor the new patriotic leadership of the non-Brahmin movement was capable of this, because both belonged to the same class. The result was a retreat on all fronts, helping the bourgeois leaders to gather the masses behind them. The hope of an independent revolutionary mobilization of the people raised by the pioneer disappeared. A movement which could have

independently mobilized the peasantry for a revolutionary onslaught went under the leadership of the bourgeoisie.

### **Landed Interests Again**

What were the reasons for the non-Brahmin movement merging with the Congress? There were two reasons. One, the leadership connected with the peasantry felt the anti-imperialist national urge. It had to give up its earlier isolation from the national struggle with the peasant masses participating in it. Secondly, the movement could have struck on independent path only if it had dared attack the basic pre-capitalist land relations, the source of peasant exploitation and caste inequality. Like the Congress intelligentsia the non-Brahmin intelligentsia was not prepared to do it. Here, the caste-distinction disappears. The intelligentsia nurtured among the non-Brahmins, the product of Western education and bourgeois conditions, gives exact weight, acts as a compromising bourgeois intelligentsia, gives up the pioneer's uncompromising principles, merges inside the Congress later on to head its ministries, suppresses the people and keeps the castes in existence. Once again we see that whatever may be one's anti-caste pretensions, the bourgeois class outlook with its compromise with land interests vetoes any radical reform or eliminations. Post-independence experience shows that the ministries composed of mostly of non-Brahmin intelligentsia with a sprinkling of untouchable leaders have kept the earlier Congress traditions and hardly done anything in the way of eradication of the caste system. The oppression, especially of the untouchables, is not less in Maharashtra and elsewhere.

When the anti-caste- movement gets divorced from agrarian revolution, when it further gets divorced from the anti-imperialist movement, what happens to it can be seen from the life of the great anti-caste warrior, Periyar E V Ramaswamy.

Ramaswamy was first connected with Congress and campaigned for independence. But he turned with revulsion against the Congress because of the caste prejudices of the leadership. Having lost his contact with the anti-imperialist struggle, he strayed far away from it, only momentarily coming to the fight against the agrarian relations and again relapsing into alliances and ways which were not to lead to the desired goal. In his review of Marguerite Ross Barnett's "The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India", N Ram sums up Periyar's quest for caste abolition as follows:

As a youth boldly violating caste based rules of social behavior; as a young man who sought and failed to find the personal and social answers he was looking for in sanyasihood and religion; as an ardent Congressman who campaigned wholeheartedly for independence and social reform and spent a personal fortune as part of his commitment to the freedom movement and to social reform; as a Congressman alienated by the high-caste prejudice and social obscurantism of the Congress upholding the banner of social reform and, following a visit to the Soviet Union, campaigning with short-lived enthusiasm in support of communism and organising conference against landlordism; as a leader of the Self-Respect League falling, tragically, into the trap of collaboration with the anti-national Justice Party; as the leader and publicist of a separatist movement demanding Dravida Nadu and campaigning against northern domination

and the imposition of Hindi; as the leader of a Justice Party completely discredited among the people; as the founder leader of the Dravida Kazhagam collaborating with British imperialism against the freedom movement; as a tragic figure railing against the transfer of power, characterizing Independence Day as a 'Day of Mourning' and demanding 'freedom from Brahmin Raj'; as a supporter of the newly formed Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and an enemy of the Congress Ministry headed by C Rajagopalachari; as a supporter of the 'Kamaraj Congress' seen as representing the interests of 'real Tamilians'; as a supporter of the DMK in power; as an idol-breaker who, towards the end of his long life, polemicised against and rejected the Tamil language and Tamil culture set up as idols; as a militant propagandist of social reform divorced from class analysis and from a scientific theory of economic and political change...[9]

Periyar did succeed in creating a great feeling against caste, and did raise his voice to overcome untouchability. But for obvious reasons the task could not be achieved. The latest evidence has been the cruel Villupuram riots in which several untouchables have been killed. It may be mentioned here that it was under the DMK government that the rapacious Thanjavoor landlords' agents set fire to Harijan agricultural workers' houses and burnt alive more than 70 women and children. Those charged with this gruesome mass murder were acquitted.

### **Ambedkar**

The monstrous atrocities against the untouchables under the present and the previous regimes reveal how the old tyrannies and injustices operated after three decades of freedom. In the earlier years Ambedkar, the most outstanding and tireless fighter on behalf of the untouchables exposed the upper caste hypocrisies, lambasted the Congress and later on demanded land and separate colonies for the untouchables. This of course could not have been achieved without an agrarian revolution. But the idea of land distribution to all the untouchables to escape serf dependence on other castes was a very correct idea.

It at the same time could have been achieved only through the common struggle of all the landless. Later on he asked his followers to embrace Buddhism to escape the injustices of the Hindu society. But the grim social reality based on iniquitous land relations did not change because of change over to Buddhism. The quest for love and samata has not succeeded as recent atrocities have shown. The tragedy of the situation has been that the intelligentsia springing from the most oppressed communities also could not ideologically look beyond formal declaration of equality, more jobs, reservation of seats, education facilities, etc. Smashing the present socio-economic system was not part of its consciousness.

The fight against land relations which also meant common fight along with others, escaped them. The intelligentsia from these communities sooner or later accepted the framework of bourgeois democracy and satisfied itself with a general declaration of democratic rights without touching the present property relations in land and industry. No one directed more concentrated fire against the Congress leaders and their hypocrisy than Ambedkar. And yet he was one of the main architects of the Indian Constitution hailed by the Congress till recently as the last word in

democracy, and under which the untouchables' houses are burnt, their houses are pillaged, their wives raped and they are murdered. No wonder Ambedkar felt himself cheated.

### **The Working Class**

The rise of the working class and trade union movement and the Communist propaganda against caste and communalism had minimal effect under the circumstances. The kisan movement headed by the Communists has been weak and is weak today compared with the requirements of an agrarian revolution. The basis for smashing caste distinctions, for developing caste equality can arise only in the course of widest and intense struggles against the common oppressor. Such unity was achieved on a wide scale during the armed Telangana struggle wherein the Harijan agricultural workers and caste peasants fought together. The Communist insistence on agrarian revolution is at the same time directed to storm the basis and fortress of casteism. The working class which was still largely connected with land could not completely act as a modern class. It has been in the stage of formation. Nevertheless it showed great capacity to organize itself as a class in its daily struggles with all castes and communities, participating in strike. The class instinct has repeatedly foiled attempts to organize trade unions on caste or communal lines. The Communist propaganda both against caste and communalism since the earlier years has helped in this class solidarity.

### **Reformist Influence**

Nonetheless caste and communal distinctions remain and are capable of being exploited for reactionary purposes. Apart from this the slow progress in cities and among the workers has other reasons. A substantial, even a major part of the working class has been under the ideological influence of national bourgeoisie and their supporters. In carrying out strikes and struggles they take particular care to conceal the class relations in society, the class character of the State and the government and reduce the joint struggles to sheer economism. This together with total absence of all reference to the conditions of the peasants and the downtrodden castes obstructs the release of the working class from caste influence. However it has to be admitted that there has been certain neglect in the ideological struggles against caste and communalism and the CPI (M) for its part has decided in its recent Plenum to resume a widespread struggle against feudal and semi-feudal ideologies. The common consciousness generated through the economic struggle cannot be pushed forward without such struggle and direct intervention of the movement on caste oppression. And the ideological struggle is not only to be linked with the necessity of changing the present social order in toto including the land relations; it cannot be successful unless the socio-economic role of Hindu religion, and religion in general, is properly put before the working class. The question of eliminating the caste system can no longer be presented as a question of Hindu social reform and in isolation from the main struggle of our times – the struggle for agrarian revolution, the struggle for ending the domination of monopolies and imperialist exploitation, the struggle for a state of People's Democracy leading to socialism. All variants which sought to fight the anti-caste struggle in isolation from the main class struggles of our times have failed and produced pitiful results. It has been again proved that the anti-caste struggle cannot be fought in isolation, that it must be fought as part of the



contemporary democratic and class struggle. The caste inequality and injustice have become an integral part of all modern class injustices. To remove them requires the common struggle of all the exploited strata to whichever caste they belong.

Initially this may appear difficult because the untouchable who is supposed to join hands with the non-untouchable poor peasant often faces him as an attacker on behalf of the landlord or his caste. Herein comes the vital role of the kisan movement which must put together the untouchable, the agricultural worker, the poor peasant against the common exploiters, the landlords, etc. The caste barriers have to be broken in the course of the struggle aided by anti-caste propaganda and education of the peasantry.

### **New Situation**

The three decades of independence and Congress rule have created a new situation which openly announces the intensification of class struggle in the countryside which the landlords and their henchmen, and the bourgeois landlord government seek to convert into struggle between the castes.

The three decades of independence have, under the capitalist path, seen an extreme deepening of poverty and unemployment in rural and urban areas alike. Irrespective of their caste-status millions are being pauperized while land and capital gets concentrated in a few hands. After 30 years of Congress land reforms and mass evictions there are huge sections of landless besides the untouchables. "According to Reserve Bank Data the concentration ratio of assets (mainly agricultural land) owned by rural households was 0.65 in 1960-61 and increased to 0.66 in 1971-72.

The poorest 10 per cent of the rural households owned only 0.1 per cent and the richest 10 per cent owned more than half of total assets in 1971-72 as well as in 1961-62".[10] This concentration has meant mass evictions of peasants; of all castes apart from the loss of land to the tribals and untouchables wherever they had land.

The process of robbing the small people of their means of production which is the hallmark of capitalist path is again throwing thousands on the streets. "Less than full employment of the rural labour force is attributable... to the progressive displacement of craftsmen and artisans by competitive modern industry. Urban unemployment, likewise, concerns not only workers laid off by declining industries, new entrants to the labour force and migrant workers from the surrounding rural areas, but a whole mass of self-employed persons and casual workers in the 'informal sector' eking out a precarious livelihood... Attempts have been made to measure the extent of poverty in India, and depending on the terms used, the 40-60 per cent of the population is below the minimum acceptable standard. According to recent estimates using norms of caloric consumption, the percentage of population below the poverty line in 1977-78 may be projected at 48 per cent in rural areas and 41 per cent in urban areas. The total number of the poor, so defined would be about 290 million." [11]

In reality the total number of poor is much above the estimated figure, as the estimate is based on an arbitrary definition of poverty line. And finally unemployment in cities and rural areas has already reached staggering dimensions.

The registered unemployment in cities has exceeded 10 million while the total unemployment is estimated to have reached more than 40 million. (Official figures try to underplay the extent of unemployment, and the Planning document estimates it as 4 million of wholly unemployed persons in 1973. Taking into consideration those who find casual employment it estimates the figure at 18.6 million.)

The concentration of land and capital i.e. taking place at one end; the concentration of economic poverty and unemployment is taking place at another end. This is the class reality that has developed rapidly during the last three decades.

Notwithstanding the existence of social discrimination etc the problem of castes and sub-castes of untouchable and toilers is now inextricably connected with the problem of general landlessness and joblessness — the problem of growing expropriation of all sections under the capitalist path. This reality could not be understood in the earlier years. It is now becoming too palpable to be ignored.

The redistribution of land, the break-up of the land monopoly of the landlords most of them, from the upper castes is the common need of all landless and jobless.

### **Lagging Consciousness**

The consciousness of the sufferers is however lagging behind this reality. Instead of a common struggle it appears as if the caste-struggles are reaching a new crescendo, castes appear to be pitted against each other as never before, and civil strife seems to be the order of the day. Witness the agitations leading to sabotage, burning of vehicles, uprooting of railway lines following reservation of jobs for backward class in Bihar and UP. These protests from certain upper castes reached their climax during the Samastipur election when the bureaucracy almost exclusively recruited from the upper caste not only helped the Congress (I) candidate (upper caste) but threatened to arrest a minister of the Janata government.

Official policies are definitely contributing towards diverting the common struggle into caste conflicts – the bourgeois landlord way of serving its class rule. The competition for land, for job, for official concessions, for loans and educational opportunities has immensely intensified leading to easy diversion into casteist channels. The problems of backward castes, of reservation of jobs for untouchables and tribals, of reservation of promotions and eliminating the backlog in promotions, are leading to inner conflicts among the toilers, enabling the vested interests to split their unity as an oppressed class. Tied to the landed and monopolist interests the bourgeois-landlord government seeks to divert the challenge of unemployment and poverty by offering petty measures of relief to sections of downtrodden castes- reservation of jobs in government services, seats in colleges, facilities for education talk of reservation of promotion.

In the very nature of things these palliatives will neither solve the problem of poverty and unemployment, nor change the condition of untouchables and other downtrodden castes. They will certainly offer some relief, to individuals from these communities; enhance their confidence in their advance, but not change their status. For the ruling classes these concessions play an important role. In the first place in the general competition for jobs etc, they pit one section of toilers against another. Secondly they create an impression among some sections that government is their real friend and they should confine the struggle within the framework of the bourgeois system. Thus a basic challenge to the present socio-economic system from the most downtrodden sections is prevented.

### **Fight the Socio-Economic System**

It is obvious that in the present situation when untouchables and certain other sections are openly discriminated against, the democratic and working class movement cannot object to reservations of jobs and other concessions. They have to be supported to cement the unity of the toilers. At the same time all sections of toilers from all castes have to be educated that these palliatives do not solve a single problem; they neither alleviate the conditions of the downtrodden sections nor solve their job problem. They only serve to divert attention from the main enemy – the landlord and monopolists. The common class struggle in the present favourable situation can be waged only if the working class, the democratic movement and the kisan sahblas carry on an incessant ideological propaganda against caste domination and actively intervene on the question of caste oppression.

The class struggle is already unleashing itself in the rural areas. A large number of the attacks on untouchables originate because they refuse to work as former serfs, want to work as modern labourers on settled conditions about their work. The mobility of labour, higher wages, freedom to move and cultivate the land – these form the content of a number of disputes leading to atrocities against the untouchables.

They reveal the real economic basis behind untouchability. These struggles constitute an integral part of the peasants struggle and have to be fought unitedly.

The advanced trade union movement will have to discharge its responsibility in overcoming its weakness on this question. It is being faced with a new problem regarding promotions and arrears of promotion. And it must solve it keeping the spirit of class solidarity intact.

The new situation calls for giving up the tradition of fighting caste battles in isolation from other toilers. It was inevitable that in the earlier years the movement of the downtrodden castes should be conducted on the basis of caste vs caste. It was all the more inevitable in the case of the untouchables who were denied human existence. This tradition has led to an exclusiveness which refuses to consider that there are toiling sections in the other castes who have to be detached from their caste leadership and to be brought face to face with the common oppressor. The vested and opportunist interests in some downtrodden castes seek to keep their followers

away from the common struggle so that they can continue to have their hold on them. All this must change; and without lowering the banner against caste oppression, every effort should be made by them to join the common struggle for democracy and social advance. For it has to be realized that the present socio-economic system is based on property relations which sustain both caste and class oppression. It is sheer deception to think of abolishing untouchability or caste with the landlords and monopolists dominating the economy and bourgeois landlord government in power. The caste problem is inevitably merged with the problem of ending the rule of bourgeois landlord class and moving forward to socialism.

#### Notes

[1] Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India", New York Daily Tribune, \*June 1883.

[2] R Palme Dutt, "India Today", Manisha, Calcutta, 1970, p 327.

[3] M K Gandhi, Young India, October 1921.

[4] 'Colonial Theses', Sixth Congress of the Communist International, 1928

[5] Community Party of India (Marxist), 'Memorandum on National Integration', 1968

[6] M K Gandhi "The Story of My Experiments with Truth"

[7] B R Ambedkar, 'Address to All India Depressed Classes Congress', 1930

[8] See Gail Omvedt, "Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India", Bombay, 1976

[9] N Ram, 'Pre-History and History of the DMK', Social Scientist, December 1977

[10] Draft Five-Year Plan, - 1978-83, p 11.

[11] Ibid, p2-3