

Class Conflict and Inequalities in India – An Overview

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study **class conflict** and their economic basis and conduct diagnosis **inequalities** brought about by that continued struggle. The social-class conflict can be direct, as in a dispute between labour and management such as an employer's industrial lockout of their employees in effort to weaken the bargaining power of the corresponding trade union; or indirect such as a workers' slowdown of production in protest of unfair labor practices like low wages and poor workplace conditions. In the political and economic philosophies of Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin, class struggle is a central tenet and a practical means for effecting radical social and political changes for the social majority.

The Indian capitalist class is today, after more than five decades of post independence, a class which has expanded and undergone some important changes. At the time of independence itself, there was a big bourgeoisie, which dominated this class as a whole. But the outlook of this big bourgeoisie has undergone a significant change. It was the big bourgeoisie which spelt out the type of capitalist development that was undertaken in India from the 1950s: a) a class which understood the international situation and its own base in Indian society. It needed the Indian State to accumulate capital and develop capitalism. The State capitalism, which the Indian ruling classes sponsored, played a two-fold role. It enabled the development of capitalism within a constrained framework. A model of capitalist development without a thoroughgoing agrarian revolution, which necessitated a compromise with landlordism and the development of agrarian capitalism from above relying on landlords and the rich peasants. (b) The subordinate position of the Indian bourgeoisie vis a vis world capitalism required the organic link with foreign finance capital and reliance on this imperialist capital to advance the path of capitalist development. (c) Such a capitalist development could have a relative degree of autonomy in a situation where there was the existence of the Soviet Union and a socialist bloc; the bourgeois-landlord classes in India could utilise the conflicts between the two blocs and manoeuvre to strengthen its own position to a limited extent. Fifty years of capitalist development, five decades of social and economic disparities and distortions in society can all be fought only if there is a powerful movement of the workers, poor peasants and the agricultural labour. They will constitute the core of a left and democratic alternative which is an interim stage towards the people's democratic front. This class struggle will develop and intensify when the workers and agricultural labour and the poor peasants are organised and mobilised to fight for their rights.

Key words: Class Conflict, Inequalities, India, labour, capitalism

Introduction

An analysis of the class conflict in the present-day Indian society within the framework of Marxian analysis modified in the light of the actual path and form in which development of capital has occurred since Marx wrote. Clearly, the development of capitalism has not proceeded quite along the lines Marx had expected. Have focused attention on a few major departures which I believe affect fundamentally certain crucial Marxian conclusions. The big bourgeoisie was the pivot around which both the alliance with landlordism and the collaboration with imperialist capital could take place for the specific type of capitalist development that was undertaken. A major change has come about in the attitude of the big bourgeoisie. The big bourgeoisie is no more an advocate of State capitalism. It is no more as dependent on the State as before for capital accumulation and investment. Four decades of capitalist development under the old regime (till the eighties) has enabled the big bourgeoisie to kick off the crutches of State-sponsored capitalism and embark on the new path of liberalisation. This path has also come about in a new world conjuncture -- The neo-liberal offensive which built up momentum in the 1980s and which has now established itself triumphantly worldwide with the dismantling of the Soviet Union.

The big bourgeoisie remains the key target for the people's democratic revolution. The struggle against the big bourgeoisie has to be waged in these new conditions. It is necessary to recognise the strength and the potentialities of the enemy while exploiting its weaknesses and contradictions. As in the case of all big bourgeoisie, in India too, the growth of the big bourgeoisie has meant a steady concentration of assets and the means of production in the hands of this narrow strata. From the beginning, the big bourgeoisie has been dominated by family owned businesses. Fifty years after independence this remains so. New families and companies have entered the ranks of the big bourgeoisie. But the concentration of assets and wealth continues. The richest 100 capitalists have a personal wealth of Rs. 50 thousand crore. This is only the wealth accruing from shares held in companies. The development of the productive forces have not resulted in either an equitable distribution of assets or an equitable distribution of incomes.

A problem which has arisen in the post-liberalisation era has strategic implications. A section of the regional bourgeoisie which earlier had no durable links with foreign capital and was therefore considered as part of the non-big bourgeoisie which had its conflicts and contradictions with the big bourgeoisie is today in the opposite camp. The Chandrababu Naidu's and others of his ilk representing the regional bourgeois-landlord classes, are today enthusiastic advocates of collaboration with foreign capital and privatisation. Strategically the shift of the bourgeois-landlord classes towards collaborating with imperialism does pose difficulties in putting up resistance and rallying the classes whose vital interests are affected. The big bourgeoisie has some regional allies. All these features have to be integrated into our class analysis while working out the strategy to counter and fight back the ruling classes.

The big bourgeoisie cannot and will not be anything but the harbinger of a counter-revolution. The landlords, except for the category of small landlords who do not mainly live off the surplus extracted from the agricultural workers, will remain united with the big bourgeoisie in opposing any worker-peasant led movement. It will be building castles of sand to rely on the rich peasants and the non-big bourgeoisie to forge a powerful front against imperialism, or, the big bourgeoisie. There will be occasions on which these classes can be mobilised and sections of them will make the cross over to the democratic side. But this is something which will not happen without the core of the strategy of an Indian revolution being addressed.

The big bourgeoisie dominated capitalist development has some specific features, which must be taken into account while working out the strategy of a democratic revolution. Firstly, the development of capitalism in agriculture has assumed certain specific forms and led to changes in the relations of production. Increasingly capitalism is the mode of production in agriculture. Landlord is a term, which defines more than before, capitalist landlord. There is ofcourse the phenomenon of semi-feudal landlordism but that also is in a period of transition. The development of capitalism has led to differentiation among the peasantry which requires a clear understanding for developing the agrarian movement. The rich peasants are a motive force for the development of the new type of capitalist relations. They are part of the developing agrarian bourgeoisie which primarily produces through hired labour. It has an antagonistic contradiction with agricultural workers and it is opposed to any further measures for land reforms and re-distribution of land. While increasingly sections of the rich peasants identify with the capitalist landlords, at the same time, they hold powerful influence among other sections of the peasantry. The middle and small peasants are bound with the rich peasants through caste and social and cultural ties.

At the same time, the development of capitalism in agriculture has produced a rural proletariat which is expanding. If the agricultural workers, poor peasants and the small artisans are put together, they constitute no less than 70 per cent of the rural work force. Any strategic perspective for an agrarian revolution has to rely on this semi-proletarian mass of the peasantry and the agricultural workers if we are to develop a powerful movement against the bourgeois-landlord order.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **class conflict in India**, the class struggle and class warfare, is the political tension and economic antagonism that exists in society consequent to socio-economic competition among the social classes or between rich and poor.

Nature of Class Conflict in Indian Society

In the rural areas, increasingly, there is a nexus of the rural rich, the capitalist landlord, the contractor, the real estate owners and big traders who constitute a powerful bloc. They ruthlessly put down any signs of revolt by the rural poor against the established order. In social terms, this bloc is heterogeneous and varies from region to region in terms of caste and social composition. In some regions the old upper-caste landlords hold sway over this rural rich combine while in others the upper strata of the landed castes among the OBCs have acquired the role of the dominant strata.

Any Marxist analysis of the concrete conditions will recognise that capitalist development in agriculture is widespread, prevalent and becoming predominant. While it is essential for concrete study to work out specific slogans in different parts of the country and regions, a fact often blurred and indistinct is that capitalist relations of production exist in all parts of the country. It is true that there are three broad categories of regions. The areas where capitalist relations have advanced like in Punjab, Haryana, West UP, parts of Maharashtra, Andhra etc. Then there are the regions where capitalist relations are mixed up with semi-feudal forms. Thirdly, there are the Left-led states where land reform laws have been implemented leading to reduction in concentration of land ownership. Even in the states where land reforms have been substantially implemented under the existing laws, the essence of the capitalist relations of production continue to develop. A tenant who has benefitted from land reforms through abolition of intermediaries in a state like Kerala or the tenants (bargadars) who have benefitted from security of tenure in West Bengal are subject to the same laws of capitalist development as their counterparts in other states and regions. Disregarding the formal tenurial and property forms, rich peasants, capitalist farmers and landlords emerge. Middle peasants, given the vast number of smallholdings and fragmentation of land, continue as a substantial strata in the agrarian sector. But all valid statistics and data show the growing number of landless and near landless. This is the poor peasant and agricultural worker masses which will be the main base for the agrarian movement even in a situation where the Left has been able to render all sections of the peasantry substantial benefits within the existing bourgeois-landlord system. The development of an agrarian capitalist class in West Bengal and Kerala is part of the all India phenomenon in agriculture and there can be no exceptionalism to this basic development.

The recent spurt of attacks on the rural bases of the CPI(M) in West Bengal are targeted at the rural poor and is an attempt by the agrarian new capitalist class and bested interests, both old and new to counter and roll back the gains made by the poor peasants and agricultural workers. With capitalist development, the rural proletariat, in the main the agricultural workers, have to be organised as a strong and independent force to counter this offensive of the rural rich nexus. While dealing with the ruling classes, Marxism does not look at only the economic role of the exploiting classes. It analyses the social role played by that class in particular. In the case of India a distinct feature of the class structure is the overlaying of the caste structure and consciousness. In the early days of the communist movement, there was optimism that capitalist development would shatter some of the antiquated caste relations. While it is true that the inter-penetration of caste and class has proceeded with the development

of capitalism, it would be highly simplistic to view class categories without its caste dimensions. As EMS Namboodiripad pointed out both the bourgeoisie and the working class have the imprint of caste consciousness on them. "As a matter of fact, the very growth of capitalism, the rise of the bourgeois and proletarian classes, was and is coloured by the persistence of the old varna-caste society. Neither of the two major classes of the emerging capitalist society, the bourgeois and the proletariat, could shake-off the pre-capitalist modes of thinking and culture."

Which class is this?

The modern Indian bourgeoisie which saw its rise in the early part of the 20th century has in the past hundred years been unable to shed its caste moorings. The development of capitalism and modern bourgeois practices do not exclude caste. In fact caste has reinvented itself in social and political terms and is very much part of the consciousness of all the classes which exist in India today.

In agrarian relations, the position of the dalits, the scheduled castes is distinctive as wage labourer and as unfree labour. No other caste category in India faces the type of exploitation which is visited upon those outside the varna system. The abolition of the caste system and all forms of caste oppression has to be a fundamental goal of the democratic revolution. It is not enough to say that the abolition of landlordism and feudal relations will ensure the end of the caste system. Life and experience in bourgeois-landlord India confirm that untouchability does not only exist but is widespread. Forms of untouchability and exclusion, direct or disguised, is still practiced by the bulk of those who belong to the chaturvarna system. The communist movement which does not engage in a direct fight against this type of oppression will not be able to rally the truly proletarian masses in the rural areas. As the CPI(M)'s Draft Updated Programme states: "The problem of caste oppression and discrimination has a long history and is deeply rooted in the pre-capitalist social system. The society under capitalist development has compromised with the existing caste system. The Indian bourgeoisie itself fosters caste prejudices. Working class unity presupposes unity against the caste system and the oppression of dalits, since the vast majority of the dalit population are part of the labouring classes. To fight for abolition of the caste system is an important part of the democratic revolution. The fight against caste oppression is interlinked with the struggle against class exploitation." (para 5.11, draft of the updated programme)

It is imperative that all forms of caste oppression direct or otherwise be taken up as an instruments of oppression to be fought and rolled back in the course of building the people's democratic front.

As for the working class, which is the dialectical opposite of the other modern class, the bourgeoisie, in Indian conditions, caste consciousness remains embedded within the class consciousness. Unless there is a powerful and effective campaign against the caste system as such and it is integral to the main agenda of the working class movement, it will not be possible to counter the growing caste appeal and divisiveness which will affect the unity of the working class.

The fight against untouchability, the social and economic oppression of a vast mass of the downtrodden, requires addressing the demands of the dalits as a special category. This does not mean accepting the petty bourgeois-driven ideas of caste exclusiveness and identity politics which is being embraced by a number of vocal and militant dalit sections. As B.T. Ranadive pointed out: "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" (Caste & Property Relations, p23). It is basically a class approach which recognises the need for forging the unity of all oppressed sections. It is an expression of what Lenin stated as the basic duty of the working class, championing the fight against all oppressions which in India includes the most heinous type of oppression of the scheduled castes.

Principal classes in the present-day Indian society

<i>Workers (in million)</i>		
1. Pre-capitalist class:		
Cultivators	78.2	
Agricultural labourers	47.5	
Household industry	6.3	
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	132.0	73.5%
2. Independent workers in capitalist society		
	16.0	8.9%
3. Employers		
	2.2	1.2%
4. White-collar employees		
	12.2	6.8%
5. Blue-collar workers		
	17.3	9.6%

In Indian society, in numerical terms, the petty bourgeoisie constitutes a vast section. In strict Marxist terms, there is not only an urban petty bourgeoisie, but a vast mass of the small propertied class in the rural areas, are also part of the petty bourgeoisie. As such they are an important component of the democratic revolution. What is called the middle classes in popular parlance are active and vocal players in the Indian political spectrum today. One of the major problems confronting the communist movement are the changes, which have come about in what are called the middle class. In a period when State capitalism was the norm, the Indian middle class subscribed to the Nehruvian path. A path which opened up possibilities for this class to develop, get jobs and for its intellectual to play a role in the development of independent India. The middle classes are a heterogeneous lot. It includes managerial and administrative personnel, there is the technical and scientific personnel, there are shopkeepers, school teachers, salaried employees and so on. The shift in the path of development, the change in the outlook of the ruling class and the consequent path of liberalisation, have brought about some significant changes. Upto the seventies, substantial sections of the middle classes were attracted towards a Left or Left-of-centre ideology. As an intermediate class it was able to adopt this position without getting into any major conflict with the ruling class. But the development of capitalism and the qualitative change, which has come about, has brought differentiation within the middle class/petty bourgeoisie. As far as the urban middle classes are concerned, an upper strata which constitutes a minority has benefitted from the era of liberalisation. Not only has there been an increase in their incomes, especially if they are working for the islands of high income generating sectors, but also the expanded opportunities for their sons and daughters abroad have enabled them

to acquire assets which enables them to enter the portals of the bourgeoisie and adopt their class outlook. This strata has irrevocably turned away from any social project which includes the rural and urban poor.

Another substantial strata of the middle class has illusions about liberalisation. This is more of an ideological condition which can be countered and these sections won over. They are not pro-imperialist and their patriotic instincts will bring them into conflict with the pro-imperialist direction taken by the ruling classes. The bulk of the middle classes are those who fall victim to the depredations of the liberalised free market economy and the highly unequal segmentation of wealth and assets implied in this process. These are the sections who must be linked up to the workers and peasants and popular democratic movements.

At present, (given the weakness of the Left and democratic forces) sections of the middle classes have become susceptible to the path of an authoritarian Hindutva. The new values of the market of self interest and self gratification hold an appeal which transcends their material conditions and blunts their democratic instincts. Unlike the middle classes in the advanced capitalist societies, the Indian middle class are imbued with religiosity. These are conditions ripe for the growth of Hindutva type of authoritarianism where both democracy and secularism will be casualties.

The reversal of this trend and the link up of the petty bourgeoisie with the working people can be accomplished only through a relentless ideological battle. It cannot be accomplished by harping back to the old Nehruvian/Gandhian framework. The big challenge before the Left is to construct a radical vision which can attract the middle class, except for the upper strata, towards a restructuring of Indian society in political, economic and cultural terms. This cannot be fully accomplished without strengthening the movement of the basic classes. It is only when the class based movements of the workers and peasants develop that the petty bourgeoisie can be won over in larger numbers. But in the interregnum, it is important to vigorously work among the middle classes to tap their latent anti-imperialism and mobilise their democratic instincts against the ravages of crony capitalism and feudal ideologies.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism of a creeping variety has already set in. As we meet in Calcutta today the higher judiciary is discussing various measures to restrain and restrict the right of association and protest through mass demonstrations and rallies. Already there is a Supreme Court endorsement of the prohibition of bandhs. The Kerala High Court has now decreed that hartals are also illegal and unconstitutional. The Marxists had been the first to warn that liberalisation will have its repercussions on the democratic system. The priorities of big capital, both Indian and foreign are hostile to the democratic aspirations of citizens and the arena of sovereignty exercised by the Indian nation State. Marxist analysis points to the intensification of the contradictions between the people

and the bourgeois-landlord system which is increasingly collaborating with imperialism. Without losing sight of the present correlation of forces in the world, our own application of Marxism to Indian conditions teaches us to take up the central task of organising the working class to lead the mass of the poor peasantry and agricultural workers to develop the basis of an alternative class front.

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