



Social Divisions among the Indian Labouring Masses

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Abstract

Dalits and women in India are denied even minimum representation in policy making and accessing national resources. Highly under-represented in state machinery, media, and all higher wage employments, they are highly over-represented in low wage, highly labour intensive, and hazardous jobs. For them, facing exploitation and discrimination, not only by the state and the employers but also by their fellow workers, is a constant reality. The social, cultural, economic, and political systems in India are built to operate in such a way as to produce and reproduce the social divisions continuously and aggravate the problems of divisions among the labourers. The labour movements, which are supposed to oppose this unjust system, have generally ignored the issue of representation of dalits and women as they operate as part and parcel of the same social system that produces and reproduces ascriptive divisiveness.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overture: Capitalism and Social Exclusion

Growing economic inequalities of capitalism and asymmetrical relationships are underpinned by ascriptive hierarchies in terms of class at birth, caste at birth, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, residence, and the like, is a topical concern of progressive social scientists (Chakrabarty et al., 2014; Robinson, Undated). As Jodhka (2015) has eminently elaborated, the development of capitalist economy and society by the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation, modernisation of mental frames and social institutions and democratisation of political systems have not made the caste system redundant and meaningless for India. Indian society has not really seen any substantive shift away from a closed system of ascriptive hierarchy by caste to an open system of social stratification based on individual achievement by merit and hard work.

The social system based on caste divisions grew out of the hereditary division of labour on which the Indian pre-capitalist mode of production was based. The caste system was systematically designed to ensure the required supply of various skills of labour in each and every village/locality by way of restriction of movements from one caste to another and thereby also from one skill to another. The social system barred any mixing between castes by declaring inter-caste marriages as a punishable sin. It also provided a comparatively greater stability to the Indian feudal system by establishing a permanent structure of social hierarchies and concentration of power with well-defined division of labour in terms of the permanent status of ruling and warrior castes, intellectual castes and labouring castes. The social and customary practices were established in a manner that also reduced the chances of revolts against the feudal system by reducing the chances of any greater unity among people, particularly the labouring masses divided economically and socially. The place of women in this social system was also permanently defined. On many counts, dalits and women were put on the same pedestal, particularly in terms of restrictions on intellectual work, reading or reciting or even hearing the recitation of religious texts. The Manu

Smriti clearly defines the boundaries of social life for women: a girl, a young woman, or even an aged one should not do anything independently, even in her own house. In childhood, a female must be subject to the control of her father, in youth to the control of her husband, and in widowhood to her sons. A woman must never be independent. She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would only make both her own and her husband's families contemptible.

With no internal stimulus for change, this social system of patriarchy and ascriptive divides was so strongly established that it changed the whole mindset of the people to take it as if it was natural, or chosen by God. Therefore, to enforce these divisive practices, generally there was no need for any law or legal enforcement machinery. Even the people who changed their religion and joined Islam or Christianity could not escape from the caste structure of society. Caste hierarchies appeared and got strengthened in the non-Hindu religions as well in India.

In the first decade of the post-colonial period, after a democratic Constitution came into force in 1952 and even after legislations for Jamindari abolition came into force in 1951 the scenario remained the same without any change for the better. Radical land reforms are one of the basic requirements for building a comparatively equitable, democratic, and sustainable (capitalist) development, which also could have led to the annihilation of caste. But for two reasons the capitalist forces in India did not opt for it: (a) speedy capitalist accumulation by accelerating the growth of big and rich farmers; and (b) fear that radical land reforms may increase the political power of the leftist forces in the country.

The characteristic feature of Indian capitalism is the persistence of un-freedom of labour from feudal obligations in terms of caste discrimination and from means of production in terms of huge poverty-ridden self-employed workers in agriculture and other traditional occupations.

Capitalist forces in India, unlike that in England, did not require to create a class of people with no means of production by large scale dispossessions of peasantry. Owing to traditional land disentanglement of dalits, this class was already there and the

capitalist forces only needed to free them by transforming the feudal system of land relations and feudal mode of production into capitalist system of land relations and capitalist mode of production. Therefore, this freedom created a persistence of social un-freedom wherein dalits as a community were made the labouring caste on a permanent basis with no chances of any upward mobility.

De-industrialisation in colonial India led to the large-scale destruction of craft industries, and most of the traditional craftsmen were thrown into the ranks of labour reserves that typically got located in agriculture. Therefore, right from the onset of post-colonial capitalist development, India faced problems: on one hand, agriculture (with highly unequal ownership structure) was overloaded with huge poverty-ridden population with small land holdings and was unable to provide an effective market for industrial goods, thereby hindering the growth of industries; and on the other hand, the industrial development was unable to absorb the surplus population of agriculture and thereby hindered the growth of agriculture. Economic development in post-independent India could never break this vicious circle. As such, even if small holdings were not rewarding and actually uneconomical, lack of opportunities for alternative decent livelihoods compelled the peasants to persist with their small farms rather than selling them. Moreover, differentiation of peasantry further increased the number of small farms.

To maintain a sustained downward pressure on wages, capital as a rule requires maintaining a huge reserve army of labour. The dialectic of caste readily gave way to this reserve army of the unemployed and under-employed labour, which is mainly reproduced non-capitalistically either by the state through social security or by maintaining low wage insecure employment and self-employment in the so-called informal sector. In developed countries this reserve army is largely maintained by the state through social security. In India and in many Asian countries, the huge mass of poor self-employed workers and insecure low wage workers in the informal sector serves as the reserve army of labour.

Creating a reserve army of labour is one of the strategies to enforce division between labourers and intensify competition amongst

them for jobs. Emergence of the united struggle of workers against capital becomes difficult due to various sectional/sectoral divisions between workers. A huge propaganda and cultural machinery of capitalism systematically works for promoting individualism and competition among workers. In this context, caste divisions of Indian society provide immense opportunities for capital to enforce wider divisions and intense competition amid the labourers. It clearly follows that the caste divisions in Indian society are part of the consolidating Indian capitalist system and for all practical purposes they cannot be looked at as merely remnants of the past ancient and feudal social systems.

2. Continuity and Change in Social Exclusion

Today, in the aftermath of pronounced progress of capitalist development in independent India, only an insignificant proportion of workers follow their hereditary caste occupations. However, in the social-cultural system, the caste system remains largely unchanged, and the same holds good for the economic status of different castes. Dalits and other backward castes are still the poorest and the upper caste Hindus still the richest. Wage labour force comprises a significant proportion of all castes of the society, but comparatively higher proportions of dalits and other backward castes contribute more to the wage labour force. These dalits and other backward castes form a significant majority in insecure, hazardous, low wage informal sector employment, and they are highly under-represented in comparatively high wage, secure and safe formal sector employment. Similar is the condition of women. The upper caste status still provides a better socio-economic opportunity and it still breeds a mentality to look down upon dalits. And lower caste status still creates strong hurdles in getting better jobs and better social and economic status.

The customary regulatory framework of the caste system is formally replaced by an egalitarian legal framework. Constitutionally, dalits have equal rights in all spheres of life; they can own land and other resources, choose their occupation, get education to ensure their upward mobility so on and so forth. Reservation policy has ensured opportunities for education and acquiring skills and knowledge for upward mobility and also

guarantee opportunities for employment in different government sectors and proper representation at various levels of policy making. It is true that these policies have brought about some change and played an important role in hitting hard and damaging the walls of the caste system. But alas, they have not smashed the walls. Largely, the rights have remained only as formal rights. It is ironic that many positions in the government sectors reserved for the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) have remained vacant for want of qualified candidates.

Abolition of Zamindari system, distribution of land pattas to dalits, capitalist development in agriculture and diversification of employment opportunities by industrialisation and various development projects particularly in 1960s and 1970s have no doubt brought a transformation in the economic life of the society. They have played an important role in ending the systems of engagement of attached/bonded labour system—equivalent to slave labour system—in agriculture in all parts of the country. This was actually the real freedom for dalits. It was also reflected in the spontaneous strikes of Dalit wage workers particularly just after 1980 (without any outside political influence) for wage hikes in many villages of Uttar Pradesh and also in some other states.

All the same, the continuity of the negative past has been rather overwhelming. As we know that land reform policies were not implemented properly in India (with the exception of a few states), inequality in ownership of land and other resources remained largely the same and majority of the dalits have remained landless. At the all-India level, about 10 percent of the Scheduled Caste households were landless in 1999-2000 as compared to 13.34 percent in 1992 and 19.10 percent in 1982. When we combine the two categories of landless and near landless (owning less than 0.4 ha of land), we see that 79.20 percent Scheduled Castes, 52.90 percent Scheduled Tribes and 59.20 percent others were landless or near landless. In 1992, 69.73 percent Scheduled Castes, 41.58 percent Scheduled Tribes and 47.21 percent others were landless plus near landless. There is a change in the conditions of dalits in terms of decreasing landlessness, but actually this change means nothing, since the amount of land they own is so meagre that it cannot provide them any decent livelihood. By contrast, the

medium and large farmers, who constitute only 3.5 per cent of rural population, own as large as 37.72 percent of the total land. The rest 96.5 percent of the population survives on only 62.28 percent of the land.

Progress in the realisation and distribution of surplus land is making mockery of the landless dalits. GoI (2009) states that: "...at national level, a comparison of ceiling status of two recent years provides a statistical account of the dying agenda of land redistribution. In March 2002, the area declared surplus was 2.7 million hectares (read m ha from now), out of which 2.63 m ha was taken possession of, and an area of 2.18 m ha was distributed to 5.65 m rural poor. Of the total area distributed, about 36 percent went to Scheduled Caste households and 15 percent to Scheduled Tribe households. The area declared surplus was less than 2 percent of the cultivated area which stands at 540 m ha. Compared to this, data obtained by December 2007 states that the area declared surplus was 2.7 m ha, out of which 2.3 m ha was taken possession of (87 percent of the area of land declared surplus). An area of 1.9 m ha was distributed to 5.5 million rural poor households, out of which 7.3 lakh ha went to Scheduled Caste households which is 37 percent and 3.1 lakh hectares went to Scheduled Tribe households which is 16 percent of the total population of allottees. Within a period of five years, which is the maximum term of a government and also for the five-year plans, the net increase in the declaration of surplus is almost nil, and the increase in distribution of surplus land to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories is of mere 1 percent in the era of communication and technology."

Further, GoI (2009) states thus: "What may be termed as collusive litigation, a large chunk of land (0.46 million ha) out of the declared surplus is held up due to litigation at various levels and is not available for distribution. This has led to a quick petering out of the agenda of land redistribution. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, which shows a consistent record of distribution of land from 1976 onwards, 83,853 cases of land dispute were registered of which 50,334 cases were resolved till date. There are 421 cases yet to have a hearing and in 13,243 ha of land is locked in litigation."

As GoI (2006) has pointed out, the representation of dalits in urban economy also remained dismal with 61 percent dalits in rural areas and 64 percent dalits in urban areas being wage labour. Only 10.18 percent dalits in rural areas and 27.76 percent dalits in urban areas are self-employed in non-agricultural occupations. Despite the reservation policy, the space for dalits in government jobs was largely only in lower categories, i.e. Groups C and D (excluding sweepers). As GoI (2005-06) and Kapur & Ramamurti (2002) show, in 2005, 16.4 percent Group C workers and 18.3 percent Group D workers were dalits in the central government services. Moreover, 59.2 percent sweepers in central government services were dalits. In the central government, at Group A positions only 11.9 percent were dalits. In public sector undertakings also, the situation is the same. Dalits constituted about 23 percent of group D workers and about 19 percent of Group C workers; but they represented only 11.5 percent and 10.8 percent in Group B and Group A positions respectively in 2001. The most important indicator of development of a community is its share in the ownership of the urban firms but only 8.4 percent firms were owned by dalits in 1998 as compared to about 9.9 percent firms owned by dalits in 1990.

Reservation policies were not strictly implemented by the government. Generally, the bureaucracy is controlled by the upper castes. And even when there are reserved vacancies, dalits and adivasis (tribals) are denied the reserved seats. Strict implementation of reservation policies in the public sector was ensured only by creating consistent public pressure on the government and it took years to fill the backlog of reserved jobs. If we look at the absolute poverty data, dalits emerge as the most disadvantaged section of the society. Poverty is claimed to be on the decline in overall terms in the government data, but even then, 36 percent rural and 39 percent urban dalits were below the poverty line in 1999-2000.

The most important indicator of economic and cultural development is the educational status of a community, but the conditions of dalits in this regard still remains one of the worst. In 2006, 73 percent dalits were illiterate as against the all-India average of 58.2 percent. Only 2.4 percent dalits were able to get education at higher secondary level or above, as against the all-

India average of 6.8 percent. This figure was 11.9 percent for the castes other than Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward castes. This actually reflects the high drop-out rate among dalit children which is a direct consequence of poverty and social oppression.

Similar are the situations for women (NIPCCD, 2010). Women actually face triple exploitation and discrimination, because they are exploited and discriminated in their own family in terms of family ruling system and family division of labour based on male dominance. Dalit women face quadruple discrimination and exploitation as they are at the lowest end of the social strata.

The divide between English educated and local language educated is emerging in a big way to represent the divide between the poor and the rich and also the divide between the oppressed communities and the privileged communities. Government schools are now transformed into poor people's schools and specifically as the dalit schools. Teaching-learning in government schools is so poor that even the labouring masses do not prefer to send their children to these schools. English has become the language of the job market in the era of liberalisation and globalisation, but government schools still do not teach English. By contrast, the overall development and exposure of children of private (public) schools and their command over English is better. Hence, the government school educated poor and dalit youth cannot compete with public school educated youth in the open market. Similar is the case of women since in the male dominated society, parents put greater emphasis on educating the boy child, and particularly low income groups consider it a waste of money to spend much on girl child's education.

Almost no representation of dalits and adivasis are there in the media. They are only nominally represented in academics. A very small number of dalit doctors and engineers are seen. In private industries, most dalits are only wage workers and that too mainly in the informal sector. Dalits and adivasis are almost absent at higher ranks in any industry. Even after implementation of reservation policy, they have almost no presence in the higher bodies of the state. Women also have a very insignificant representation in media, academics, and higher ranks of industries.

They are more engaged as nurses, low paid teachers in private schools, and as wage slaves in the informal sector. Representation of dalits, adivasis and women in the leadership of political parties, trade unions, and corporate NGOs are less in number. The dalit representation of the Supreme Court and High Courts is negligible (The Hindustan Times, 2006).

3. Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation

These neoliberal economic forces since the 1980s/1990s have aggravated problems of poverty, unemployment and social discrimination as follows: Agriculture being overburdened with surplus population. On one hand, land acquisition for industries are leading to the mass destruction of livelihoods and, on the other, non-agricultural growth is largely dominated by service sector which has least employment generating potential.

There is rampant accumulation by dispossession not only in relation to land, but also in relation to dispossession from all resources and rights. The control of all natural and energy resources is being handed over to corporate hands, along with privatisation of all public sector industries and sale of them to the corporates at throwaway prices. There is increasing privatisation of education, health and transport services. There is stoppage or minimisation of expenditures on welfare schemes, and slashing/cutting of subsidies to farmers and people at large. By contrast, huge subsidies are granted to the corporates. In some states huge pieces of patta and assigned lands plus government lands (meant for distribution to landless) are being acquired for industrial purposes. A large number of dalits have lost their patta and assigned lands, thus resulting in the reversal of social justice in the country. There are closures and privatisation of public sector units, and downsizing of the workforce in general but specifically in government and public sector, which has led to the ouster of large number of workers. Innumerable dalits and adivasis in government and public sector have lost their jobs, consequently.

There is an aggressive informalisation of jobs in the industries, both by transferring jobs from formal to informal sector and by casualisation of jobs in the formal sector. All this is increasing the

intensity of all forms of exploitation, both economic and non-economic. Most importantly, the duality in the labour force (formal and informal) is rigidly systematised so that there is almost no chance for upward mobility of the workers from the lower levels. On the one hand, there is an enormous mass of casual and contract workers suffering worst forms of exploitation and devoid of any type of job security, and on the other, there is a tiny section of 'privileged workers' enjoying better working conditions, better wages and comparatively better job security. This rigid duality manifests not only in the divide between the rich and the poor, but also in the caste divisions in the society, since the majority of contract/casual workers in the informal and formal sectors are drawn from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, other backward castes and women. Therefore, this rigid duality of slimy capitalist exploitation actually not only helps in the persistence of social oppression/exploitation, but also reproduces the caste and gender-based hierarchies.

Numerous dalits have lost their jobs due to closures, retrenchments and downsizing in government and privatisation of the public sector. Just during the two years of 1991 and 1992, the absolute number of Scheduled Caste employees in government dropped from 0.628 million to 0.604 million. The absolute number of Scheduled Caste employees in the public sector also declined from 0.432 million in 1990 to 0.369 million in 1992. Their percentage-share also declined from 19.54 to 17.74 from 1990 to 1992. According to Teltumbde (1996), "The rate of growth of employment in the organised sector dropped from more than 1.7 per cent per annum in the late 1980s to 1.2 per cent in 1991-92 and to 0.6 per cent in 1992-93. Creation of jobs in the public sector fell from 11.0 million in the preceding four years to 6.2 million in the succeeding four years of the Reforms. For the Private Sector, the corresponding figures rose from 2.08 million to 2.49 million. In the Central Government establishments there were 4.03 million jobs on 1st March 1991 which went up next year to 4.14 million. But for the next two years, they came down to 3.97 million and 3.84 million respectively." The same trends continued later also. Moreover, a significant share of government jobs also moved to the NGO sector, by way of transfer of some welfare activities to the NGO sector. The

moral responsibility of the state is, thus, slowly being shifted to the NGOs!

With the privatisation of the public sector enterprises and de-reservation of the industries which were earlier reserved exclusively for public sector, the dalits, adivasis, and backward castes not only lost jobs, but they also lost a huge space of secure employment reserved for them in these industries on a permanent basis. In the industries reserved for the public sector, any expansion meant expansion of ensured space for secure employment for them. But reservation policy is not made applicable in private sector and therefore no ensured space remains for them in these industries (Thorat, 2004).

The conditions of women have worsened. According to GoI (2001), the benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, feminisation of poverty, and increased gender inequality through deterioration of working conditions, especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Also noteworthy is the fact that in the waves of economic crises that are integral to the new global economy, the informal workers are the worst affected, of which women and the oppressed castes form a significant majority of the workforce.

In this backdrop, demands for reservation for women in various walks of life and extending reservation policy in the private sector have emerged in the phase of globalisation. There is no reservation policy for women and they do not get any reservation in jobs, except the preferential treatment for some jobs and some positions. In recent decades, after a long struggle, a policy was implemented to ensure proportionate representation of women in elected local administrative councils. A bill for ensuring proportionate representation of women in state assemblies and parliament is still pending and is facing strong opposition from some political parties. However, there is no initiative for a reservation policy to ensure proportionate representation of women in all jobs in government, public sector, and private sector.

The idea of extending reservation policy to private sector is fiercely opposed by the captains of industry in order not to destroy meritocracy and efficiency (The Hindu Business Line, 2004). The

labour movement is considered to be the most democratic movement to ensure a more equitable and democratic society, but it has become impotent in this regard in India by fragmenting itself by all sorts of ascriptive hierarchies.

4. Concluding Remarks

In post-colonial India, the social structure creating and recreating social exclusion based on caste and gender discriminations remains largely unchanged. Globalisation and privatisation have further aggravated the problems of social exclusion in various ways. Formal workers form a minority of the workforce and a significant majority of informal workers is represented by dalits, adivasis, other backward castes and women.

All this reality is established here through secondary literature including data published by the government. This paper is a much improvised and abridged version of Pratap (2011). This paper can be updated with the latest data on the same lines. Our serious thought is that the above picture still holds good unaltered. What then is in store for the dalits and women?

Largely because the issue of social exclusion was not effectively addressed by the general trade unions, dalit trade unions have emerged on the scene. There are also attempts to form national federations of dalit trade unions. However, dalit trade unions are largely formed in the ever-shrinking public sector and government departments, and they are generally concerned with the issue of reservation for their members. They are conspicuous by their absence in the private sector.

Parliamentary politics on one hand has provided space to all sections to raise their voices, but in the given context of almost absence of pro-people, pro-labour political forces, the capitalist political parties are getting immense opportunities to play the game of divide and rule. The politics of casteism and fundamentalism has systematically created such sectional conflicts that socio-political divisions between different sections of the society are reaching alarming levels. Cultural intimacy among people in the country has collapsed. In many parts of the world, there is hyper-nationalists' irritation with anthropological revela-

tion of violation of cultural (or social/public) intimacy (Herzfeld, 2016).

The above developments clearly indicate that any people's and labour movements in India cannot emerge as broad-based strong socio-political forces if they ignore the issues of social exclusion and cultural intimacy. Labour movement needs to launch a general political movement for the right to employment and the right to pension for all and for ensuring proportionate representation of dalits, adivasis, backward castes and women in all walks of life, all sectors and at all levels. Furthermore, it will have to do organizational restructuring ensuring proportionate representation of dalits, adivasis, backward castes and women at all levels in leadership and incorporating issues of socially excluded sections in organisational functioning and economic and political struggles. Useful lessons can be learnt from the victorious recent farmers' protests. They are exemplary in testifying to overcoming ascriptive divides in fighting for justice (Bhaduri, 2022).

The issues of the dalit and women's movements on one hand and of the labour movement on the other, are getting more and more integrated. For example, struggles against informalisation of jobs are emerging as a major focus of the labour movement, and a new wave of struggles for forming trade unions are actually coming out as a challenge against informalisation. And this fight is going to be an integral part of the socially excluded sections' movement for extending reservation policy in the private sector and making a reservation policy for women. This, perhaps, augurs well for social inclusiveness.

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