

Marx On Caste

Ranganayakamma

MARX did not write a special treatise on 'caste' just as he wrote on 'capitalism' under the title *Capital*. However, in his writings, he made some observations on the caste system in India and on certain regulations akin to castes in other countries. Through these observations, it is possible for us to understand the conception of castes and the solution that he indicated with regard to that question.

There are the people in India who oppose Marx's theory (either knowingly or unknowingly or with half-baked knowledge) just like similar people elsewhere in the world. Such Indian opponents express two types of opinions on Marx's theory - (1) Marx's theory was relevant to the 19th century Europe but precisely it is not relevant to even those countries. (2) Marx's theory may be relevant to other countries but it is not at all relevant to India because caste system exists here and this does not fall under the scope of Marx's theory.

These are the two views that are opposed to Marx's theory. However, both these views are completely wrong. Since Marx's theory talks about 'labour relations', it applies to each and every inch in human society. It applies to every relationship.

Any country or its society of any period lives in terms of 'labour relations' only. The nature of a given society will be in accordance with the nature of its labour relations.

Marx talked about those labour relations. He talked about 'exploitation of labour' that has been taking place since hundreds and thousands of years in the arena of labour relations. He discussed various kinds of problems that arise due to exploitation of labour. He indicated the solution to those problems. Therefore, it is our responsibility to understand our problems. First, we have to ascertain whether exploitation of labour

is present in India. We also have to ascertain whether the caste question comes under the sphere of labour relations. If we ascertain that there is a connection between castes and labour, then we can undoubtedly arrive at the conclusion that Marx's theory applies to India also.

Any problem connected with human society is intertwined with labour relations. Since caste question is connected with human beings, it also comes under the purview of the theory that talks about labour relations.

Marx's theory applies to all countries, including India, which are based on 'exploitation of labour' and class distinctions, since it is the only and correct theory that discovered and explained exploitation of labour.

Further, this theory explains why human relations ought to be established from a use-value perspective and what sort of problems would arise if they lack that perspective. Hence, this theory will be useful as a guiding theory for organizing society even in future when exploitation of labour is absent.

Though caste system is a specific problem of India, we can understand how Marx's theory is relevant to it if we understand its connection with labour.

If we observe castes even though superficially we find certain obvious distinctions among them: that some castes are high and some are low. In what respect do we find this 'high-low' distinction? Generally speaking, all the upper castes are those which possess land, capital and money; those which have hegemony and engage in social organization and administration. Again, generally speaking, all the lower castes are those that do not have properties even as means of livelihood. They live as labourers and servants. They are subjected to the hegemony and ruling of the upper castes and live in dire poverty and social inferiority.

Among the upper castes, we find the way of life of 'not doing any labour'. Or if they do, they are engaged in mental labour and clean labour. On the other hand, the situation of lower castes is totally opposite. It is unimaginable for the lower castes to live without doing any labour. The kind of labour they perform is the bottommost manual labour. All kinds of unclean labour that are needed for cleaning the entire society are the responsibility of these castes.

According to the laws of economics, mental labour possesses higher value and manual labour possesses lower value. This is based on a nat-

ural law of formation of value. Values of different kinds of labour are formed differently depending on the resources required to learn a given kind of labour. There is nothing 'wrong' in it. As the mental labour possesses more value and manual labour less value, a person who always does mental labour gets higher income and a person who always does manual labour gets lower income. Societies based on exploitation further increase the naturally existing gap between values of different kinds of labour. Thus, such societies and their conventions pay more value to a mental labour than it inherently possesses and less value to a manual labour than it inherently possesses. Societies based on exploitation of labour exploit more intensely the manual labour, especially the bottommost manual labours. If we consider a doctor and an agricultural labourer in a society based on exploitation, we find unimaginable distinctions between their income and their way of life, although both perform labour.

The system has been in practise since remote past, whereby a class, which occupied all the means of production as its property, lives on exploitation of labour by extracting rent from land, interest and profit from capital in the name of property rights, without doing any labour. The division of labour that emerged from these relations of exploitation always ties labouring people to only one kind of labour. A person who performs manual labour has to languish in the same kind of labour through out his life. It is not possible for that person to expect to do some kind of mental labour, education relevant to such labour or income that it fetches. Mental labourers like doctors, engineers and scientists need not ever do any manual labour. They need not even undertake the responsibility of cleaning their own dirt.

The fact that some section of the population in a given society lives without doing any labour implies that it is the remaining section of the population that performs all that labour. This is what is happening either in India or in any other country. The fact that the upper castes of India are leading their lives without entering manual labour and unclean labour implies that they are throwing that burden onto the lower castes.

All this is connected with the question of division of labour. It is a question of division of labour if one class does not work and lives on the labour of others. In addition, it is a question of division of labour if

a person is always tied to only one kind of labour. Formation of castes is not something that emerged without any connection with labour and labour relations. The caste question is one of many problems that arose due to faulty social relations. This is a problem that is intertwined with exploitative nature of labour relations, its laws of value, its division of labour and its property rights.

Therefore, only through such economic conceptual categories which Marxism uses namely, use value, exchange value, mental labour, manual labour, value of labour, value of labour power, property relations, masterhood and servitude and many such categories we have to understand the caste question.

Marx (along with Engels) talked about castes in India for the first time in *The German Ideology* (1845-6). He made some observations and offered explanation concerning castes on six or seven occasions including in *Capital* (1867). By means of those observations and *Capital*, which elaborated Marx's theory in great detail, we can understand the caste question and get hold of its solution.

According to Marx's theory, there must be a material cause for the evolution of human history. If it is a correct answer, that cause is something that arises from labour relations. However, since the past times, there has been an idealist conception among philosophers predominantly with regard to the evolution of history. It is a conception which assumes that human history evolves based on the will of god, or of the kings who are incarnation of gods, or religious leaders or some supernatural power.

It is 'idealism' if it fails to see some material basis for a given problem.

Criticizing the wrong conception concerning the process of history in general and the idealist conception of post-Hegelians in Germany in particular, Marx made the following observations on caste in *The German Ideology*:

"When the crude form of the division of labour which is to be found among the Indians, and Egyptians calls forth the caste-system in their state and religion, the historian believes that the caste-system is the power which has produced this crude social form." (*Moscow edition 176, p. 63*)

This is a question of whether division of labour gave rise to castes

or castes gave rise to division of labour. According to Marx, division of labour is primary. The same formed into caste occupations in the subsequent period. While this was the situation, historians assumed castes as primary and they gave rise to division of labour. Hence, Marx criticized such historians.

How could castes emerge in the society in the beginning? If they emerged so, there must be some cause. If there were a cause, such cause would be the fundamental point.

Various kinds of labour are necessary for human beings to live. While different kinds of labour emerge and continue, some division would emerge among them. If we keep aside the question 'how a given division of labour transformed subsequently', the initial basis would be existence of different kinds of labour.

When we observe what castes do, we find that different castes perform different kinds of labour. From ancient times to the present time, there has been a connection between castes and different kinds of labour. By logical thinking, we can grasp that division among different kinds of labour itself gradually transformed into castes. However, different kinds of labour and division of labour exist in all countries and all societies. However, why did the division of labour transform into castes only in India?

Those who conducted considerable research too have not offered any answer to this question. No researcher could say anything more than observing, 'Castes are not found elsewhere. They are found only in India'.

Therefore, the task that remains before us is to find out the solution for the caste question. In order to grasp the solution, we have to ascertain the point, 'whether division of labour gave rise to castes or castes gave rise to division of labour'. Unless we ascertain this point, we cannot take even a single step toward the solution.

We have seen that, according to Marx, division of labour is primary. The same had crystallized into the caste system. Therefore, the solution for the caste system is to transform the division of labour that created the problem.

The first change that has to take place is: Dragging the class which does not perform any labour but lives on exploitation into labour process. The labouring class (hereafter 'working class') which is subjected to

exploitation must wage this struggle. This class struggle had begun in the period of slaves.

The entire population of lower castes who perform manual labour are part of the working class. This class must realize that liberation from the exploitative relations of labour is its goal. In addition, it must accomplish the task of changing the division of labour in the course of its struggle. The change should be such that every individual ought to do certain kinds of mental labour as well as certain kinds of manual labour instead of one person always doing manual labour alone, while another person always doing mental labour alone.

Every person must do labour.

Every person must do various kinds of labour. We have to sustain and stabilize this kind of new relations of labour gradually through our experiences. This alone is the path of liberation for the lower castes who have been leading the unbearable life of manual labour and servitude for many thousands of years. This path is possible by means of class struggles only.

In December 1846, Annenkov, a Russian intellectual, asked Marx's opinion on Proudhon's book *Philosophy of Poverty*. Replying to Annenkov's letter, Marx comments that Proudhon does not have a proper understanding of division of labour and that he assumes it to be identical at all times. Marx wrote to Annenkov as follows:

"But was not the caste regime also a particular division of labour? Was not the regime of the corporations another division of labour? And is not the division of labour under the system of manufacture, which in England begins about the middle of the seventeenth century and comes to an end in the last part of the eighteenth, also totally different from the division of labour in large-scale modern industry?" (*Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 158, Moscow 1966).

In 1847, Marx wrote *Poverty of Philosophy*, a critique of Proudhon's book. There he says:

"Under the patriarchal system, under the caste system, under the feudal and corporative system, there was division of labor

in the whole of society according to fixed rules. Were these rules established by a legislator? No. Originally born of the conditions of material production, they were born of the conditions of material production; they were raised to the status of laws only much later. In this way these different forms of the division of labour became so many bases of social organization." (p. 118).

While commenting on 'how capitalist economists wrongly understand the relationship between production and distribution', in his 1859 work, *A contribution to the critique of political economy*, Marx makes a reference to castes.

"Or, legislation may perpetuate land ownership in certain families, or allocate labour as a hereditary privilege, thus consolidating it into a caste system." (p. 201, Moscow edition 1970)

In his 1853 article on "*The Future Results of British Rule in India*", Marx expressed certain views on castes and division of labour.

"Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power." (*On Colonialism, Moscow edition 1974, p. 85*)

"I know that the English millocracy intend to endow India with railways with the exclusive view of extracting at diminished expenses the cotton and other raw materials for their manufactures." (p. 84)

"All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people, depending not only on the development of the productive powers, but on their appropriation by the people. But what they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premises for both." (p. 85)

From what Marx had said (that the 'modern industry will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour'), we can infer that it will transform traditional aspects of the division of labour here. He is saying that such changes will not suffice to liberate the working class. He is also saying that the working class must wage struggles against the class of owners primarily to appropriate the means of production. As a result of this, the means that enables the exploiting class to snatch land rent, interest and profit from the working class in the name of property rights will be abolished. There arises a need for the class of owners to live on its own labour. When all the people work, the master-worker relations will transform into relations between producers who are equal to one another.

We have to transform labour relations at every place wherever they are unequal. Transforming division of labour applies to all these conditions.

Changes in the division of labour between castes, changes in the traditional division of labour between men and women—all those things come under this.

Only by following the path of class struggles that are waged from a correct perspective against exploitation of labour, is it possible for the working class to transform various forms of "faulty social relations" (to use Marx's expressions) and liberate itself from the slavery to the class of masters.

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Marx's observations on castes in volume one of *Capital* that appeared in 1867:

"Manufacture, in fact, produces the skill of the detail labourer, by reproducing, and systematically driving to an extreme within the workshop, the naturally developed differentiation of trades which it found ready to had in society at large. On the other

hand, the conversion of fractional work into the life-calling of one man, corresponds to the tendency shown by earlier societies, to make trades hereditary; either to petrify them into castes, or whenever definite historical conditions beget in the individual a tendency to vary in a manner incompatible with the nature of castes, to ossify them into guilds. Castes and guilds arise from the action of the same natural law that regulates the differentiation of plants and animals into species and varieties, except that when a certain degree of development has been reached, the heredity of castes and exclusiveness of guilds are ordained as a law of society." (p. 321. *Moscow edition 1974*)

Here, at the end of these words, Marx cited the words of another writer as a footnote:

"The arts also have. . . in Egypt reached the requisite degree of perfection. For it is the only country where artificer may not in any way meddle with the affairs of another class of citizens, but must follow that calling alone which by law is hereditary in their clan. . . In other countries it is found that tradesmen divide their attention between too many objects. At one time they try agriculture, at another they take to commerce, at another they busy themselves with two or three occupations at once. In free countries, they mostly frequent the assemblies of the people. . . In Egypt, on the contrary, even artificer is severely punished if he meddles with affairs of State, or carries on several trades at once. Thus there is nothing to disturb their application to their calling. . . Moreover, since, they inherit from their forefathers numerous rules, they are eager to discover fresh advantages." (pp. 321-22)

The handicrafts reached such a stage in Egypt since it was a rule that they ought to remain in those trades only. They were not allowed to pursue another trade. If they do, they will have punishments. Hence, every trade reached there to a stage of specialized occupation.

This is also a question related to division of labour. Just as we do not know why castes emerged only in India, it is not known why these

restrictions of occupations and severe punishments were present in only Egypt. We can grasp no more than that division of labour assumed such a form there.

As a result of development of capitalism, forms of division of labour throughout the world are changing to some extent. These changes are taking place in India also. Rules concerning hereditary occupations have changed. However, these changes will not be such that they could eliminate the institution of caste itself. Caste related occupations are still prevalent among the majority population of lower castes. Because they lack economic conditions that enable them to leave their caste-related occupations and enter mental labour.

Based on Marx's observations so far, we have to understand the fact that the basis for caste question is division of labour of the past. However, there is no evidence to explain why it happened only India.

Caste system is a kind of division of labour. Though there are no laws that defend caste distinctions all the social conditions are such that they keep castes in tact.

Following Marx's repeated observations, if we examine classes in India, all the lower castes are part of working class. Further, these are sections that are subjected to exploitation of labour to a large extent. They have to liberate themselves from exploitation. They have to change the division of labour that exploitative societies created. For that, they have to go along the path of class struggle only. If they do not recognize that path and go in that direction, there will not be a way out for them from this problem. The same situation will continue in future also just as they have been languishing in the caste system for the past hundreds and thousands of years. It is not possible to escape from it in any other way.

However, the intellectuals of lower castes have not yet opened their eyes. They have not yet grasped the difference between the alms of reservations, which the exploiting class throws as a tactic, and the real liberation. Satisfied with finger-food sort of opportunities available to handful of population in the form of reservations, they consider permanent retention of their low caste position as a protection. They think that their goal is to intrude into the existing government of the exploiting class.

Imagine that there formed a government in India where in the representatives of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes

constitute the majority! What can that government do in respect of elimination of caste? What will be their programmes in that respect? How will it abolish exploitative property relations? With what programmes will it change the economic conditions of lower castes that are living by performing all kinds of unclean labour?

At the most, it may make some laws with haphazard sayings like - 'Don't observe caste distinctions!' Whom can it order with such laws? Can it arrange a marriage between a Brahmin girl and a Chamar boy by means of commands of law? Can it bring together any two persons any time by means of laws? How can it pave the way to intercaste marriages without changing economic conditions? Can it change even a single aspect of social relations by means of its administration? Then what will a government of lower castes accomplish by taking the reigns of state power?

What it will achieve is this: It will accomplish the sharing of its spoil in the process of exploitation of labour. It attains a place that enables it to stand as lower caste bourgeoisie beside the upper caste bourgeoisie.

We are seeing governments of lower castes also. Their entire aim is to create *Dalit Bahujan Bourgeoisie*. Do you know what it means? Nothing but the exploitation of the ordinary masses of lower castes by the bourgeoisie of the lower castes! Governments of lower castes will achieve this wonderfully.

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