

tuals, and administration is how to speed up the pace of this change and make it more relevant to the relatively more deprived sections of the people? The ideology of development has inverted the process. Development according to the district magistrate has to be relevant to the people, instead of people becoming relevant to the development. It is in this process there is a shift in perception, from problems of Kalahandi to problems of development of Kalahandi.

But the two are to be distinguished from each other. The latter depends on one's own view of the developmental process and will tend to be identical with the problems of Kalahandi if the development is a unique one-dimensional process. At an ideological level, it is prescribed, of course, as a unique one-dimensional process, though with multiple facets. What if development is viewed in terms of access to natural resources and with greater control and development of these resources? What if capital is defined in terms of greater utilisation of existing surplus labour, as some of the successful NGOs do? But that is what mainstream ideology of development ignores in the name of 'given structures'. And that is where the

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## Caste and Class in India

Sharit K Bhowmik

*The durability of the caste system cannot be underestimated. Its ritual basis may be knocked off but it reappears through politics. The emergence of class struggles has not been able to reduce the influence of caste in these struggles. A report of a seminar to discuss the interconnections between caste and class and their consequences.*

THE political role of caste has come to the forefront in the last couple of years, especially after the 'Mandal agitations'. The fact that caste is firmly lodged in our society and has an independent identity cannot be overlooked. The emergence of class struggles has not been able to reduce the influence of caste in these struggles. In order to discuss the interconnections between caste and class and their consequences the Joshi-Adhikari Institute of Social Studies in collaboration with the Indian Council of Historical Research organised a one-day seminar on the subject in Delhi on April 4, 1992. A group of 30 academics and activists participated in the deliberations. There were six presentations around which the discussions took place. Three of them were on the historical context and the other three dealt with the social and political manifestation of caste in contemporary India.

gulf between problems of Kalahandi and the problems of development of Kalahandi widens, making the latter topics of non-terminating discussions in workshops and seminars.

The shift from problems of Kalahandi to the problems of development of Kalahandi is what Kalahandi of 1990s is all about, and to that extent Kalahandi has entered the national mainstream losing its concrete specificity. Kalahandi borders the district of Bastar of Madhya Pradesh, where the mainstream ideology of development is being challenged by a group of naxalites. Their programme appears to be to bring back access to the natural resources, namely, land, water and forest to the people. This presents an alternate methodology in solving the problems of hunger, unemployment, forced migration, thus making development a people-centred system, instead of the mainstream ideology of making people adjusting to a development-centred process. The mainstream ideology willy-nilly still adheres to the trickle-down theory in spite of its failure over the last 40 years in India and other third world countries. It is this failure that gets reflected in discussions on hunger, resulting in solutions in politics, as happened in the Kalahandi workshop.

### CASTE AND CLASS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The seminar was divided into two sessions. The first session had four presentations and was presided over by Andre Beteille and the second session had two presentations and was presided over by Manoranjan Mohanty. Vivekananda Jha made the first presentation which sought to trace the origins of caste and class in India. He put forth the view that the institution of caste as a hierarchy based on exploitation came into being only when classes based on appropriation of surplus and on exploitation emerged. This occurred during the later Vedic period of 1000 BC. Jha strongly refuted the theory propounded by some eminent historians that castes were in existence in the earlier Harappa civilisation. He claimed that these were speculations as the script of

that civilisation had not yet been deciphered.

Jha noted that the Rig Vedic period, which followed the Indus valley civilisation after a gap of 200 years, too did not show any positive signs of an ascription-based caste system. This was mainly a pastoral society and was segmentary in nature. This period was marked by simple division of labour, low surplus and common property. Inequalities were not high because though there was uneven distribution of surplus the means of production were not unevenly distributed. Property, cattle and slaves were commonly held. Manual labour was not taboo and artisans were respected. There were references to the four *varnas* but occupational hierarchy and endogamy were not prevalent. Jha clarified that slaves during this period were mainly womenfolk of the conquered tribes. They were mainly engaged in domestic activities and in breeding children as there were fewer menfolk due to the frequent tribal wars. There were however no indications that slaves later constituted the so-called unclean castes.

It was during the later Vedic period (1000 BC onwards) that agriculture developed and subsequently surplus increased. Social differentiation increased and the tribes started breaking up. Settled agriculture indicated a more efficient mode of production resulting in higher surplus. Division of labour became complex, hierarchical and based on exploitation. It was now possible for groups of people who were not directly connected with production to appropriate the surplus because of their ritual status or control over the means of production. The social distance between brahmins and the others increased because of the former's ritual status. There were tensions between the brahmins and the kshatriyas over status but these were set aside as they both combined to exploit the vaishya and the shudra. It was during this period that both caste as well as class emerged in their full forms. Monarchy developed, trade and crafts increased and the practice of untouchability also came into being. There was an increase in the number of *jatis* as new groups such as tribes and forest dwellers had to be included in the emerging hierarchy. However a significant feature of this period was that though women became a part of the property structure, endogamy as a practice was still not prevalent. The higher castes could marry women from other castes.

### CASTE IN COLONIAL INDIA

The next two presentations dealt with aspects of caste and class in colonial India. Papiya Ghosh's presentation was on the relevance of castes among the

Muslims. She elaborated on the Momin Conference in the 1930s and 1940s in Bihar. Caste distinctions among Muslims in Bihar was based on the distinctions between rasil and sharif. The latter included the sayyeds, sheikhs and the upper strata while the former included the artisans and the 'jolahas'. During the early decades of this century the so-called lower caste Muslims tended to group themselves as a single community and called themselves jolahas or momins. This is reflected in the large number of jolahas recorded in the 1911 Census. The Muslim League after its formation tried to mobilise Muslims on a common platform of Muslim unity. This was initially accepted but later the momins found that the upper class Muslims tried to distance themselves from them. This led to tensions between the two groups especially since the minority upper castes dominated the League. The momin leadership initially came into conflict with the League on class issues among the Muslims. However after the mid-1930s the momins concentrated more on seeking greater representation in legislative bodies by stressing on their backwardness. They saw in 1937 that the lower caste pasis were able to get representation in the provincial assembly because they were able to organise themselves. The momins then began to demand greater representation in the assembly either on the basis of their numbers or through the Muslim League's quota by claiming that they constituted the majority among Muslims. Ghosh pointed out that during this phase the earlier class contradictions between upper caste Muslims and Momins gave way to the quest for greater representation in the assembly.

Swaraj Basu's presentation was on the rajabanshi caste movement in north Bengal (1910-1947). The rajbanshis are an autothenous Mongloid community concentrated in the northern districts of West Bengal and their contiguous regions in Assam, Bihar and Bangladesh. They constitute the third largest caste in West Bengal after the mahishyas and namasudras.

The census records of 1872 to 1931 show that several castes tried to upgrade their status within the caste framework. The rajbanshis also followed a similar path by trying to seek kshatriya status. They formed the Kshatriya Sabha in 1910, an association which tried to enhance the interests of the rajbanshis by seeking greater representation in public life and in the bureaucracy. Basu stated that the colonial government granted greater representation to the backward castes ostensibly with the idea of helping them. What happened in effect was that these sections became loyal supporters of the British and they moved away from the

nationalist movement as it was led by the upper castes. The namasudras in Bengal, the nadar dominated Justice Party in Madras and the Kshatriya Sabha in Gujarat leaned towards the British as they felt that their interests were better served by them than by the nationalists. Basu placed equal blame on the upper castes because they wilfully alienated the lower castes from the freedom struggle.

Basu noted that some of the backward caste movements had radical components as they tried to challenge the existing caste framework. The case of the rajbanshis was different because strictly speaking they did not fall within the caste hierarchy as did the other groups. There were cleavages within the community based on class factors. While some of the rajbanshis were jotedars a majority of them were sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. The move for kshatriya status was mainly of the elites who tried to improve their social status and at the same time avail of the benefits of reservation. The mass of the rajbanshis remained unaffected by these moves and the Tebhaga movement, a mass movement of sharecroppers in 1946 attracted their active participation. During the course of this movement rajbanshi sharecroppers joined other sharecroppers to agitate against rajbanshi jotedars. Basu concluded that caste movements could exist as long as movements which tried to consolidate people on class lines did not exist. In the case of the rajbanshis the communist-led Tebhaga movement was able to attract the exploited and backward sections of this community even when a caste movement for upward mobility existed.

#### THE BIHAR SITUATION

Chaturan Mishra a Communist Party MP from Bihar made a presentation on the nature of caste conflicts in Bihar. Caste and class converged to a large extent because an overwhelming majority of the agricultural labourers and poor peasants belonged to the scheduled castes and the landlords were mainly from the upper castes. He stated that the scheduled caste poor were now more concerned with their social status and self-respect than with economic problems. The upper castes not only exploit them economically but they also treat the womenfolk as their property and sexually exploit them. For long the scheduled castes have borne these humiliations silently but the new generation is not willing to do so. He said that a new militant consciousness is developing among the lower castes which is a welcome change.

Mishra interpreted the ongoing caste conflicts in Bihar and other parts of north India as power struggles between the haves and the have-nots. The caste equations in

Bihar had changed over the past few years. The Congress had earlier forged an alliance between the brahmins, Muslims and the scheduled castes. The brahmins naturally dominated this alliance and managed to corner most of the benefits. The alliance now was between the three backward sections, namely, harijans, backward classes and Muslims. It was therefore natural that these sections would try and bring in their people into the power structure and the bureaucracy. They are also trying to corner licences, contracts, etc, which were earlier the privilege of the upper castes. This has resulted in tension and violence. The recent murder of a Bihar MLA over the issue of civil contracts is an indication. Social scientists and journalists have expressed alarm at the rise of casteism in the state but, Mishra asked, is not the prevailing order which favours a minority of upper castes exhibiting a worse form of casteism?

Mishra at the same time maintained that casteism comes into the fore when other forms of ideology become ineffective. Political parties having distinct ideological orientations such as Gandhism, socialism and Marxism are unable or unwilling to propagate their ideology among the people. They hence find casteism an easy way out. He jokingly remarked that MLAs and MPs of these parties talk of secularism during the first four years of their term. In the fifth year when they have to seek the people's mandate they indulge in the worst forms of casteism and communalism thereby undoing all the good they had done earlier. He therefore stressed that instead of trying to improve the status of the lower castes within the caste hierarchy it is necessary to try and dispense with caste altogether as Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and the Bhakti movement tried to do.

While commenting on the presentations Andre Beteille noted that our society has strong links with the past which cannot be overlooked while discussing or analysing the present. The urge for equality is a very important development in our society but the road to equality is not as smooth as the framers of our Constitution thought it would be. One should not underestimate the durability of the caste system. Its ritual base may be knocked off but it reappears through politics. The crucial point is: how does it enter through the back door each time it is thrown out of the front door? He believed that in the political arena caste movements are used to abolish the caste system. This was a trap because could casteism be fought by casteism? He said that another durable aspect of the caste system which was apart from its ritual or political basis was the practice of endogamy. This aspect has often been overlooked as being not very

significant. The fact remains that very few people would like their children to be married outside their castes. Endogamy in fact ensures that caste barriers remain intact.

Abani Lahiri observed that one of the significant ways of tackling the caste problem was through the left and democratic movement. He asserted that West Bengal which had a rich tradition of left politics did not suffer from the problems of casteism as other states did. It was however pointed out by Beteille that the three upper castes who form only 10 per cent of the population in West Bengal dominate the political and the administrative fields. Why has the left and democratic movement not been able to throw up people from the remaining 90 per cent of the population?

#### CASTE, CLASS AND ETHNICITY

The afternoon session had two presentations by Partha N Mukherjee and S K Chaube. This session focused mainly on the post-independence phase. Mukherjee began with the statement that it would be incorrect to categorise all movements in terms of caste or class. The term ethnic group would be more appropriate. Taking examples from agrarian movements in the pre-independence period he noted that most of them were aimed against economic injustice. Hence the class factor predominated. In the post-independence period the problem of social discrimination became an added factor. The discrepancies between castes emerged and the movements were directed not only against economic exploitation but against social exploitation and discrimination as well. The Sarvodaya movement of Jai Prakash Narayan found support mainly among the harijans and other lower castes.

The Naxalite movement which followed the Sarvodaya movement had an ethnic base initially. Mukherjee's study of Naxalbari showed that the movement in its early stages attracted the tribal population in the region. These were mainly immigrants from the Chotanagpur region who had settled as tea garden workers, sharecroppers and agricultural workers. The rajbanshi rural poor did not participate in the movement mainly because most of the jotedars in the area belonged to the same community. There was little social distance between jotedars and their tenants belonging to the same community. Later however the movement leaders were able to convince the rajbanshis to join the movement. Mukherjee therefore asserted that exploitation cannot be viewed only from the class angle. The ethnic factor is equally important. He pointed out that a large number of 'Naxalite' groups including the Indian People's Front and the People's War group have come to realise

that the dogmatic Marxist approach of viewing conflict only through class positions needed to be refined. Mukherjee, therefore, suggested that it was necessary to identify the principal structures of exploitation. In a system of economic exploitation it was equally relevant to look into the interfaces between exploitation and discrimination and how the two are maintained or articulated in the overall system of exploitation. It is possible that the principal contradiction lies in economic exploitation at a given point of time but later social exploitation becomes more predominant.

S K Chaube began his presentation by explaining the two contradictory terms included in the word caste. It includes varna meaning status groups and jati meaning ethnic groups. The varna splits people into vertical divisions whereas jati divides them on ethnic lines and to reconcile these two conflicting divisions is a major theoretical problem for all students of caste. This also makes the interconnections between caste and politics a complex problem. Chaube observed that universal adult franchise had on the one hand admitted numerous peripheral groups into political power and thereby legitimised the basis of the Indian state. On the other hand it has led to increasing competition for power. Numbers now gain predominance over other factors. Caste as a political factor in free India was first used by the Congress strategist S K Patil in the 1957 elections in Andhra Pradesh. He matched the communists "caste by caste" and succeeded.

Chaube noted that the communists had in the earlier phase been apprehensive on using caste as a form of mobilisation. In 1958 at its Amritsar Congress the CPI decided to launch a massive movement against casteism, communalism and untouchability. In 1959 the Nair Service Society and similar caste organisations led the movement against the communist led government in Kerala. In June 1961 E M S Namboodiripad wrote in the monthly *New Age* that whereas caste as a social bar had weakened it has increased in the political sphere and has in many cases decided the fate of elections and even selection of ministers. In 1964 at the Vijaywada Congress of the CPI its general secretary Ajoy Ghosh reported that caste sentiments instead of loosening have grown tremendously. There was a greater tendency to use caste in all elections. The Congress party had set the example which was being followed by others.

It was thus evident, Chaube noted, that caste as a system of status ranking with attendant privileges was transformed to unequal groups competing for power. The four-and-a-half decades of independence has expanded enormously the bureaucracy. The privileges of bureaucracy concern power and property. The competing

groups therefore try to corner as much as possible of these privileges. The Mandal Commission agitation can be viewed in this context. Chaube felt that the growing caste aspirations were more a sign of growth than of decay. The changes in the approach of the communists towards caste could perhaps be viewed in this light.

Manoranjan Mohanty while commenting on the presentations noted that there has been a considerable narrowing down of differences between the liberal political scientists like Rajani Kothari who speak of caste as a new form of mobilisation in a democratic society and Marxists who had once believed that caste as an institution will disappear once the forces of industrialisation and class come to the fore. The views of the latter have been substantially modified. He differed from these views as they tended to presuppose the importance of caste over class just as earlier Marxists had done with class. He explained that in the process of democratisation the structures of domination become arenas of struggles. In the course of these democratic struggles one discovers many areas of domination and their implications for day to day life. For instance one discovers that an overwhelming majority of the bureaucrats belong to the upper castes and then one begins to relate the caste question with the question of political struggle. Thus it is possible to consider that even if caste has become a basis for competition it is still an aspect of democratisation.

Elaborating further Mohanty said that there were several autonomous social categories such as caste identify, gender, community and religious identities and class. We have to try to find the interconnections between these identities. Neither academics nor political practitioners have been able to evolve methods of coping with these interconnections. Instead class has been used to gloss over these autonomous factors whereas there is a need to aggregate them and find meanings. In the discussion on caste and class it was found that there were large areas of overlap. Similarly the other structures also overlap with each other. For example it was necessary to examine the effects of capitalism as a class process in contemporary society on structures of domination such as patriarchy, caste domination, ethnic domination, etc. The scope of discussion has therefore to be widened to include these aspects.

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