CHAPTER - IV

MAPPING CASTE-CLASS DEBATE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the brief description of caste and class by different scholars. And it moves on to map the class, caste debate to understand how these two concepts are understood in relation to one another in trying to understand the society. The different perspectives on class and caste debate are considered by broadly classifying them into four categories. Though debates and discussions on caste and class are never ending, they definitely increase the scope of better understanding of the concept.

The relationship between caste and class has been perceived by various intellectuals and activists in diverse viewpoints. The bulk of the poor in India are not only is landless poor peasants and unorganized workers but is also from the scheduled castes, backward castes and scheduled tribes. The distinction among castes was also related to division of labour and its justification in ideological and cultural terms.¹

In the post-independent India, the liberal democratic politics and the mixed economic structure has created many complexities and pressures and the then politics created autonomous realms of struggle and competition.² The emergence of Dalits as the special agents of the new democratic revolutionary force is itself evidence of an


aggravation of the age-old caste-class contradictions in contemporary Indian social reality.³

Before mapping the debate on the class and caste in Indian perspective, it is relevant to understand the basic concepts of class and caste respectively as follows:

ABOUT CASTE

Caste is a social group placed in a hierarchical order derived from certain Hindu cultural prescriptions originated as Varna. Caste system is a distinctive institution of India and is said to be the fundamental characteristic of its social organization. The influence of caste system on the life of most of the people in India is such that it is caste which guides the march of human life cradle to grave. This system has resulted in a diverse cleavages in the society the end result of which is the most cruel and inhuman traits. These inherent traits of inequality evoked subjugation of one section of society by the other.

Conceptually, the idea of caste has been understood by various people in different perspectives. The scholars like Anthony Giddens, relate caste only to ‘a form of stratification in which an individual’s social position is fixed at birth and thus cannot be changed. There is virtually no inter-marriage of the members of different caste groups.’ But, this definition of caste fails to provide the modern contexts in which caste emerged as the dreadful denomination of socio-political mobilization in post-colonial Indian society.

While many Indian scholars have tried to study and define caste as the significant factor in conceptualizing Indian social order, the ideas of M.N. Srinivas are worth mentioning in this regard. Defining caste by way of identifying its fundamental characteristics, Srinivas succinctly points out caste as a ‘…hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having an association with a hereditary occupation, and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes.’

So, this definition tries to bring out the basic traits which continue to strengthen the caste system in India.

Caste system has been a dictatorial factor in the Indian society and that no section of the society remained immune from the forbidden implications of the same. As is said earlier, caste system distinguishes Indian society amongst various social formations, the two poles of which happens to be the upper castes in the form of the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas occupying the top position, and the dalits, lying at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. While the former enjoys the undue advantages of the caste system, the latter becomes the most significant section bearing the burnt of prejudices and exploitations borne out of the caste system.

Drawing their sense of superiority the upper caste people continue to command a very high socio-cultural status in the society and, thereby putting them up with a false sense of superior social status. Second, the impact of caste system has been horribly denying a dignified life for dalits in Indian society. Just by being born in

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a particular caste, the dalits are placed in a far inferior and degrading position in the social order.\textsuperscript{5}

Moreover, the Indian social set-up permitted the recognition and acceptance of untouchability which is probably the greatest crime against the humanity. Dalits live a life of perpetual subjugation and humiliation in society and are not allowed to any sort of social upward mobility.

Finally, the position and status of women have been influenced in a complex way by the caste system in India. The caste system has been a weakening factor for the status and position of women in the Indian society for at least two reasons. First, socio-cultural taboos put on women of upper castes in the name of safeguarding them and second, in case of the dalit women being allowed to move out to earn the livelihood which was a model of women empowerment is more in the nature of demeaning the life and personality of such women.

ABOUT CLASS

The idea lying at the core of modern capitalist societies is the class. The concept of class is based on the application of the Marxist method of dialectical materialism to the understanding of history. Class relations are basically the relations between groups of production which may be different from social groups.\textsuperscript{6} On the basis of the idea of Marx about class, the theory of class-struggle had been evolved and lies at the core of the Marxian critique of the capitalist mode of production and


the ultimate demise of the capitalist societies. However, the other sociologists have tried to understand the idea of class more as a sociological concept aimed at understanding the stratification in society rather than mere economic notion as in the case of the Marxian discourse.

In the strict, Marxian parlance, class is understood as a group of people standing in a common relationship to the means of production. Ordinarily, the ownership of wealth along with the particular type of occupation seem to be the two major components on which the various classes in the society are differentiated.

Applying this notion of class in the historical perspective, Lenin defines classes ‘as large groups of people which differ from each other (i) by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production; (ii) by their relation to the means of production; (iii) by their role in the social organization of labour, and consequently, (iv) by the dimensions and mode of acquiring the share of social wealth.’

In Marxian perspective class is defined absolutely in terms of its relation to the economic parameters prevailing in the society, to the total exclusion of the social dimensions of the concept. Marx identified class as a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the means of production or the means through which one gains one’s livelihood. Max Weber conceptualized class as a product of the economic

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relations in society being conditioned by the factors like ‘status’ and ‘party’ in society.\(^8\)

This class configuration underwent a subtle transformation in the modern industrial societies with the change in the means of production. With the setting up of factories, industries, offices and the use of machinery, the previous land owning classes got themselves transformed into the industrial class, owing the establishments critical in carrying out the function of mass production in society. Similarly, the formerly serfs, landless or the tenant class changed their nature to become the working class, earning their livelihood by working in the establishments set up by the capitalists.

The interconnectedness of class with other such categories of social organization remains weak without having any powerful impact on other categories of people. For instance, if one is not able to understand the notion of caste and its implications for various sections of Indian society, it would be almost impossible for that person to grasp the complexities that surround the proper understanding of the idea of India.\(^9\)

Anand Teltumbde forcibly argues that caste is the central issue for any social change in India. While dealing with the caste-class debate, he says that the understanding of caste in the Indian context has wide effects and caste is very much


part of class. The interrogation of the Marxists' position by him continues on the caste and the class.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite the centrality of caste in Indian sociology, few studies have empirically analyzed the relationship between caste and class or the influence of modernization processes on this relationship, particularly at the national level.

**DEBATE ON CLASS AND CASTE**

The debates on caste-class relationships and social versus political changes which were initiated in the Ambedkar era are being carried forward even today. The literature on the interpretations of caste-class projects, the relationship between the two and also between anti-imperialists and anti-caste struggles has been scanty.\textsuperscript{11}

The debate about the association between caste and class is discussed in the context of historical and contemporary perspectives in India, maintaining that what exists in India is caste in class, not caste per se or caste and class.\textsuperscript{12}

The new leftists widened the political role of the working class in relation to the new social movements which are based not only on class but on other categories of caste, gender, culture and ecology.\textsuperscript{13} Influenced by this broadened New Left thought, there emerged the phenomenon of subaltern historiography, popularly known

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as the Cambridge School of Indian scholars. However, the problem with this New Left or Subaltern studies, as Kancha Ilaiah points out, is that they have not given due importance to caste subordination and exploitation. In order to understand the specific caste-class position of subordinated Dalit bahujans, Ilaiah characterized them as sub-subalterns.\textsuperscript{14}

In observance of the Indian social reality, attempts have been made to blend the ideas of Ambedkar and Marx to explain the caste-class phenomenon. As part of this trend, an Indian version of Marxism is proposed by fusing the comforts in annihilation caste with class annihilation.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVE ON CASTE AND CLASS

According to Marxist theory, class struggle is the main principle for the liberation of working classes in any country where antagonistic classes prevail and problems specific to a particular country can only be solved, governed by that main principle, by altering the fundamental conditions in that country.\textsuperscript{15}

The Marxists demystified 'caste' as a category of social and historical analysis and, like the nationalists, debunked the Orientalist construction of caste as India's essence.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, Marxist historians in India also castigated nationalist histories for positing India as an undivided, autonomous, glorious agent of its own


\textsuperscript{15} Ranganayakamma. “For the Solution of the "Caste" Question, Buddha is Not Enough, Ambedkar is Not Enough Either, Marx is a Must”, Hyderabad: Sweet Home Publications, 2001,Pp.33-40.

history and for ignoring the heterogeneous, contesting materialities that underpinned its evolution.

The Marxists generally relegated caste to the domain of the superstructure, situating Indian history within a transition, mode-of-production narrative. Thus, its 'existence and efficacy are [were] to be understood as the ideological products of the specific pre-capitalist social formations that ... made their appearance in Indian history.'

There is endless discussion on caste and class in Marxist circles, but here this study dwells on select Marxists for analysis, beginning with Marx himself.

As is evident from the above paragraphs there is a lack of appreciation on the part of Marxists of the caste system, its origin and contents. Marx in his letter addressed to P. V. Annenkov in Paris wrote about caste as, “the series of economic evolutions of the eternal reasons begins with division of labour. To M. Proudhon division of labour is perfectly simple thing. But was not the caste regime also a particular division of labour? And is it not the division of labour under the system of manufacture, which in England begins in the middle of seventeenth century and come to an end in the last part of the eighteenth, also totally different from the division of labour in large scale modern industry?

In the same book, he described about the village system and said as-“We must not forget these little communities were contaminated by distinction of caste and by slavery, that they subjugate men to eternal circumstances instead of elevating man to

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be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and sabbala, the cow.”

In future results of British Rule in India, Marxs said, “Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian caste, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.”

Caste assumed a centrality in DD. Kosambi's relentless quest for the origin of Indian society, since for him it was a category to understand socio-economic difference. Caste was undoubtedly one of the most significant categories in Kosambi's understanding of early Indian history. At one level, he equated the institution, often explicitly, with class. In his classic formulation, for instance, he stated: Caste is an important reflection of the actual relations of production, particularly at the time of its formation.

Kosambi expressed three critical, somewhat conflicting ideas. One is an equation of caste with class, second was the religio-ritual dimension of caste, and its implications for understanding of historical change. The third idea pertains to an association between caste and social stagnation, typified by the Asiatic mode of production.

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Kosambi was of the opinion that the supposed un-shakeability and inherent strength of the caste system vanish as soon as new forms of production come in. The modern Indian city implies productive relations not based upon caste, often in conflict with caste, when the system is least effective in our cities, in contrast to the villages.

One of the ways in which Kosambi developed the equation between caste and class was through his analysis of the category of the sūdra as he visualised the sudra as constituting a class of more or less dependent labourers with virtually no independent access to productive resources.21

As is evident, even as Kosambi argued that caste is class, the equation was, for him, rarely simplistic, or even simple. Kosambi attempted to work with the equation between caste and class, defining both with a somewhat narrow precision.22

Caste system in India is thoroughly connected with relations of labour. The majority of people does not possess means of production and are divided into SC, ST and OBC categories. These castes are not merely classes, but are a set of knotted relations of labour. The reason for their economic and social difficulty is the kind of role that they play in the relations of labour.

One ought to take the aspect of 'annihilation of caste' from Ambedkar's theory, but such annihilation is possible only by means of class struggle which is aimed at a radical transformation of relations of labour.23 According to Ranganayakamma,

21 ‘The Emergence of National Characteristics among Three Indo-European Peoples' appeared in 1939
23 Ibid.
annihilation of caste will not take place before the economic conditions of lower castes are changed.

On the whole, according to Marxists of the orthodox school, the political revolution led by the proletariat or working class to capture State power would ultimately emancipate all other forms of oppression. Going by this doctrine, it followed that the emergence of Dalit consciousness and identity as a separate social movement was non-progressive and sectarian.

Neo-Marxism or New left, which challenged this orthodox historical materialism, brought about a general renaissance of Marxist thought, led by George Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci. The other luminaries of the new structuralist Marxism were Louis Althusser, the Frankfurt school of critical theory led by Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, all of whom sought to give relevant answers many acute problems of society and politics. They widened the political role of the working class in relation to the new social movements which are based not only on class but on other categories of caste, gender, culture and ecology.24

Influenced by this broadened New Left thought, there emerged the phenomenon of subaltern historiography, popularly known as (he Cambridge School of Indian scholars, with Ranjit Guha in the forefront.25 Their mode of historiography is distinctly different from the mainstream history. They write "history from below". According to the subaltern historiographers, all forms of social consciousness are an


outcome of spontaneous impulse to resist imperial dominance. These historiographers focused on popular social movements in colonial India, keeping in view the dyadic relationship between imperialism or colonial dominance and people's resistance.²⁶

However, the problem with this New Left or Subaltern studies, as Kancha Ilaiah points out, is that they have not given due importance to caste subordination and exploitation. Moreover, they did not differentiate between Gandhi and Ambedkar or Nehru and Periyar. It is Ilaiah’s view that Gandhi and Nehru represented the interests of the upper caste, feudal and bourgeois forces, whereas Ambedkar and Periyar represented the poor, the oppressed and the suppressed. In order to understand the specific caste-class position of subordinated Dalit bahujans, Ilaiah characterized them as sub-subalterns.²⁷

This study considered these select Marxist reading of caste to point at the way the communist movement manifested itself in the Indian political domain. And also to suggest that it did not have the wherewithal to rethink the question of class struggle from the point of view of the dalit movement. The latter's engagement with the millennia-long pain of caste oppression could not be accommodated within the Indian communist movement's dogmatic acceptance of the primacy of class struggle. The untouchables were welcome into its fold but first as members of the working class.


AMBEDKARITE PERSPECTIVE ON CASTE AND CLASS

Dr B. R. Ambedkar while talking about caste said: “The caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically. Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with the outsiders: and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem.”

The problem of caste and its consequences that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar talked about is what we see in Marxist and Radical Marxists circles now. And he went on to say: “It may be an exaggeration to assert the theory of class-conflict, but the existence of definite classes in a society is a fact. Their basis may differ. They may be economic, or intellectual, or social, but a individual in a society is always a member of a class. This is a universal fact and early Hindu society could not be an exception to this rule, and, as a matter of fact, we know it was not. If we bear this generalization in mind, our study of the genesis of caste would be very much facilitated, for we have only to determine what was the class that first made itself into a caste, for class and caste, so to say, are next door neighbours, and it is only a span that separates the two.

A Caste is an Enclosed Class.”


29 Ibid.
Ambedkar accepted most of the economic analysis of Marxism, during much of his social and political life, roughly from the late 1920s through the 1940s, and even attempted to organize along these lines, creating a radical movement of Mahar and Kunbi peasant against landlords, allying with communists in the working class struggle.30

These were years in which the pages of Janata, Ambedkar’s weekly, were filled with reports of the struggles of workers and peasants against ‘capitalists and landlords’ as well as the fight of the Dalits against atrocities. Ambedkar did not have much time for theoretical writing in this period of tumultuous organizing, but his programmes and speeches indicate that he accepted broadly the Marxist analysis of class struggle so far as economic issue were concerned. What this led to, though, was a kind of duel system theory which saw capitalism and Brahmanism (casteism) as separate systems of exploitation, one to be fought by class struggle, the other by caste struggle. As he put it in his famous address to the Mahar railway workers at Mahad:

There are in my view two enemies which the workers of the country have to deal with. The enemies are Brahmanism and Capitalism I do not mean the power, privileges and interests of Brahmins as a community. By Brahminism I mean the negation of the spirit of liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In that sense it is rampant in all classes

and is not confined to the Brahamins alone though they have been the originators of it.\textsuperscript{31}

Ambedkar took as his basic goals the ending of exploitation and oppression, the achievement of equality, liberty, community.\textsuperscript{32} He was flexible about what he called it, insisting that it represented all that Marx had wanted to achieve with ‘communism’ but frequently describing it as ‘social democracy’.

He had a vision of development that emphasized the creation of a modern society of abundance; though by the end of his life he rejected the economics of Marx, his positive approach to economic growth, his insistence on creating a society free from suffering and his readiness to take the best of the global heritage was radically different from a Gandhian orientation to the traditional village and limitation of needs.\textsuperscript{33}

The path to achieving this was backed up by an understanding of the nature of human society and an interpretation of human history. Human society, as he saw it, was characterized by conflict and contradiction but also by reason and will. Not simply ‘economic factors’ were motivating force in history, but also efforts to achieve power and efforts at liberation.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, along with class caste (and by implication

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 26.
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patriarchy) were stratification defined sections of society which represented decisive factors in contradiction and processes of social change.

Within India, Brahmanism/Hinduism was the historical basis of the stratification system, of the social inequality which was constituted in the caste system. Hinduism meant the lack of liberty, the negation of inequality for all groups but especially for women and untouchables, and the destruction of the community. Historically speaking, where a Buddhist upsurge had been revolutionary, Hinduism was the ‘counter-revolution of ancient India’

Dalits of ex-untouchables had a crucial role to play in defeating Brahmanic Hinduism and opening the road to a society of equality and liberation. Whereas, originally, Ambedkar had emphasized on the destruction of caste as a pre-requisite to economic quality; socialism now he began to argue that untouchables were the carriers of Buddhism, the liberatory message of Indian tradition.35

The process of change involved internal (spiritual) change, the ‘slave’s rejection of slavery’, and also a social struggle and political dialogue and political organizing. Ambedkar rejection of violence was not a principle of absolute principle, like the Gandhians, but simply because he saw it as ineffective as a main method of change.

Ambedkar philosophy was an Enlightening philosophy that could be described as of ‘social liberation’ combined with an emphasis on caste as a social reality; and it distinguished Ambedkar from both Marxists who saw the proletariat as revolutionary

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and neglected cultural and social factors, and from both the dominant and Congress trends (not to mention the Hindu right wing) which refused to see elements of exploitation and oppression in Indian tradition.36

Another Marxist scholar of dalit political and social history who took this stand is Gail Omvedt. She, while differing from the classical Marxists in crucial respects, emphasizes that the resolution of the caste issue must precede all other revolutionary movements in India.

Omvedt differs from the classical Marxist historians in that she rejects the superstructure theory of caste. Following Godelier, who formulated a trenchant Marxist critique of Louis Dumont, Omvedt situates caste firmly in the domain of the base and sees it functioning at the level of the relations of production. She draws on Godelier's infrastructural argument that 'each structure – social, kinship, political, etc. has its own content not reducible to any other and its own mode and time-scale of evolution.'37 She demonstrates that in a fundamentally agrarian society like India, caste and material/economic factors have always been deeply intertwined. Thus, relegating the question of caste to the domain of the 'social' or of pure 'form' renders any traditional Marxist account of Indian history and society which locates 'reality' in the class struggle not only historically inaccurate but also ideologically questionable:

Traditional Marxist analyses are ... showing themselves as inadequate.

The view that though there are class differences among the peasantry (rich, poor, landless, etc.), these are non-antagonistic and that the main


contradiction is between 'peasants' as a group and landlords, has left the major communist parties tailing after the rural rich rather than building an independent political movement based on the rural toilers.38

In her major work on the dalit movement, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994), Omvedt notes that most Marxist analyses of caste have been based on a narrow reading of economic exploitation in the sense that they have drawn on the foundational category of class as it has been conceptualized within the capitalist mode of production. Class in such conceptualization is defined in terms of ownership of the means of production, and class struggle those who do not toil but live and thrive on the expropriation of the surplus produced by the labour of the toiling masses. In such a reading, where classes come into existence only in the capitalist 'core' areas of factory production, there is no theoretical space to account for caste-based and other forms of economic exploitation that do not necessarily follow from the concept of ownership of the means of production. As Omvedt says:

Some owners are exploited (e.g. small peasants); some non-owners exploit (e.g. controllers of state property in societies described as 'socialist'; lords and upper castes in certain feudal societies). Proletarian husbands may benefit from the exploitation of their wives' unpaid labour. Moreover, many ecologists would argue that nature itself can be 'exploited' in the double sense that resources from nature incorporated into the accumulation cycle increase the accumulation of

capital, and that this has a destructive effect on the ecologies of regions
that provide such resources.\textsuperscript{39}

Omvedt is also against theoretical attempts that extend the analytical reach of
class to include every other form of economic exploitation. This, for instance, is the
stance of activist scholars like Sharad Patil who argue that caste is class in a South
Asian form. In such readings, caste is read non-ideologically, and caste struggle or jati
sangharsh is seen as a form of class struggle.\textsuperscript{40} Such attempts, Omvedt maintains,
continue to assert the hegemony of the analytic of class. Omvedt would rather
maintain the narrowness of the classical Marxist theorizing of class and argue that as
an analytic category it cannot begin to encompass all forms of economic exploitation,
such as those based on patriarchy or caste-hierarchy, for instance. These latter are not
merely superstructural or ideological, but have a pronounced economic dimension as
well. The forms of exploitation they assume contribute to the accumulation of capital,
but they are not determined at every instance by the sphere of surplus value and
capitalist production in the narrow sense: that is, by manufacturing and processes of
wage labour. One could argue from here that together they constitute the outside that
inheres in the categories of class and capital. Omvedt, of course, does not argue for
such a deconstructive reading of capital and class. Rather, she puts forward a
historicist reading of caste-based forms of economic exploitation as those that had a
prior existence outside the spheres of capitalist production and which was
subsequently brought into the domain of capital. Her caste as infrastructure thesis is

\textsuperscript{39} Gail Omvedt. Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in

\textsuperscript{40} Sharad Patil. Liberalism vs Left and Right, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XXXVII, No.6,
based squarely on the historicism of 'then' and 'now'. From this position she formulates her theory of liberation of caste–class oppression by arguing that in the South Asian context one could not talk of class struggle in additive terms—that is, in terms of adding the issues of caste, gender and ecology to the primacy of class but only in terms that recognized the fact that the very term 'class struggle' had no meaning unless it took the form of community-based struggles, whether such struggles were based on caste, gender or religion.\footnote{Ajay Gudavarthy. *Maoism, Democracy and Globalisation: Cross- Currents in Indian Politics*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2014, p. 57-61.}

It is not a coincidence that of the many theories offered to account for the genealogy of caste, Omvedt endorses the materialist account put forward by Morton Klass in his book *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*. Klass places the origin of caste at the very beginning of Indian class society. According to Klass, the pre-Aryan tribal societies were inherently egalitarian. Gradually, with the improvement in the means of production, such societies started generating economic surplus; such surplus led to inequality in economic status among the various tribal groups. This economic inequality then evolved into a very specific form of social stratification that we now know as caste. Caste has since coexisted with 'several different modes of production, from the very earliest ones which we would define essentially as tributary modes through the feudal period up to the present when capitalism has come to dominate.'\footnote{Gail Omvedt. (Ed.), “Class, Caste and Land in India: An Introductionary Essay”. *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian State*, Delhi: Authors’ Guild Publications, 1982, Pp. 9-50.}

Omvedt's argument that caste and class in India have always meshed together derives its strength from her invocation of Marx's thesis that the 'economic' began to...
be seen as a separate-phenomenon, distinct from the political and the social, only with the advent of the capitalist mode of production. In pre-capitalist Indian society, as she says,

unpaid surplus labour was pumped out of direct producers via a system that was itself defined and organized in terms of caste. While the sub-castes were a basic unit of the kinship system, the jati itself was a class phenomenon and was a basic unit of the division of labour ... caste structured the very nature and existence of the exploiting and exploited sections ... it was impossible to speak of a 'caste system' and a 'class structure' as separate concrete phenomenon.43

Another scholar and activist, Sharad Patil, the leader of the Satya Shodhak Communist Party, has initiated theoretical debate based on this perspective (an Indian version of Marxism). According to his party formulation, "the class system was manifested only through the Varna and Jati system."44 Taking Jati as the basic unit, Patil tried to explain the caste system within the frame of historical materialism. In Patil's view, only in colonial times Jati disintegrated and gave rise to the class system.45

43 Ibid. p. 14
CASTE, CLASS PERSPECTIVE

The other scholars who adopted the caste-and-class approach are Gail Omvedt, Manoranjan Mohanty, Sharad Patil, D.L. Seth, Madhusudan Subedi, Louis Dumount, Anand Teltumbde, Kancha Ilaiah and other scholars looked into this perspective.

Meillassoux, a scholar underscored the material significance of caste by showing its role in organizing “relations of production and reproduction”. In fact he conceptualized caste in terms of class. From his standpoint, the dominant caste, as the peripheral landowning group, occupies an important position; its control over the means of production confers on it the capacity to exploit a ‘labouring class’ recruited from among low, usually, dalit castes.46

According to Madhusudan Subedi, the discourse of caste has been shifted from ritual hierarchy and social discrimination to an instrument to mobilize people for economic and political gain. In the caste-based society, high caste groups promoted their own advancement and initiated various economic changes at the community and regional levels that effectively marginalized the people in several important ways. The ability of dominant groups to bring more and more labor under its control resulted rather quickly in exaggerated wealth inequities and higher social positions for some. Higher caste groups gained considerably more power, wealth and influence than the lower caste groups, thus bringing them higher economic status.47


The nexus between caste and occupation can be broken but yet the overlap of caste and class can be very strong. A rigorous social and economic investigation into the caste composition of the occupational structure can help drive an objective, larger picture of the nature and degree of change.\footnote{Ibid.}

A basic shift took place in caste: from ritual hierarchy to identity politics, from ascribed and designated status to negotiated positions of power, from ritual definitions of roles and positions to civic and political definitions of the same. The caste system eroded at the ritual level, but emerged at the political and economic levels.\footnote{Rajni Kothari. “Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste”, \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, Vol - XXIX No. 26, June 25, 1994, Pp.1589-1594.}

Caste, as a sociological construct appears to be relevant only in deconstructing the underlying features of Indian society, as the phenomenon of caste does not exist as a powerful component of the social structure of other civilizations. A comprehensive understanding of the major sociological constructs like caste and class seem to be incomplete without having a deep analysis of the mutual interactions and interconnectedness between these two concepts.

According to Manoranjan Mohanty, “the capitalist class in the new phase of Indian politics was not the typical anti-feudal, secular, modern universalist social
force that textbooks on European capitalism depict but it played politics of religion, caste and ethnicity from region to region to secure leverage in its operations.\textsuperscript{50}

The local non-brahmin movements and backward class political groupings were also patronized by industrialists, who simultaneously patronized upper-caste organizations. The emerging ideology of Indian capitalist class was partly shaped by the social dynamics within the country and partly by the global ideology of capitalism. Thus, the class politics of capitalist globalization got seriously entangled with politics of caste, ethnicity, gender and such other categories. So it is extremely important to see the interface of caste, class and gender in politics and understand the specific form that they take in the particular context.\textsuperscript{51}

However, we observe that when caste and class are studied together the influence of caste is much weaker than that of class origins where access to certain class destinations is concerned. Thus we conclude that the importance of class origins on class destinations has so far been under-emphasized in the Indian literature.\textsuperscript{52}

The neo-Marxists who adopted the synthetic caste-class approach within the broad new historical materialism, provide a rich insight into the Indian social reality, notwithstanding their limitations. The view that the radicalization of Dalit theory and praxis through the synthesization of Ambedkarism and Marxism for the guidance of


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

true revolutionary transformation of caste-class society is at present in its embryonic form and needs much greater and comprehensive understanding.\textsuperscript{53}

Omvedt maintains that notwithstanding the many inadequacies of existing Marxist theories, the Marxist methodology is fully adequate to throw light on the structure and role of caste in South Asian society.\textsuperscript{54}

Omvedt argues that the orthodox Marxists have invalidated the pre-capitalist sociological categories like caste, gender, family, kinship, the state, which categories, in her view, are as much exploitative as class. In these categories, the fight against exploitation takes place through communities, tribes, castes and kinship groups. In order to understand the linkage between ideological superstructure and economic base, she has constructed "a revised historical materialism". She argues that, class defined solely in terms of the ownership of private property and the ownership or control of the means of production does not explain major aspects of exploitation and capital accumulation. Hence, she begins her revised historical materialism with defining the caste system and its exploitative features of endogamous principles and practices, purity and pollution and hierarchy, which shaped Indian society and the Indian economic system.\textsuperscript{55}

Kancha Ilaiah, in his study of the Dalit bahujan consciousness in Andhra Pradesh, has adopted the caste-class approach. He finds limitations, both subjective and objective, in the writing of both Western and Indian upper caste scholars in their


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. p.30.
approach to Dalit bahujan history. In his view, caste constructed consciousness in ways that were fundamentally different from the consciousness created by class in European societies.56

The most substantive challenges to earlier understandings of caste have emerged from Marxist feminist and dalit feminist perspectives. The former is exemplified in the Indian context in the writings of Uma Chakravarti. Uma draws attention to the need to re-conceptualize both caste and class in terms of gender.57

One of the most significant contributors to the study of caste, Srinivas (2003) argued that the subsistence economy of rural India, dependent on jati-based division of labor, is the ‘essence of caste’. As this is rapidly breaking down, it ‘augurs the end of social order which has continued for 2000 years or more’. He suggested that production will become freed from jati-based division of labor, economic relation will payments become autonomous, and payments in goods will be replaced by cash. Indian rural society will move, or is moving, from status to contract.58

Despande (2011) argued that the breakdown of the caste hierarchy has broken the traditional links between caste and profession, and released enormous entrepreneurial energies in the South. It is true that over time, occupational structure itself has undergone a profound change, while caste division has been relatively static. It is also true that any kind of skill acquisition (for example, admission to a


management or a computer course, or to a dental school) is not contingent upon one’s caste status. Indeed, none of the modern occupations are determined by birth, and most are not caste-based.\textsuperscript{59}

In an exploratory study, D.L. Sheth\textsuperscript{60} overviews and examines the significant changes that have occurred in the caste system in modern times which have resulted in the ideological and structural transformation of the caste system. The most important among the changes include the formation of a new, trans-local identity among the lower castes.

The nexus between hereditary ritual status and occupations which constituted one of the caste system’s defining features is progressively breaking down. Today, members of a single caste are becoming increasingly differentiated among themselves in terms of their occupations, educational and income levels and lifestyles.

When social and religious aspects of economic relationships are insisted upon by any caste, such as traditional obligations of one status group to another, it often leads to inter-caste conflicts and violence in the villages. The nomenclature that has stuck to these formations is the one that was devised by the state in the course of implementing its social and cultural policies—especially of affirmative action (reservations). As such, the new formations are identified as: the forward or the upper castes, the other backward castes (OBCs), the Dalits or Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the tribals or the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Over the years, these categories have


acquired a strong social and political content, each category providing a collective self-identification to its members.\textsuperscript{61}

Regardless of the national focus of caste in Indian sociology, very few studies have observed the relationship between caste and class and or the powerful influence of transformation and modernization processes on this relationship.\textsuperscript{62} The resemblance of caste and class in contemporary India was studied by using the method of log linear analysis.

Divya Vaid empirically explores the relation between caste and class in contemporary India. The existence of a caste system places India in a unique position where the study of class mobility is concerned. Certain castes have been historically associated with particular occupations with modernization and resultant urbanization. While the relation between caste and class is not completely straightforward, a tentative picture of congruence between the two does appear; High Castes are seen to be concentrated in the higher social classes like the professional, large business and farming classes. Also, the association between caste and class origins is not seen to weaken over time or at least not by very much. Furthermore, lower castes like the Scheduled Castes seem to be experiencing difficulty in gaining upward class mobility though conversely High Castes are not cushioned from the forces of downward class mobility.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.


Divya also adds that in India modernization has not had the expected effect as the association between caste and class has neither disappeared nor declined appreciably. The author used binary logistic regression to find out whether caste becomes a less important influence on destination. By applying the model of Constant Social Fluidity (CSF), it is also concluded that the relation between caste and class destinations has not changed appreciably over the birth-cohorts. Thus, even though the class distribution in the country has changed subsequently with modernization, the ‘underlying association’ between community and class destination has not changed much. 64

As castes have been historically associated with particular caste occupations, recent research argues that modernization may bring about changes in the relation between caste and class.

Panini summarizes these changes when he states that economic liberalization in the long run is likely to weaken the hold of caste over the economy. The quote 65 from Panini highlights a variant of the modernization theory specific to India. Panini concludes that ‘evidence suggests accelerated occupational mobility which has broken down the caste based division of labour.’ 66

But at present, Panini and Srinivas’ analysis of the transformations with liberalization and modernization that would bring to the caste system do not meet

64 S. Kumar, A. Heath, and O. Heath. “Determinants of social mobility in India.” Economic and Political Weekly, 37:2983-2987 (year)


66 Ibid. 29.
universal reality. The continued association of castes in particular occupations despite liberalization has been much debated. According to Jayaram\textsuperscript{67} the ‘conjugation of caste and class is no longer a sociological axiom’, and Kumar\textsuperscript{68} show considerable occupational variation within castes.

Finally, Kancha Ilaiah comprehends that the Indian nationalist historiography of the liberal, the Marxist or the subaltern did not differentiate between Gandhi and Ambedkar or Nehru and Periyar. He pronounces that though all these leaders must have made attempts to lead the people of the same constituency, due to the difference in their ideological moorings, they did not represent the same masses.\textsuperscript{69}

Ilaiah states that the historic Telangana armed struggle and the subsequent Naxalite revolt have failed in transforming the caste-class relations in post-independent the resultant of which were the signs of development of regional capital along with restructured class relations. In the course of this development, the caste structures began to rigidify within the sphere of subordination and domination.\textsuperscript{70}

Analyzing the communist and Naxalite movements and their role in class struggles, Kancha Ilaiah gets on that the communist parties articulated only economic questions and took all care to see that the SCs did not develop an independent identity


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
by transmigrating Ambedkarism into Marxism. But it appears to him that the future discourse would be that of caste and class but not of one dimensional class or one dimensional caste. It would be a sort of synthesis of Marxism and Ambedkarism.

LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

The people who advocated this perspective based their arguments on Comparative social theory. They claimed that social differentiation and stratification is common to most of the societies elsewhere in the world. While accepting the varna vyavastha they argued for change on the periphery like untouchability and temple entry. They believe that caste system is just a division of labour and the caste based discrimination that we see today is an aberration of a well defined social system. They also went on to say that caste system contributes to the society’s self-sufficiency and stability.

Comparative social theorists have generally placed caste systems not as a unique religious ideological or structural category but as a matter of social differentiation and social stratification. They argue that every system of social stratification allocates power and privilege in the society in which it occurs, and most, if not all, such systems are associated with some ranked division of labor that promotes interdependence.

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71 In such way he feels that the communists have hijacked the dalit movement but they have certainly played a significant role in increasing the wages of dalits as the communist movement as more ‘economic determinist’

Gandhi, while supporting *varnashrama dharma*, argued for reform and protection from above.\(^{73}\) When Ambedkar stressed the need for political power for Dalits, Gandhi said, “what these people need more than elections to the legislatures are protection from social and religious persecutions.”\(^{74}\) And I quote again. “Those who speak of the political rights of the Untouchables do not know their India; do not know how Indian society is today constructed”

It appeared that only the anti-imperialist, secular nationalist movement, represented by Indian National Congress, constituted the heart of India’s democratic revolution, and that the various workers and peasants’ mobilization allied with it in complex but antagonistic ways; however, mobilizations on the basis of caste or religion were seen as retrogressive, diversionary and even pro-British.

We can guess the reason why Gandhi and his Indian National Congress and other Hindu politicians took this liberal stand when it came to address the issues of caste, which is expressed by an anonymous letter written to the *Times of India* in January 1933:

Hindu politicians now embrace the depressed classes partly because of the latter’s meteoric emergence into the political life of the country, and partly because of the apprehension of their own position in the future. They would now be ready to include the untouchables among


\(^{74}\) Babasaheb Ambedkar. “*Writings and Speeches*”. Vol. II Ed. Vasant Moon. Bombay: Govt. of Maharastra, 1982. p. 661
Brahmans, not merely among Hindus, if Dr. Ambedkar wants it. This is the real condition today.\textsuperscript{75}

The above are the four different perspectives on caste class debate. Caste, as a sociological construct appears to be relevant in deconstructing the underlying features of Indian society, as the phenomenon of caste does not exist as a powerful component of the social structure of other civilizations. The nexus between caste and occupation can be broken but yet the overlap of caste and class can be very strong. A comprehensive understanding of the major sociological constructs like caste and class seem to be incomplete without having a deep analysis of the mutual interactions and interconnectedness between these two concepts. It can possibly be analysed through the concrete practices in the interconnectedness of Radical Left movement and Dalit movement in Telangana.