



# Beyond the Veil of Identity Politics – Preliminary Explorations Through Categories of Caste and Class in Indian Society

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*Identity politics, based on the principle of homogenizations, segregation of social realities into unconnected, autonomous modules, has allowed the expansion of capital, thwarting any possibility of resistance against the system.*

## Need to Reinforce Marxism as a Method

Recent developments in some of the North Indian states have raised serious questions about the existing analysis of structures and stratification in Indian society. One such question relates to the debate over the continued validity of caste as a basis of social stratification. Is it right to depend solely upon the study of caste to understand relations in Indian society rather than pursuing the analysis of class as the defining factor? This battle is an old one and has invoked lengthy debates not only among intellectuals but political formations as well—understandably, it has been impossible to separate the “social” from the “political”. Furthermore this debate has become increasingly dense as a result of “assertions” by backward castes (BCs) and Dalits which, in spite of having been in existence for quite some time in other parts of the country, have been a relatively new phenomenon in North India, especially in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Intrinsic to this debate has been the issue of ‘identity politics’, a debate that has been raised aggressively after the sudden discovery of

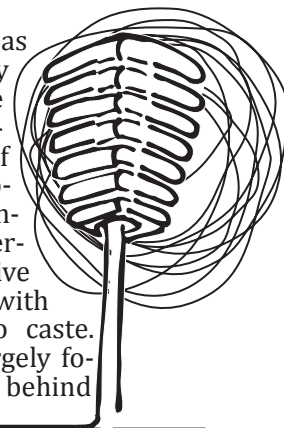
‘multiple subjectivities’ by the various post-isms and the proponents of the so-called new social movements. Indian social sciences have not remained detached from this discourse, with a further impetus from the numerous assertions by different ‘social’ categories across the country. There are many issues involved in these debates and tendencies, one of them being the well thought-out marginalization of certain schools of thought such as Marxism, which are better equipped to explore and explain these developments.

The most important offshoot of this marginalization has been the negation of dialectics as a method to be employed in understanding society. Some might argue that dialectics is not really a method, but in agreement with Allman, I would argue that though dialectics is not a method in the strict sense of the word it has been vital in the development of a specific type of critical thinking. “In other words, it is not an abstract, formal, step-by-step approach but rather a manner of intellectually grasping the truth, or the internal structure/essence, of any real phenomenon, which is not transparently obvious or observable” (Allman: 2007: 04). The

marginalization of Marxism in social sciences is not a problem particular to India. Following Simon Clark and others, Allman et al. argue that, “we witness the virtual abandonment of the notion of the working class—not just by erstwhile postmodernists, but also by mainstream social scientists. Most people who analyse social class today do no such thing; rather they have social inequality and stratification in view. Social class itself is evaded and avoided. This bad seed at the heart of capitalist society, indeed its structural core, is covered in mounds of obfuscation ...” (Allman et al., 2005: 135).

## Looking Beyond the Veil of Identity Politics

An effort has been made here, by trying to overcome these methodological shortcomings of the mainstream social sciences, to understand the repercussions of collective identity politics, with special reference to caste. The analysis will largely focus on the reasons behind





the fact that despite strong assertions in North India by Dalits and Backward Castes, in the recent past their situation has remained largely unaltered except that the elite from these sections has started participating in the market and the states. Perhaps, as Mukherjee (2000) argued, we need to move beyond “[the] mystification of class formation in Indian society” so as to be able to more fully grasp the manner in which the “resistance identity” (see Castells: 2001 for conceptual elaboration), in this case that of being from a lower caste, has increasingly been co-opted into mainstream and hegemonic structures of power. Resistances characterized and defined by caste identities have gradually had submit to the diktats of capital. Perhaps even the most radical “identity” discourses stop short of suggesting an alternative system and better accommodation in the existing order of things is the agenda of the struggles they lead. If this is so, we need to be better equipped in our struggles and the need for a dialectical sociological analysis becomes paramount.

The use of dialectics as a method here becomes relevant because “reality is more than appearances and...focussing exclusively on appearances, on the evidence that strikes us immediately and directly can be extremely misleading” (Ollman: 2003: 13). We need to make a conscious effort to go beyond the apparent, to the actual, because the visible caste based social formations have more to them than just the (apparent) social. We must locate our understanding of caste within the wider context of the capitalist mode of production. Empirical studies on villages must be seen in relatedness not only to diverse elements within the village but also outside the village. Indian sociology has much catching up to do on this account and dialectics can be one way of addressing the concerns over the failure of sociology to deliver in times of post the Mandal Commission (as expressed by Deshpande (2004) for example).

Today, caste has emerged as an instrument of political practice. There is continued need of caution

while dealing with the struggles of caste associations at various historical junctures—rigid, unreflective ways of dealing with the question and issues of caste show a lack of understanding of history. The role played by the Dalit movement and backward caste associations in pre- and post-independence India has been completely different. Different agendas have mobilized them in the different politico-economic contexts that have existed in these periods. Understandably then, struggles and organizations based on caste cannot, at all times, be the basis of radical social and economic transformation. Today, for instance, the electoral representatives of the BC collective identity in the two states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have been working in alliance with capital instead of looking after the interests of landless agricultural workers and poor peasantry belonging to their constituencies. But their militant portrayal and posturing after the Mandal Commission and the subsequent political developments did put into wide currency their image as the “real” representatives of BCs, irrespective of class. (This, along with the decision of the Left to side with them contributed to the weakening of the Left in these states). Whether the question is of land reforms, decommodifying the social sector (which is essential for social justice to prevail in real terms), or addressing the issue of wage or labour rights, the representatives who entered the scene in this phase of BC mobilization, when in power, failed on all accounts.

These developments in the situation of Backward Caste movements show how caste is increasingly being used within the politico-economic paradigm of capitalism to further the consolidation of capital. It has in fact become an effective instrument to retain economic inequity in society, as caste mobilizations diminish possibilities of cross-caste, working class mobilisations. The idea of social justice built on the foundation of distributive justice and the rhetoric of social dignity has not been effective enough to take the Backward Castes beyond their economic mis-

eries. What has happened instead is that a section has emerged as the ruling elite within the Backward Castes and has monopolised the advantages offered by capitalism. A large chunk of the Backward Castes, comprising landless labourers and poor peasants, has remained stuck in a state of economic deprivation. Wealth has remained concentrated in a few hands.

As mentioned before, the emphasis on caste as the determining characteristic of stratification in Indian society is partly about establishing the social as superior to the economic in the hierarchy of determinants. It has been argued ad nauseam that caste discrimination emanates from social values, attitudes and locations. The role of economic aspects has invariably been played down by analysts in understanding the assertions of identity politics, ignoring the way in which caste becomes an instrument of mobilization for the BC elite so as to demonstrate its ‘power’ and enhance its access to the market and the instruments of state. The point is not so much about positing the social against the economic but about looking at their dialectical relationship—they interact with and alter not only each other but also political and cultural variables. This in turn will help us understand why, despite the overwhelming participation of Backward Castes in the movement, only a certain section takes away the benefits. Why does the relationship between the rich and the poor Koeri, or the rich and the poor Yadav not alter even though all of them have been part of the Backward Caste assertion? What retains the inequity within or between castes? Which takes us to the question—why do we not consider the aspects of class, competition and co-option as innate to Indian society today? There are many more such questions which are unanswered as every analysis—like that of social change, status quo and forms of resistance—remains restricted to particularities devoid of any attempt to understand the influence of interactions with other realities. There is a necessity to rank our variables of analysis. For instance the economic



is a stronger determinant than the social when it comes to understanding the absence of land reforms, equitable educational opportunities, employment generation, ensuring at least minimum wages, health facilities to all etc. on the agenda of Backward Caste collective identity politics.

Indian sociology has not been able to identify the developments in the sphere of caste based mobilizations and identity politics because of its uni-focal attention on caste, which translates largely into the social, divorced from other elements such as the processes of production determining the location of an individual or group in society. It is this limited analysis which has led to the continued emphasis on the potential of caste based identity politics, which conveniently excludes other determinants of one's social location, and has failed to understand the problems brought about by the emergence of caste as the defining characteristic of social movements. Identity politics, based on the principle of homogenizations, segregation of social realities into unconnected, autonomous modules, has allowed the expansion of capital, thwarting any possibility of resistance against the system. What one sees is a shift in trajectory, where movements are bilked of their radical potential and are transformed into reformative drives (to make the system better)—implying successful co-option of resistance in to the system. Examples abound and caste is just a case in point. Emerging as a movement for social justice, raising demands against discrimination, Backward Caste identity politics in Bihar in the pre-Independence period was aimed at attaining a scenario of democratized opportunities. The post-Independence period on the other hand witnessed a reification of this identity, which got limited to being a tool of mobilization used by the new emerging elite to serve its purposes. While this example gives us a useful picture to substantiate the argument about the difference between caste based identity politics before and after Independence it also allows us to enter into a discussion of the effects of conceptualizing caste as

a homogeneous identity on the entire backward caste population.

I cannot help reiterating this time and again—Indian sociology has, by and large in a very unperceptive manner continued a celebration of this identity politics. Strangely even Left political formations publicly accepted their over emphasis on class. Located within a context where economy and society are witnessing rapid changes in light of the transforming character of capitalism it is important to consider what is the purpose of collective identity politics in its reified form. Caste is no longer the rigid and hierarchical determining element of social relations that it once was. It was such when the village economies, or economies in general, were able to sustain people on basis of their traditional occupations. Now what one does to sustain oneself is not always constant. Nature of the economy determines occupations; new criteria are skill, human resources, technical know how etc. Even in villages where people are still engaged in settled, and relatively non-fluid occupations of labourers, peasants and landlords, the situation has altered considerably and traditional occupations are not always the basis of livelihood. Then where does caste exist?

It exists as an identity and as an ideological apparatus. It has been kept alive in discourses that characterize family networks, socialization processes and rituals which are so innate to even a modern Indian's life. Does that mean then that caste defines the everyday social life of an individual? Scholars would argue in the affirmative: look at everyday violence, discrimination in temples, in use of water resources, marriages etc. Oppressed and oppressors exist! And truly enough, one does come across incidents of these kinds. I would argue however that what is manifested in everyday relations is the apparent, with its own consequences of discrimination and atrocities, but an analysis of the underlying reality reveals how caste becomes a non-entity when alliances across castes are forged against a common opponent, such as in case of the landless versus landed.

Within caste, there exist sharp divisions of class, an aspect that has not emerged clearly in Indian sociology due to its seeming apathy towards class as something that could offer a useful study of social difference and its tendency to look at caste as homogeneous. Because the analysis begins not from the nature of the production process, which shapes social relations, but from caste as a given social relation, it perceives the relationship between castes as having an a priori configuration in Indian society. There is a problem in the ahistorical analysis which does not look at the question of identity as in state of constant flux, as a process running in conjunction with the changes taking place in the larger system, of which nobody is untouched.

We must analyze not only the given locations of certain people in society, but also the relations that are forged in the process of production in society. In capitalism, the relations formed in this process lead to the emergence of propertyless and propertied sections—there are also sections which appear to fall in between, but in times of crisis take sides determining their location in society. The sole motive that drives the ruling class is the maximization of the surplus so as to propel the growth and expansion of capital. This motive leads the modern Indian ruling class into three types of well concerted actions: (1) allowing caste as an ideological apparatus to persist to allow for the creation of the 'other', with whom they compete (as in the case of upper castes versus Backward Castes—Koeris versus Yadavas etc.); (2) the consolidation of their strength through the forging of collectives based on rhetoric of caste so as to extend their monopoly over instruments of state and market; and (3) making all efforts possible to retain and expand their hegemony within the caste as well as in society as a whole—for which, once more the role of caste as a homogeneous entity becomes important as it prevents the emergence of any organized opposition.

In order to understand better what identity politics has done



to the political scene beyond the apparent, considering the example of Bihar would be useful. The year 1990 became a landmark in the political history of Bihar and of India. It provides us with useful fodder to analyze and understand the nature and purpose of caste based identity politics. The triumph of Laloo Prasad Yadav is understood to be the first Backward Caste majority government in Bihar. His government came into power because of tremendous support of the poor in the state and seemed to be a near complete rebuttal of upper caste hegemony in political power. However the years 1990-2004 decimated this political collective identity—it fragmented under the weight of its own failures and was unable to reinvent itself as the political elite in the state. This category was populated by the fluid social groups searching for political power, shuffling between Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Congress Party, Lok Janshakti Party and Janata Dal (United). But the changes that came over the scenario were not limited to this as election analysts, through short-term quick analyses, seem to suggest. It is this excess, unnoticed as it was by the mainstream that gives us the opportunity to understand how identity politics digests its own entrails at particular historical conjunctures.

Laloo Prasad Yadav's ascendance to political power meant initially the possible empowerment of the poor, a new era of governance (Bharti: 1990: 1373-74)—the empowerment of Backward Castes through the new agenda of social justice which held sway over voters. (Bharti: 1991: 1895-97). It definitely, did transform the social landscape of Bihar, Despite the fact that it represented the elite of the Backward Castes the fifteen year long regime did generate a confidence among this section of the population at large. Analysts acknowledge his "deft political management" in rallying the Backward Caste's for a movement for social justice (Gupta: 2001: 2743). In the larger political macrocosm of State, Backward Caste politics made a substantial difference—and the elite of these castes emerged as strong con-

tenders for political power. But as far as the larger picture is concerned the development only proved how sharply differentiated are the 'apparent' categories of caste collectives on the level of the economic. Ultimately the so-called Backward Caste assertion while allowing the democratization of confidence did not make any fundamental difference to the actual living conditions of the large mass of Backward Castes. They remained as underdeveloped as before and in a certain sense their condition deteriorated with the government following its agenda of withdrawal from the social sector—a process that has been speeded up by the current Nitish Kumar's government. For the poor the Laloo Prasad government in actual terms remained a mere substitution of one section of the elite by another. Hardly any material benefits accrued to them and everyday life was unaltered. In 1990, the Backward Caste government came to power over the agenda of social justice, identifying the 'other' as the enemy shouting slogans which sought destruction of caste system and brahminism. But after 1995 a tremendous change came over this politics. While Nitish Kumar broke away and aligned himself with the Bharatiya Janata Party, a political formation with a support base among the upper castes, Laloo Prasad Yadav inducted more and more upper castes into his ministry. Though there was general discontent among the Backward Castes who constituted his support base, the elite at the state level appeared to be heading towards a cross-caste alliance. Is this to be termed a new phase of Backward Caste identity politics—dissolution of the agenda of social justice, because the upper castes have become more accommodating or is it that the Backward Caste elite's interests have decided to pursue the agenda of capital? This is not an isolated development that has taken place in some villages but state level politics indicates how there has been a mixing of representatives from different castes and a commonality of political understanding has developed on the issues of pushing forward the agenda of private capital at state level.

This essay was an effort to understand not only the manner in which caste based identity politics has had suspect agendas in the recent past but also the manner in which this agenda as well as the essence of this politics is constantly misconstrued by political analysts as well as sociologists. Divorcement of the process of formation of identities from the actual social and material processes results in convenient status quoist analysis. Discourse and analysis are not autonomous, they are rather, products of particular political milieus. Discourses that have ignored the relationship between caste, class and identity have primarily emerged from "anti-class" positions in Indian social sciences, which if explored further seem to emanate from a bias against an analysis that does not consider it inappropriate to take a position or defend certain sections/ideas. This bias is generally called the principle of value-neutrality in social sciences.

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