

EXCLUSION AND EMERGENCE OF CASTE BASED LABOUR UNIONISM: DALIT ADHIKAR SANGATHAN [DALIT RIGHTS ORGANIZATION]

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ABSTRACT

It is more than just a mere redistribution of capital and the means of production that is a solution to the issues of the caste system, but a more wholesome understanding that looks into the various particularities of each such social grouping. The manner in which caste plays out in the Labour market shall be explored in the course of this paper, and the underpinnings of the system shall be used to draw conclusions on the synergies (or lack of) between the Marxian understanding of labour relations, and labour relations as they actually play out in the caste system.

One of the principal objectives is to understand the emergence of caste-based labour reform organizations such as the Dalit Adhikar Sanghathan and the social movement of caste-based unionism apart from the intersection and differences between the constructs of class and caste in society and labour markets.

INTRODUCTION

The Dalit Adhikar Sangh is an initiative associated with the Action Aid Association, with its object geared towards the cause of Dalit Dignity in primarily seven districts of Odisha. Its work is primarily based in the areas of Ganjam, Jajpur, Khurda, Cuttack, Kendrapara, Puri, and Jagatsinghpur. They attempt primarily to sensitize the community and support claims arising from land rights and, in particular, agricultural land. Through their state-level advocacy, they have attempted to raise the annual income of eligible landless families to facilitate greater inclusion in the Land Distribution Program. Their focus lies in the empowerment of communities to access their rights to land, water etc., as well as their participation in welfare schemes and the equal treatment of such persons in socio-economic opportunities.ⁱ An analysis of this initiative is an example of the nature of policies attempting to deal with exclusion through a system of caste, as opposed to policies aimed at class consciousness and redistribution as understood by Marx. Exclusion from social and economic development is to be addressed through solutions that are group-specific. It is important to remember that the caste system is not merely a system of inequality, but rather, a system of graded inequality.ⁱⁱ The entitlements and deprivations in this system are hierarchical and defined by “degrees of exclusion.”ⁱⁱⁱ The differential impact on different groups within the caste system entails that the policies addressing the exclusionary character of Indian society need to be group-specific, and the same need has led to the rise of the social movement of caste-based/group-based unionism.

MARXISM AND CASTE IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Marxism, in essence, is based on the fundamental unit of ‘class’, as a primarily economic unit with resultant political and social functions. Marxism is an analysis of the ‘division of the labour’ and the ‘owners of capital’, and the relations that play out between them. In this sense, the caste system too has as one of its primary components, a division of labour. However, this is not merely an economic division between those who own the means of production and those who do not. Marx viewed Asiatic societies, however, to not have a clearly defined class consciousness. He attributed this to the nature of Asiatic societies in so far as society found its fundamental basis in the village system, governed by a central government that appropriated

surplus and provided the facilities for irrigation. Thus, these societies did not base distribution on private property and ownership but rather on community ownership, wherein the ruling elites appropriated the surplus. He further attributed this “unchanging nature of Asiatic societies” to the role of religion.^{iv}

This view has, however, been criticized as failing to understand the various specificities of Indian society. In taking the Asiatic model further, it has been argued that this despotic state that controlled the masses through religion, merged with the ideological substructure of caste.^v Thus, the devolution of rights in the land to the Brahmins, who made up the elites in the village system, formed the basis for an exploitative economic situation. This, however, was not based primarily on who controlled the land, but with the stratification of society through the caste system.^{vi} The reinforcement of this system was self-sustaining through the partial devolution of benefits from the higher to the lower castes, thus enhancing the exploitative nature of the system.

We see this problem emerge in Gandhian Marxism to the extent that the ideological hegemony of Brahmanism was the primary cause of post-independence ideological retardation.^{vii} Therefore, where Lenin argued that the fall of the colonialist system would create the ideal conditions for the growth of socialism,^{viii} it is clear that the reinforcement of Hinduism in the Gandhian Nationalist Movement was a significant cause of the failure of any development in the class consciousness of the working classes. This failure was due to division across caste lines, thus leading to the eventual failure of communism in India.

In understanding this role of religion, we move to the works of Gramsci and Ambedkar and their understandings of “civil society,” as not confined purely to the economic sphere, but also in various non-economic aspects. Therefore, while Gramsci accepts that the powers of the ruling classes are grounded to a great extent in the means of production, in capitalist economies, he extends this notion to the dominance of the ruling classes in political, moral, and intellectual dimensions.^{ix} He refers to this as ‘hegemony’. This hegemony is based on ‘ideology’. Ideology is, to Gramsci, the process of consensus-building of moral beliefs and values in the subaltern classes to the benefit of the ruling classes.^x This process is achieved by creating ‘voluntary associations’ by combining the needs of the minority group with that of the elite, which thus represents the framework of society. These associations, in essence, created tri-partite bargaining systems between the state, labour, and the resource owners. These associations,

therefore, represented the interest of the associations in terms of “cross-class interests”, to thereby deny the relevance of caste and put forth particularistic interests.^{xi}

It may be important to note that while attempts have been made by various academics to construe the caste system in terms of a class struggle^{xii} a simplistic understanding of caste hierarchy as a class division in disguise that may be overthrown by a Marxian form of class struggle, is to misunderstand the complex workings of the caste system and the manner in which exclusion plays out in group relations.^{xiii}

The caste system may be best described, for the purposes of this paper from the prism of ‘Social Exclusion’, which must be understood as the lack of ability of any person to take part in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society.^{xiv} In Marxian terms, the economic realm of the caste system could be encapsulated in the denial of equal access to opportunities for a particular group, or various groups.^{xv} The caste system, much like the Marxian analysis of labour relations, is one based on group relations, and the individual is not the focus of social relations. This system of grouping attempts to justify the rights and privileges of some groups although they may be primarily founded on the disadvantage and disabilities of other groups.

Castes, therefore, exists as a system that determines the rights and relations of endogenous groups in an unequal manner and is a system that is all-pervasive in Indian society.^{xvi} This unequal distribution of rights and relations of groups plays out in the Labour Market in a variety of ways not purely restricted to a Marxian understanding of labourers and the owners of means of production. It, rather, seems to find an odd place within the capitalist system and the “free market” and is therefore required to be considered differently from a class struggle.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF EXCLUSION AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Labour power, in the modern world, is essentially a commodity. Marxian analysis of labour indicates that labour is not organized in accordance with the needs and desires of the sellers, but is organized as per the buyers of the labour. Therefore, employers essentially determine the organization of labour.^{xvii}

It is in the interest of these employers to cheapen the cost of labour, and in order to do this, the labour force must be free, fungible, and fundamentally divided into its smallest example. In essence, the labour process is removed from special knowledge and training, and reduced to simple labour.^{xviii}

A modern worker faces the insecurity of unemployment, the complexities involved in searching for work, hazardous and harmful conditions of work (in developing countries), meager rewards, and the combination of these factors leads to the further degradation of labour beyond just the alienation described by Marx.^{xix}

While the Caste system does, to a great extent, encompass and include the issues with the capitalist system underlined by various Marxian studies of the modern capitalist system, its impact on the labour market is indeed more disruptive. Marxian understandings of the labour market emphasize the free movement of the labour force in accordance with wage rates and rates of return, but the caste system prevents the ordinary functioning of the labour market as understood by Marxists.^{xx}

Therefore, while the modern capitalist system attempts to arrive at efficiency through the minimization of costs, Ambedkar emphasizes the factor immobility that essentially renders economic outcomes inefficient. Customary rules governing employment leads to unemployment when the demand shifts from a particular industry. Therefore, there may be situations of voluntary unemployment and involuntary employment that exist simultaneously under the caste system.^{xxi}

The economic efficiency of labour suffers severely in another manner. Insofar as the division of occupations is not based on individual choice, individual sentiment, and preference, the natural aptitudes of individuals have no place in it. Ambedkar observed that ensuring social and individual efficiency necessitates developing the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose and make one's career. The principle of individual choice is violated in the caste system insofar as it involves an attempt to assign the nature of work to an individual in advance, who is selected on the basis of not training or capacities, but an ascribed caste status.^{xxii}

Notably, the consequence of this is that the income distribution in this system is skewed clearly on caste lines. As Ambedkar argued, the caste system is removed from any idea of efficiency and is, in fact, a system of income maximization through coercion.^{xxiii}

The cast system stands in stark contrast to the Marxian critique of the capitalist system which emphasized the tendency to reduce the worker to the smallest possible unit, thereby reducing any dependence on specialized knowledge and expertise and dividing the work into its most basic form to reduce costs to a minimum and create a faceless mass of workers. The caste system aims to create a social hierarchy, attempting to preserve the privileges of certain groups and perpetuate the subordination of others. To this extent, opportunities are not based on “the smallest possible unit” but rather dependent on ascribed caste status. Inequalities, therefore, are conditioned not primarily on the ownership of the means of production, but rather on the caste of a person.^{xxiv}

Onto the question of change, while Marx emphasized the idea of class consciousness, the application of this idea to the caste system is fundamentally flawed. Organizations of class and caste are dissimilar in both sociological and epistemological divisions.^{xxv} A particular caste of individuals belonging to different social classes may not be looked at in the sense of a homogenous social category. A larger level of income and accumulation of wealth does not allow for upward mobility within the caste structure. In fact, the caste structure prevents precisely this type of upward movement on account of factors other than the ascribed status of an individual.^{xxvi}

The manner in which the rigidity of the system is maintained is through the imminent deterred of economic and social boycott. The social costs associated with the caste system prevent change.^{xxvii} The great social cost is the essential deterrent to any change in the customary rules that have thus been solidified within the caste structure. Ambedkar, however, goes beyond this and further identifies the monopolization of the economic and social institutions to perpetuate the system. Gramsci’s analysis of the subaltern and civil society is seen playing out in Ambedkar’s analysis of the impact of Hinduism and the Hindu nationalist movements against the British, as obscuring the issues of caste. In presenting precisely this type of “cross-class interest”, the Nationalists reinforced the ideology of Hinduism within the “Hindu Social Order.”

ADDRESSING EXCLUSION

The purpose and basis for the existence of movements like the Dalit Adhikar Sangathan lies in the ability of such groups to fight and to overcome discrimination and exclusion. In light of the understanding of exclusion (particularly economic) expounded later, we attempt, to delineate two alternative solutions to exclusion as they have emerged in economic studies of discrimination.

The first of these models essentially postulates that the free hand of the market, in attempts to arrive at efficiency in costs and profits, will tend to discard discriminatory practices. Essentially, this theory states that there exist significant costs associated with discrimination in highly competitive markets, which will end up lowering profits. Therefore, the market exists as a self-adaptive solution to discrimination (at least economic discrimination).^{xxviii}

The inherent problems with such a solution lie in the modern structure of the market. As opposed to being highly competitive, the market tends towards more oligopolistic and monopolistic conditions. The markets for labour, in particular, are highly imperfect, and the inherent safeguards of the “perfectly competitive market” cease to exist in such situations.^{xxix}

The basis for such flawed reasoning lies in the preliminary assumption that societal outcomes are essentially an aggregate of Individual behaviors, and the issue with such an assumption is that it fails to understand what Sen argues is the fundamentally ‘group based dynamic’ of Indian society and the caste system that pervades it.^{xxx} Within the constraints imposed by the organizational and social hierarchies created by the caste system lies the cause of the deviation from the simple aggregation of outcomes. The group dynamics of group self-interest and identity are not offset by custom but rather reinforced by it. Discrimination is due to the dynamics of group identification, competition, and conflict rather than irrational, individual attitudes. Market mechanisms cannot be relied upon to eliminate discrimination of their own accord and must be scrutinized and pressured to further the goal of equality of opportunity.^{xxxi}

If such an approach is therefore deemed insufficient to either overcome discrimination and exclusion or to ensure efficient labour market outcomes, the alternative is to leave nothing to the free market. A deeply interventionist view asserts that legal safeguards are necessary to offset the politics of discrimination inherent in society.

In analyzing the outcomes of discriminatory practices, we once again see the fundamental distinction between Marx's understanding of class and the particularities of the caste system as expounded by Ambedkar. What we understand from the above analysis is that in order to maximize profits, a free market system guarantees some degree of efficiency in the market and thereby reduces the impact of discriminatory practices of firms in the market.

If, however, we apply the class-based understanding to monopolistic or oligopolistic markets, which are less competitive, we see primarily economic constraints preventing the efficiency of market outcomes. This does adversely impact the worker as it allows for discrimination on the basis of the relative balance of wages and profits. The lack of competition in the market allows the firm to pay less and to maximize its profits.

Finally, the analysis of the caste system in such a market sees a situation where the discriminatory practices are not merely guided by motives of economic gain, and maximization of profits for the owners of capital, as the two types of markets elucidated in the previous two paragraphs entail. Exclusion is enforced from outside, in order to protect the privileges given to certain groups, and in order to maintain and reinforce the social structure. We, therefore, see that discriminated groups face discrimination in transactions channelized through the market and non-market situations, and in that regard, their discrimination is multiple and plural in nature.^{xxxii}

In light of the above analysis, we may identify two major sets of remedies. The first, being that of Social and Economic Empowerment, is based on the assumption that market outcomes are purely a function of merit and efficiency.^{xxxiii} It seeks to improve the relationships between the 'classes' in terms of a more equitable distribution of capital, land, skills, and education. This solution is majorly a capitalist answer to Marx's critique but does not go so far as to deal with the particularities of the caste system elucidated above. Such policies do play a significant role in alleviating the discrimination and exclusion enforced by the caste system. However, policy-making bodies must, in fact, consider the various other issues created by the caste system that prevents proper functioning of the market in order to attain efficiency. A redistribution of capital is only helpful if we assume that the market works in a perfectly competitive manner wherein discriminatory attitudes of employers will lead to losses of profits.^{xxxiv}

Therefore, the reliance on the working of the free market must, in fact, be supplemented by policies that eliminate the discrimination that creeps into oligopolistic and monopolistic markets, as well as the additional social costs imposed by Hindu society on any attempts to change

First, whether the absence of income gathering capital assets such as land for agriculture and business capital, access to gainful employment, and acquisition of educational and vocational skills due to persistent denial of the same over long periods of time. The repercussions of these are visible in contemporary times in the form of entrenched inequalities, seen across various indicia of the Human Development Index. Second, is the persistence of discriminatory practices in various non-market and market fora. The truth in this statement emerges particularly in the lower strata of 'caste division; in the Hindu Society. A solution to the problems faced by the discriminated classes mandates a two-fold solution, the primary to address land and capital asset ownership disparities, increasing quality of employment and augmenting their educational levels to compensate for decades of systemic denial in the past, while the second set of remedies would focus on the provision of safeguards against present and future discrimination, with the former relying on tenets of compensation for denial of legitimate rights in the past (the consequences of which permeate in the present) while the latter relies on future due share and equal participation in various market and non-market situations such as participation in employment, education, businesses, legislature, and other supportive services.^{xxxv}

These policies of social economic and educational development seek to further capacity building within the discriminated groups and make them equal shareholders in societal social and economic progress. Permeating through the barrier of access would vastly alleviate their situations by enabling them to partake in business actives and increasing employability, thereby making them a figure in the private and public sector^{xxxvi}

However, it is pertinent to acknowledge that only economic and educational empowerment would not be sufficient. Such a view enables them solely towards furthering participation in economic and social progress. Systemic, entrenched discrimination would continue to act to their detriment in non-market and market transactions, extending to vital needs such as healthcare and educational facilities (as highlighted above). Thus, tools of furthering a regime of 'equal opportunity' (such as reservation) gain increasing relevance in such a context. In the

lack of such tools, marginalized groups have consistently seen to bear the brunt of discrimination in various spheres, extending to civil amenities like electricity, sanitation exclusion from private employment, education, businesses, and state-funded civil amenities and social welfare projects like housing, electricity, and water, etc. It is primarily with this rationale that complementary equal opportunity policies (alongside a general economic empowerment policy) are created in the form of policies of the reservation to ensure that the excluded groups get a fair share and equal access.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In the context of labour empowerment through unionism, it becomes crucial to consider the relations between the workmen employed in the industry, their caste, and their unions. While caste-based unions strengthen the nature of social movements, they may actively undermine the nature of class-based labour activism within the industry. This, may be attributed to “primordial loyalties” coming up in inter-union relations. Moreover, in a non-caste-based union, as against the owner of the industry, caste becomes a card through which specific appeals may be made to sections of the union to undermine the nature of class agitation actively. Thus, to such an extent, movements like DAS must understand the nature of caste-defined relations between the workmen and the owners, between the workmen and the union, and in between the workmen themselves.^{xxxvii}

Social exclusion is a deeply complex phenomenon, which cannot merely be addressed by isolated activities, which reduce poverty or homelessness, nor is it just about increasing employment and education opportunities. Social relations itself are of instrumental importance because being excluded is in itself deprivation. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage is about enjoying human rights, human dignity, and respect. The caste system, or untouchability, is at the root of the discrimination of social exclusion in society or labour markets. Scheduled castes (SCs), or Dalits, constitute 16.23% of the total population of India. Dalit women constitute 49.96% of the total Dalit population. Dalit women in India suffer from inter-class oppression based on: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste. The social movement of caste-based unionism, although aimed at addressing caste-based impediments in labour markets, fails to

address the larger issue of conservative societal norms, such as eradication of gender bias to ensure equality of opportunity, since women have low representation in these caste-based unions. Also, these unions, due to financial and political fragility, are not equipped to enhance the political participation of the excluded groups. Further, the leadership of these unions and hierarchy becomes skill-based, insofar as members with better language or bargaining skills rise in power in the union. All members do not have an equal opportunity to be in the leadership since they cannot effectively communicate with the management and political affiliates. This “leadership by intellectuals” rather than by workers phenomenon is due to large levels of illiteracy, particularly in the backward caste groups due to centuries of impoverishment and atrocities.

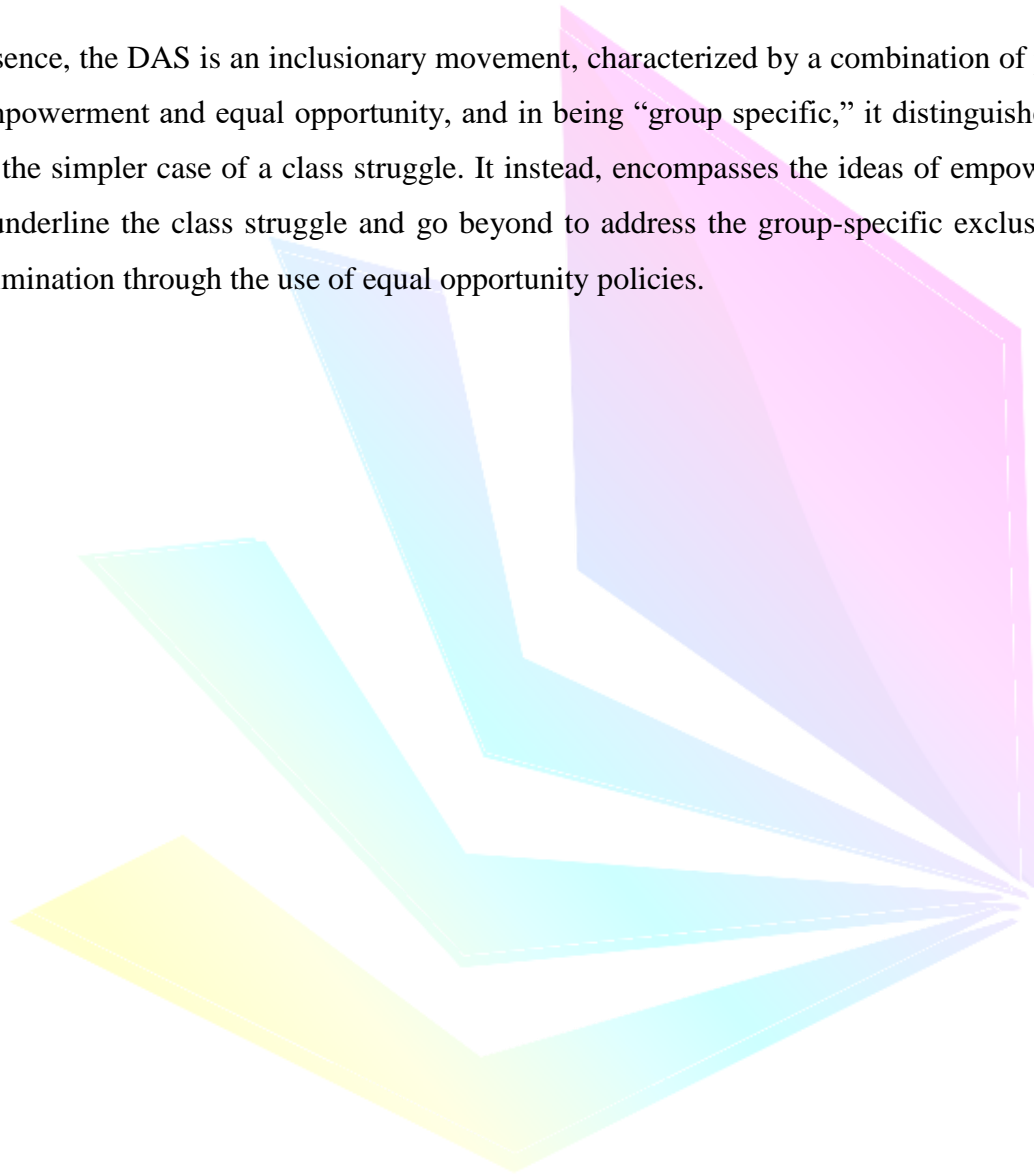
However, the social movement of caste-based unionism is not merely aimed at dealing with labour employment but rather holistic enrichment of labour from disadvantaged/excluded groups thereby, attempting to overcome the vacuum created by the intersection of societal horizons of caste, class, and conservatism.

In this context, the more general policies of empowerment happen to take the form of policies aimed at a lack of access to income-earning assets, education, and employment. They also take the form of more specific policies aimed at the particular skill and educational levels of the groups in question. The DAS, in its support for land rights and welfare schemes, embody some such policies of empowerment. These policies, while in a similar context as Marx’s ideas of redistribution, are more group-specific. These are focused on agricultural labour, on the Dalits, tribals, women, and informal sector labour. They identify the caste specific problems of landlessness, in the more general context of redistribution, and is therefore indicative of the need for group-specific answers to the specific issues of caste. While this may seem to embody the more general dimension of a class struggle, the specific issues brought about by caste have to be addressed separately.

The DAS has also attempted to supplement its general policies with “equal opportunity” policies described earlier. They have attempted to address the lack of access to equal socio-economic opportunities, including petitioning the Odisha government into raising the income of eligible landless families from Rs. 24,000 to Rs. 40,000. They agitate for equal access to public areas to Dalits and tribals as well as various similar policies. In this sense, we see that any policy cannot merely focus on empowerment as a solution to historical exclusion. The

policy must also account for the current barriers to various activities and professions. In essence, such policies in India have generally taken the form of reservation, which is not something that Marxian thought directly addresses. Thus, in advocating for a greater voice of such persons, and their greater participation in society, such policies go beyond merely addressing economic inequality but address the specific issues brought about by caste.

In essence, the DAS is an inclusionary movement, characterized by a combination of policies of empowerment and equal opportunity, and in being “group specific,” it distinguishes itself from the simpler case of a class struggle. It instead, encompasses the ideas of empowerment that underline the class struggle and go beyond to address the group-specific exclusion and discrimination through the use of equal opportunity policies.



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