

The Marxist

Volume: 18, No. 03-04

July-December 2002

**CLASS STRUGGLE AND CASTE OPPRESSION:
INTEGRAL STRATEGY OF THE LEFT**

JAYANTANUJA BANDYOPADHYAYA

The political and ideological struggles of the left parties have reached a crossroads, as correctly emphasized by the political resolutions of the 17th Party Congress of the CPI (M). The communal fascism of the Sangh *parivar*, with its ideology of the *Hindu Rashtra*, now poses a grave and unprecedented threat to the secular fabric of Indian democracy. Gujarat-type genocides are likely to engulf the entire country if the BJP and its perverted *parivar* are allowed to gain further strength. The so-called non-communal regional parties, which are supporting the Sangh *parivar* with a view to sharing the spoils of power, are too devoid of ideologies to be relied upon as anti-fascist political forces of the future. The Congress is in a state of severe ideological atrophy and organizational decay. But it still retains a broadly and vaguely non-communal character and considerable following at the all-India level. It can conceivably become a tactical ally of the left forces in the struggle against communal fascism. But for at least two reasons the left parties and forces alone can spearhead the great coming struggle of the masses against the demonic communal and fascist forces. First, the left forces alone are committed to ideologies which not only aim to confront and combat the fascist forces without compromise, but also offer a clear alternative politicoeconomic programme to the people that is scientific and equalitarian. Secondly, for that very reason, fascists everywhere make leftists their primary political target in all countries, once they are in power. The rapid growth of the left forces in Indian politics is therefore an immediate ideological and strategic imperative.

Unfortunately, as the political resolution of the 17th Party Congress of the CPI(M) has forcefully pointed out, the left parties are weak as an all-India political force, their influence being limited to the three states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Kerala. The resolution has further correctly pointed that united front with non-left parties can only be a tactical necessity, and not the main path of progress for the left parties. The growth of the left movement in India would have to depend primarily on the independent growth of the left forces all over the country. In this context, the 17th Party Congress of the CPI(M) has emphasized the need, not only for sustained ideological work, but also mass struggles against caste oppression, communalism, and the oppression of women. Without minimizing the importance of protracted mass struggles on all other fronts, in this paper we wish to deal specifically with the question of integrating the struggle against caste oppression with the broader class

struggle in the objective Indian context. For it appears to us that the adoption of a clear ideological and strategic position by the CPI(M) and other left parties on this question is the key to the accelerated development and proliferation of the ideology and organization of the left in the given objective conditions of society and politics in India.

Marxist Thinking on Caste in India

Karl Marx was the first thinker to draw sharp attention to the highly deleterious impact of caste on Indian society and its causal link with the relations of production. In his famous essay on *The Future Results of British Rule in India* Karl Marx characterized the Indian castes as “the most decisive impediment to India’s progress and power”. Marx correctly argued that the caste system of India was based on the hereditary division of labour, which was inseparably linked with the unchanging technological base and subsistence economy of the Indian village community. At that time he believed that British rule would undermine the economic and technological foundations of these primitive, self-sufficient, stagnant, and isolated village communities, particularly through the spread of railways. The industrialization and commercialization of India under British rule, facilitated by the spread of railways, would lead to the breakdown of the traditional village communities, and with them also the caste system.¹ But Marx wrote later on that he had exaggerated the possible impact of the spread of railways on the traditional relations of production characterized by the Indian village community.² The important point, however, is that Marx clearly and causally connected the archaic social formation of caste in India with the relations of production. It followed logically that the abolition of the caste hierarchy and the oppression and exploitation of the ‘lower’ castes could not be separated from the Marxian form of class struggle.

Following this Marxian approach to the relationship between the class struggle and the struggle against caste oppression, the renowned Indian Marxist leader and thinker, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, placed the Marxian approach to the struggle against caste consciousness and caste oppression as a part of the class struggle in modern India when he observed in 1979:

One has to realize that the building of India on modern democratic and secular lines requires an uncompromising struggle against the caste-based Hindu society and its culture. There is no question of secular democracy, not to speak of socialism, unless the very citadel of India’s ‘age-old’ civilization and culture – the division of society into a hierarchy of castes – is broken. In other words, the struggle for radical democracy and socialism cannot be separated from the struggle against caste society.³

The same year another Indian Marxist stalwart, B.T.Ranadive, regretted the fact that “there has been a certain neglect in the ideological struggle against caste and communalism”, and that “the common consciousness generated through the economic struggle cannot be pushed forward without such struggle and direct intervention of the movement on caste oppression.”⁴ Three

years later, in his book, *Class, Caste and Property Relations*, Ranadive strongly pleaded for the adoption of an anti-caste programme of struggle by all mass organizations. In his own words:

The decisive challenge of caste and untouchability has to be defeated by the leaders of the mass struggles by inculcating a strong anti-caste feeling among the fighting toilers – above all among the workers in the spirit of proletarian unity and solidarity. This can be achieved by strong ideological propaganda against the caste system and untouchability.

The mass organizations, besides, must devote special attention to the problem of the untouchables, tribals and oppressed castes as part of their work to unite the oppressed.

Then alone the mighty force of the united toilers will decisively strike for agrarian revolution, smashing the basis of caste distinctions and serfdom of the untouchables; then alone the democratic forces will open the way to political power and rapid industrialization on the basis of socialization of all means of production and usher in a casteless and classless society.⁵

Both E.M.S. Namboodiripad and B.T. Ranadive thus felt the urgent need for integrating the class struggle with the struggle against the caste system in India, and considered this integration to be essential for the success of the proletarian revolution and the establishment of people's democracy in this country. This ideological position of the highest Marxist leaders and thinkers of India was reflected in a resolution of the Salkia Plenum of the CPI (M) in 1978, which stated that the ruling class took advantage of caste and communal divisions among the people, and emphasized the need for a mass struggle against casteism and communalism. The resolution further stated that the actual decision and strategy to be adopted in this respect was left to the Central Committee of the party.

But while the CPI (M) and other left parties have consistently organized mass protest and struggles against communalism, the exigencies and dynamics of the developing political situation in India in the 1980s and 1990s prevented them from organizing a simultaneous struggle against casteism and communalism. In particular, the acute caste conflict generated by the Mandal Commission Report and its aftermath made it extremely difficult to integrate the anti-caste ideology of the left with the class struggle against feudalism and capitalism in the 1980s. The rapid rise of communal fascism in Indian politics in the 1990s, leading to the capture of power at the Centre by the communal and fascist forces, impelled the left parties to mobilize all their organizational power against these forces, and to postpone the organization of a mass struggle against casteism and caste oppression to a later date. The issue was again taken up seriously at the 17th Party Congress of the CPI (M) at Hyderabad in 2002.

Caste Structure and Relations of Production

The leading Indian Marxist thinkers and the Salkia Plenum and 17th Congress of the CPI (M) would not have pleaded for the organization of mass struggles against caste oppression in India if they had believed that there was any antagonistic contradiction between the class struggle and the struggle against caste oppression in the objective Indian context. It is therefore necessary, at a

time when the major left parties have decided to integrate the class struggle with the struggle against caste oppression, to have a clear idea of the structural linkages of the caste structure in India with the relations of production in the perspective of Marxian historical sociology.

Caste formations, of course, are not identical with class divisions. There is a caste structure within each class, and a class structure within each caste. They generate different forms of sociopolitical belonging, loyalties, and consciousness. Both on the epistemological and the empirical planes, caste consciousness proves to be antithetical to class consciousness, and stymies the growth of proletarian class solidarity. As every leftist political worker knows, the unity of the working class in India is constantly vitiated by the caste consciousness and caste loyalties of the peasants and workers. The poor 'upper' caste peasant or worker does not consider his poor 'lower' caste coworker or neighbour as his equal, tends to look down upon him, and generally refuses to build or accept any sociocultural linkages with him. While workers and peasants belonging to different castes do join trade unions and participate in common struggles on purely economic issues, they generally desist from developing life-sharing sociocultural linkages across caste barriers. In many cases, it is individual and collective economism rather than class consciousness that motivates participation in agitations for specific economic demands. This is also evident from the fact that support of workers for political parties does not always correspond with their trade union belonging.

The class consciousness of the workers and peasants can, of course, be best awakened by their continuous participation in the class struggle. But if the nature of the class struggle itself is often distorted by caste consciousness, we are in a vicious circle. On epistemological, sociological and organizational grounds, therefore, it is necessary to treat the caste structure as a semi-autonomous socioeconomic formation within the broader class structure of Indian society, and trace its historical and sociological roots in the evolving relations of production in India from the ancient times to the modern period. This, of course, cannot be done exhaustively within the short span of this paper. We shall confine ourselves to portraying, in a few bold strokes, the outlines of the relationship between caste formations and the relations of production in India. This will then enable us to appreciate the strategy of integrating the struggle against caste oppression into the broader class struggle, as recommended by Marxist stalwarts like E.M.S. Namboodiripad and B.T.Ranadive, as well as the Salkia Plenum and 17th Congress of the CPI (M), and formulate appropriate tactics for an integral form of class struggle with Indian characteristics.

There is a widespread belief among orthodox Hindus that *chaturvarnya*, or the hierarchical four-tier social structure of ancient India, had a religious origin. This belief is engendered by the apparently religious justification of *chaturvarnya* in the *Rig Veda*, the *Manusmriti*, and the interpolated forms of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, where it has been declared to be of divine origin. In reality, however, the support to *chaturvarnya* given by the

religious texts on the pretext of its allegedly divine origin served merely to sanctify and perpetuate an ancient form of unjust division of labour that was based on the oppression and exploitation of the entire working class, which constituted the overwhelming majority of the population in ancient India, by a small and parasitic ruling class. The 'other-worldly' religious injunctions were in the nature of a deliberately contrived functional ideology that served to camouflage a this-worldly socioeconomic structure of exploitation. In other words, the social roots of the metaphysics of *chaturvarnya* were embedded in the relations of production in ancient India.

As is well known, the religious texts assigned the parasitic functions of teaching, preaching, and the performance of religious rituals to the Brahmins, ruling and fighting to the Kshatriyas, and trade and business to the Vaishyas. The sociopolitical status of the Vaishyas was, however, somewhat ambivalent and fluctuating. In the age of the *dharmasutras*, all peasants, except rural artisans, craftsmen, and landless labourers, were reckoned as Vaishyas. By the middle of the period of the *dharmasastras*, however, most of the peasants, including those who tilled their own land, were demoted to the status of Sudras. Only that small section of peasants who were big landowners and produced a marketable agricultural surplus, were now counted as Vaishyas.⁶ From that time onwards, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas effectively constituted the ruling class of ancient India, with the Vaishyas playing a somewhat auxiliary role.

Thus by about the 1st or 2nd century A.D. the entire working class, including all small and marginal farmers, landless labourers, artisans and craftsmen, and all manual labourers, was relegated to the status of Sudras. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas naturally constituted only a small proportion of the population. Since industry and trade were undeveloped in that ancient period, the Vaishyas also constituted an insignificant proportion of the population. The Sudras therefore constituted the overwhelming majority of the people of the country. It was this vast class of Sudras that was relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid and ruthlessly exploited by the composite ruling class of the Brahmins and Kashatriyas, using both the power of religion and the power of the state as its instruments of control.

The concept of *swadharma* was central to the injunctions of the religious texts regarding the division of labour consummated by *chaturvarnya*. Manu defined *swadharma* as *swakarma*, or the occupational duty as prescribed by the *dharmasastras*. All major religious texts, including the *Manusmriti*, the *Bhagavadgita*, and the interpolated versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, prescribed the unquestioning service of the three 'higher' *varnas* as the *swadharma* of the Sudras. The vast working class of Sudras was thus denied all social, economic and political rights, which were, of course, monopolized by the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The *Manusmriti* also denied the Sudras the right to education, the right to property, the right to carry arms, and even access to religious observances. The *Manusmriti* declared that if a Sudra acquired any property, any Brahmin or Kshatriya had the right to take it away from him forcibly. As regards the carrying of arms, even the Brahmins

were empowered to carry and use arms in times of trouble, although it was alien to their *swadharma*. But the Sudras were totally forbidden to carry or use arms. The denial of the right to property in a social structure based on private property perpetuated the proletarianization of the Sudras, while the denial of the right to carry arms rendered them incapable of overthrowing the structure of exploitation. Thus the whole purpose of the ostensibly religious injunctions regarding *chaturvarnya* was to reduce the entire working class to the status of subsistence labour, close to that of slaves, and generate a huge surplus value through its productive labour for the enjoyment of a parasitic ruling class.

The religious texts have also forbidden the change of occupations prescribed by them for the four *varnas* respectively on pain of dire consequences in this world as well as the next, because this would destabilize and destroy the prevailing social order. The *Manusmriti* makes the change of occupations a serious and heavily punishable offence. The *Bhagavadgita* says that it is better to die in the performance of one's own *swadharma*, even if it be without merit, than to practise the *swadharma* of another *varna*, even if the latter be easier to perform. But not being sure of the effectiveness of religious injunctions by themselves, the wise writers of religious texts also provided for political safeguards against any potential challenge to *chaturvarnya*. The *Manusmriti* enjoins upon the king the duty of preserving the four-tier social hierarchy, and to inflict severe punishment on those who attempt to change their occupations. The *Bhagavadgita* cautions the Kshatriyas against the non-performance of their *swadharma* of fighting, lest such an example inspired the 'lower' *varnas* to change their occupations. The *Manusmriti* also advises the Brahmins and Kshatriyas to form a class alliance in their common class interest. Such an alliance, it says, would ensure tremendous gains for themselves in this world and the next, whereas in the absence of such an alliance both the *varnas* would perish. For the same reason, the *dharmasastras*, including the *Manusmriti*, made it a major political duty of the king to suppress all forms of atheism and to inflict severe punishment on atheists. Any atheist challenge to the *dharmasastras* would have seriously undermined the foundations of the exploitative structure of *chaturvarnya*. Thus the opium of religion as well as the power of the state, both of which were mere instruments of exploitation in the hands of the ruling class, were used to perpetuate the oppressive and exploitative socioeconomic structure of ancient India.

Class Structure, Dalits and Adivasis

One special characteristic of this exploitative socioeconomic structure was the marginalization, alienation, economic exploitation, and geographical separation of the *atisudras*, also called *asprishyas* or *panchamas* or *antyajas* in the *dharmasastras*. Originally stigmatized on account of the 'unclean' jobs assigned to them, they were subjected to numerous inhuman disabilities, in addition to those suffered by the rest of the Sudras. Perhaps the most disabling injunction against them proclaimed by Manu and other law-givers was the one that denied them the right to live in the main village inhabited by

the exalted 'upper' *varnas*, and were compelled to live in separate hamlets on the outskirts of the village. It was from this geographical and social exile that they acquired their status as *antyajas*, meaning "born on the margin". According to the injunctions of the *dharmasastras*, they were obliged to wear the mark of untouchability on their bodies, and eat only the foulest kind of food, including the leftovers thrown away by the 'higher' *varnas*, from iron or broken earthen pots. They were allowed to wear only iron 'jewelry' on their bodies. They were not to draw water from the wells used by the 'upper' *varnas*, not to enter temples, not to enter areas inhabited by the 'higher' *varnas* except to perform menial jobs for the latter, and not to tread the roads used by the latter. They had to wear a bell in their necks in order to warn the 'higher' *varnas* of their approach, so that the latter could move out of sight in time. They were permitted to move around only in the darkness of the night, avoiding the areas inhabited by the exalted ones.

The *adivasis* or indigenous people of ancient India suffered more or less the same socioeconomic disabilities as the *atisudras*, and were virtually indistinguishable from the latter with regard to their status in relation to the socioeconomic structure of *chaturvarnya*. They were also both geographically isolated and socially marginalized, and relegated to the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. They represented that section of the pre-Aryan population of India, which had retreated into the jungles and hills in the face of the Aryan advance, and remained by and large inaccessible to the conquering Aryan 'civilization' and its *chaturvarnya*. Those who lived in the forests were generally called *nishadas* or *shabaras*, depending on their tribal belonging as well as occupation, while those who dwelt on the mountains were generally called *kiratas*. There is abundant evidence in the *dharmasastras* and Sanskrit literature to show that these indigenous people were also treated as untouchables.

This forest and mountain-dwelling section of the people of India differed from the rest of Aryan-dominated ancient Indian society in at least three important respects. In the first place, they practised a form of primitive communism of property that was diametrically opposed to the system of private property on which the Aryan 'civilization' was based. Hence, unlike the exploitative class structure of the Aryan-dominated society, the relations of production of *adivasi* society did not generate a class structure. Secondly, they had refused to come under Aryan domination, and hence, were outside the purview of *chaturvarnya*. There never was any *varna* or caste system in *adivasi* society. Thirdly, They had refused to be a part of the Vedic and *dharmasastra*-based Brahminical religion of the Aryas, and never practised the rituals and ceremonies of the latter. Because of their refusal to be integrated into mainstream Aryan society, the *adivasis* remained even more isolated, geographically as well as socially, than the *asprishyas* within the fold of *chaturvarnya*. As regards their socioeconomic status vis-à-vis Brahminical society, they were also treated in practice like *atisudras* and untouchables. Like their counterpart within Brahminical society, they also belonged to the most exploited section of the proletariat of ancient India, and were assigned to the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. They were not a part of *chaturvarnya* in terms of religious doctrine. But along with the *panchamas* or

atisudras, they were the worst victims of the exploitative class structure of ancient India.

The grossly exploitative class structure of ancient India, which was cleverly camouflaged and sanctified by the *dharmasastras*, particularly by *chaturvarnya*, has remained virtually unchanged to this day. Unchanged feudal relations of production, poverty, illiteracy, and crystallized superstition among the masses, and the oppressive and exploitative strategies of the ruling classes over many centuries have contributed to the perpetuation of the ancient relations of production and their sociocultural superstructure. The original four *varnas* have proliferated into over three thousand castes and subcastes due to numerous socioreligious and economic factors. These include false ideas regarding hereditary transmission of purity and impurity, differences of rituals and ceremonies, endogamous marriage and other forms of sociocultural intercourse, geographical location, and above all, economic status, particularly land ownership. Some cases of Sanskritization, or the vertical movement of the 'lower' castes, have also taken place over the centuries, mainly due to their rise in economic status. The myriad castes and subcastes of contemporary India cannot in all cases be classified under the original *chaturvarnya* of the *dharmasastras*, although they have all risen on the matrix of the four-tier hierarchical socioeconomic structure of ancient India. Perhaps the most important retrograde development is that the entire caste system has become hereditary and transformed itself into a crystallized prejudice structure. Although it is still a superstructure of the relations of production, it has over the centuries acquired a measure of autonomy, and in some ways behaves independently of the relations of production. This is the most distinctive characteristic of class relations in India today. This is also the single most important social reality that the left forces spearheading the class struggle in India must weave into their strategy.

The proliferation of castes, and the relative improvement of the socioeconomic status of some of the 'middle' castes, have to some extent diluted the structure of the four-tier hierarchy of ancient Indian society. But so far as the relations of production are concerned, the slave-like condition of the *dalits* – descendants of the *panchamas* and *asprishyas* – has remained unchanged at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Similarly, the *adivasis* – descendants of the *shavaras*, *nishadas* and *kiratas* – have remained the victims of the grossest and most acute form of socioeconomic exploitation. This is mainly because neither the basic class structure of India nor the crystallized prejudice structure of caste has changed significantly for many centuries, including the fiftyfive years since India's independence, except to some extent in the left-dominated states. The existential characteristics of the collective historical condition of these two socioeconomic classes make them the 'wretched of the earth' who truly belong to the fourth world of nearly total alienation and exploitation. Apart from being the victims of gross economic exploitation, they also suffer from the stigma of low social status imposed on them by the prejudice structure of caste. It follows logically that those leftist forces in India which are engaged in class struggle for the collective emancipation of the proletariat must accord the highest priority to the emancipation of the *dalits* and the *adivasis*. For there are no worse sufferers

from class exploitation, and no proletariat more impoverished than them anywhere in the world.

Numerous studies, including the Mandal Commission Report, have established beyond any doubt that there is a high correlation between poverty and social 'backwardness' in India. This is particularly true of the *dalits* and the *adivasis*. It was estimated by the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 1981 that 85 % of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes belonged to the poorest 35% of the population.⁷ Another indication of the absolute poverty of the SCs and STs is that 84% of the SCs and 94% of the STs live in the rural sector⁸ Moreover, 90% of all bonded labourers and 80% of all child labourers come from the SCs and STs.⁹ Several investigations, including those by the Planning Commission, have revealed that landlessness and illiteracy are much greater among the SCs and STs than in the rest of the population.¹⁰

The fact that the SCs and STs, which belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are also in the lowest economic class was highlighted by the Eighth FiveYear Plan when it said:

Thus, while there has been a reduction in the percentage of population below the poverty line in the case of both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the incidence of poverty is still very high. Most of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families do not own land and other productive assets. They constitute the bulk of agricultural landless workers, construction workers and women in the unorganized sector. They suffer from long periods of unemployment and underemployment. They are also handicapped due to non-enforcement of protective laws such as the Minimum Wages Act and Prevention of Land Alienation Act. Inequality and exploitation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, particularly in the rural areas ... still continue.¹¹

Even the Mandal Commission, while emphasizing the role of traditional sociocultural prejudices in perpetuating the economic exploitation of the 'lower' castes, fully recognized the fundamental significance of the relations of production in the shaping of the class-caste structure. Hence it called for the radical restructuring of production relations in order to liberate of the oppressed castes from economic as well as social exploitation.. In the Commission's own words:

Under the existing scheme of production relations, Backward Classes, comprising mainly small landholders, tenants, agricultural labour, village artisans, etc. are heavily dependent on the rich peasantry for their sustenance. In view of this, OBCs continue to remain in mental and material bondage of the dominant castes and classes. Unless these production relations are radically altered through structural changes and progressive land reforms implemented vigorously all over the country, OBCs will never become truly independent. In view of this,

highest priority should be given to radical land reforms by all the states.¹²

For several reasons, however, it would be misleading to assume that caste oppression can be eliminated through the class struggle on the economic plane alone. In the first place, the crystallized prejudice structure of caste tends to rationalize and perpetuate the economic exploitation of the oppressed castes. By confining the 'low' castes to the lowest paid occupations on a hereditary basis through religious dogma and cultural prejudice, they are kept perpetually in a state of absolute poverty. Their poverty, in turn, reinforces the sociocultural prejudices against them, and tends to perpetuate the stigma of inferiority with which they have been branded from ancient times. Secondly, unlike the poorer sections of the 'upper' castes, the *dalits* and *adivasis* have been compelled to live in separate hamlets in the rural areas, and in separate slums in the urban areas. This geographical isolation of the oppressed castes is more due to social stigma than to economic status. Thirdly, although feudalism prevails in many parts of the world, particularly the Third World, the caste system does not exist in any other country. Hence caste oppression must be attributed at least partly to the peculiar religious and sociocultural tradition of India. Finally, even with the advent of capitalism, caste prejudices do not seem to have lost their vigour in the capitalist sector of the Indian economy. Hence in determining their strategy of class struggle with Indian characteristics, the left forces have to take into account the dialectical relationship between class and caste.

Class Struggle with Indian Characteristics

Thus the integration of the fight against caste oppression with the class struggle in India, as prescribed by EMS Namboodiripad, B.T. Ranadive, the Salkia Plenum and the 17th Congress of the CPI (M), implies that a three-pronged class struggle has to be organized in India with certain specifically Indian characteristics. The 17th Congress of the CPI (M) has correctly highlighted the importance of the independent growth of the left parties, as distinguished from the united front tactics. For while united front tactics become necessary for electoral purposes and for organizing mass struggles, steady and sustained growth in the strength of the left parties can alone be the ultimate guarantee for a successful struggle against the forces of communal fascism and for the emancipation of the Indian proletariat. Moreover, a sustained and long-term cultural revolution, through which the proletariat will capture the commanding heights of a scientific and socialist culture, is also a necessary component of the class struggle for destroying the sociocultural foundations of the archaic social formation of caste. In the objective socioeconomic conditions of India, the Marxian strategy of class struggle must incorporate these specifically Indian characteristics.

1. Independent Growth of Left Parties

Since the SCs and STs are the most oppressed and exploited sections of the

Indian proletariat, they qualify to be the natural allies of the CPI (M) and other left parties. The left parties must therefore unequivocally align themselves with the SCs and STs, and fight for their economic as well as social rights. This struggle must include the uncompromising implementation of the policy of reservation, which is correctly based on the principle of positive discrimination in favour of the traditionally disadvantaged sections of the population. There appears to be a general suspicion among the SCs and STs that although the CPI(M) and other left parties have accepted the policy of reservation, they are not always sincere in implementing this policy on account of their apparent ideological position that caste is a false socioeconomic category. It is necessary to dispel this misperception, and to draw increasing numbers of SCs and STs within the ideological and organizational fold of the left parties by building sympathetic linkages with their life experiences and aspirations. It should be remembered that some otherwise misguided ultra-left forces in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal have succeeded in increasing their strength to some extent in recent years mainly by taking up the cause of the SCs and STs. It is necessary for the major left parties with a mass base to seize the initiative from these misguided ultra-leftist elements in order to carry forward the class struggle along correct lines.

The Tamil Nadu branch of the CPI (M) has already taken up ideological and organizational work among the SCs and STs in right earnest, and obtained visible results. Small as it is in terms of its total numerical strength, about one-third of its membership comes from the SCs and STs.¹³ Harkishan Singh Surjeet, General Secretary of the CPI (M), has rightly commended this achievement of the CPI (M) in Tamil Nadu.¹⁴ If the Tamil Nadu CPI (M) does not deviate from this correct strategy of class struggle with Indian characteristics, it will certainly be able to increase its organizational and political strength significantly in the near future. There can also be little doubt that if the CPI (M) as a whole and other left parties persist with this strategy, and treat the SCs and STs as their natural allies in the class struggle, they will grow from strength to strength in the not too distant future.

2 United Front Tactics

Needless to say, the tactic of united front is only an element of the class struggle at a time when the left forces are not strong enough to capture power in the whole country on their own strength. Hence it is necessary for every left party to choose even its temporary allies in the united front, whether for electoral purposes or for the purpose of organizing mass struggles, very carefully in terms of a correct class analysis. Since the SCs and STs represent the most oppressed, exploited, and impoverished section of the Indian proletariat, their parties and organizations should be accorded the highest priority by the left parties in forming a united front. The left will have to strive to draw the dalit organisations into joint struggles against social oppression, land, wages and other issues affecting the SCs and STs. Even when some of these organisations are imbued with casteist ideologies, it must be seen in the historical and existential experience of caste oppression, endured for

centuries. It is the task of the left parties to engage them in dialogue and persuade them, through both ideology and practice, that their true destiny lies with the left.

It should not be forgotten that the grievances of the dalit-advansi groups against Manuvada and their deep-seated sense of socioeconomic injustice is quite legitimate and not inconsistent with the class struggle. Their only fear seems to be that the left parties, in their apparently exclusive preoccupation with the economic dimension of the class struggle, would fail to pay special attention to the issue of caste oppression, and hence not serve the true socioeconomic interests of the SCs and STs. But in the context of the clear espousal of the cause of caste oppression by the CPI (M), which is the largest leftist party in the country, there is no valid reason for this misperception. Once they are persuaded to realize, by word and deed, that the left parties regard them as natural allies and assign the highest priority to their emancipation, the parties and organizations of the SCs and STs may not be slow to form permanent alliances with the left. The formation of a united front with other democratic parties need not be ruled out in a given situation, but in no case should the most oppressed and exploited section of the Indian proletariat be left out of a united front led by the left parties. There can be little doubt that the left parties will make rapid headway in Indian politics, outside the states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, if united fronts are formed in this manner, keeping in view the long-term strategy of the class struggle with Indian characteristics.

3. Cultural Revolution

As we have tried to show above, the crystallized prejudice structure of caste has acquired a certain autonomous character over the centuries, and often stymies the growth of class consciousness and thwarts the growth of the class struggle for the radical restructuring of the relations of production in India.. It has grown out of ancient religious dogmas and cultural prejudices, and is unique to India's long and unbroken sociocultural tradition. Feudal social formations elsewhere, such as the estate system of Europe, were not sustained and perpetuated by any archaic social hierarchies based on socioreligious strictures and taboos enforced by the state. The socioeconomic structure of medieval Europe represented a simple division of the population in terms of economic status that was functionally and almost exclusively derived from the relations of production. The transition from feudalism to capitalism, accompanied by an intellectual renaissance and religious reformation, led to a simple division of society into classes. Even in China, which was a feudal country at the time of the communist revolution, there were no archaic and rigid sociocultural formations intervening in class relations. The class struggle there was carried out by the peasants and workers against the landlords and capitalists, as well as against the state controlled by the latter. But the existence of the crystallized prejudice structure of caste as a palpable objective element of India's socioeconomic structure makes it imperative to add a specifically cultural dimension to the class struggle.

A direct assault on the economic structures of feudalism and capitalism, and

the transformation of these structures into socialist relations of production should, of course, remain the central thrust of the class struggle in India. But on account of the complex class-caste relationship outlined above, the class struggle on the economic front will have to be supplemented by a great intellectual and cultural movement among the masses against the religious and cultural prejudices that sustain the caste hierarchy and perpetuate caste oppression. Here the struggle against caste oppression and the struggle against communal fascism are likely to converge in one gigantic cultural revolution. The struggle for the replacement of the unscientific and bourgeois religious culture that sustains both caste oppression and communal fascism by a scientific, proletarian, and socialist culture will have to be an integral element of the class struggle in India. Moreover, this will have to be a protracted cultural revolution that will continue for a long time after the socialist revolution, as and when it takes place.

A proletarian socialist revolution does not seem to be an immediate possibility in India, although this must remain the inalienable long-term goal of the class struggle. But this is not sufficient reason for arguing that the class struggle must therefore confine itself to something close to economism in the immediate future. Even within the constraints imposed by the objective politicoeconomic conditions of India it is possible, in fact imperative, to carry on a massive intellectual struggle against religious and obscurantist belief structures and values. Even partial success of such a cultural revolution would in fact lead to an awakening of class consciousness among the masses, reinforce the class struggle on the economic and political fronts, and pave the way for the rapid growth of the left forces all over India.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For Marx's early comments on the caste system in India see Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India", first published in *New York Daily Tribune*, 25 June 1853; "Future Results of British Rule in India", first published in *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 August 1853. The quotation is from the second article.
2. *Capital*, vol. III, ch. 20.
3. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1979, p.347. For other writings of EMS Namboodiripad on class-caste relations see his *Problems of National Integration*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1966; *Kerala Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1968; and *Selected Writings*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1982, vol. I.
4. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1979, p. 355.
5. B.T. Ranadive, *Caste, Class and Property Relations*, National Book Agency, Calcutta, 1982, Foreword.
6. Ram Sharan Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1990, ch. 2.
7. *Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*, 1979-81 (Twentyseventh Report), Government of India, 1983, p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. T.C.Joseph, "Child Victims of Exploitation", *Sunday Statesman Miscellany*, Calcutta, 12 October 1986.
10. Pradhan H.Prasad, "Rise of Kulak Power and Caste Struggle in North

India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 August 1991, Table 2; DN, "Reservation and Class Structure of Castes", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 November 1990; *Eighth Five Year Plan*, Government of India, Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1997, p. 420.

11. *Eighth Five Year Plan*, op. cit.
12. *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (Mandal Commission), Government of India, New Delhi, 1980, Part I, vol. 1, p. 64.
13. P.Sampath, "CPI (M)'s Intervention Against Caste Oppression in Tamil Nadu", *The Marxist*, vol. XVIII, No. 1 (January-March 2002).
14. Harkishan Singh Surjeet, "Significance of the 17th Party Congress of the CPI (M)", *The Marxist*, op. cit.