

Marxian Class Analysis in the Indian Political Context

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Abstract: *Karl Marx in none of his writings has given a definition of “class”, a subject that has been widely discussed and used in social sciences. However, from his writings we can draw an understanding of not only “class” but also of what is known as “class model” of social analysis. The paper argues that an economic interpretation of class is “reductionist” because Marx has put enough emphasis on the social and political sides of class theory. The paper has also dealt with the problems associated with the application of the theory in interpreting the Indian economic, social and political order.*

Keywords: class, mode of production, class relations, non-class models of mobilization, trade unions, modernism.

Introduction

Marxist theory of class is based on certain basic principles. The basic assumption of Marxist argument is that the character of a society is determined by its mode of production. The modern industrial societies are based on the capitalist mode of production, which is fundamentally different from the earlier feudal mode of production. Secondly, the major classes in the capitalistic mode of production are - the bourgeoisie or the owning class that controls the forces of production like land, labour, capital, industry and so on. The other numerically dominant class is the proletariat, a class that does not control the forces of production. The proletariat survives by selling its labour power to the bourgeoisie, which the latter use for the production of surplus value, which, in turn, is accumulated as profit. In between these two major classes there are many intermediary or “middle” classes. The middle class consists of petty bourgeoisie and managerial class, intellectual medical persons and so on.

It is important to note at this point that by the time Marx had written *The German Ideology* (1932) and *Capital* Vol. 1 (1867), he had neither defined “class”, nor had he worked out how the concept was to be explained, despite the fact that he had isolated the principle of class formation at

different stages of historical and social development and had identified at least three distinct periods where classes had formed.

The conceptualization of social classes by Marx thus goes back as far as his early writings and can be found in works such as *The German Ideology* (1845), *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *The 1844 Manuscripts* (1844) and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). If we consider the notion of class from Marxian concept of social relations, we can find class and class relations as the name for a certain type of structured social relation that is found within the field of the economy and the relations of subordination¹ that arise from it.

A class by Marxist definition is a group of people having similar position in class relations. Class relations in Marxist terms involve control of forces of production by different groups and the relations they enter into a production system. Marx argues that it is development that leads to the emergence of social classes; as soon as a society is able to produce more material goods than the bare minimum needed to survive, classes emerge. Lenin gave the following definition:

[classes are] large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are group of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy (Lenin 1971: 486).

This is a comprehensive definition of class in Marxist perception. According to this definition, classes are determined by both the social relations of production, and the control over the forces of production. The organization of labour is such that either the controllers of the forces of production themselves work with the tools and raw materials, or people separated from control do it². Marx once said that, a class should be united by a fellow feeling and a similar approach to life since the members undergo

¹ One of the first discussions of the relations of subordination in the context of nineteenth century economics is found in Marx's Preface in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, 1970, pp. 19-22.

² See, 'Marxism and social class' by Jim Johnston and David P. Dolowitz in Andrew Gamble, David Marsh and Tony Tant edited *Marxism and Social Science*, 1999, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p.132.

similar kind of social and political experiences. A class will also maintain uniformity in political action, since its role in the history of class struggle is defined. The bourgeoisie and proletariat are tied to each other by a relation of explanation. The proletariats generate surplus value for the bourgeoisie.

Class in Marxist interpretation is very much a political category. Participation in production relations and the resulting experiences would make them class conscious, which in turn would drive them to class struggle. Politically the bourgeoisie controls the power and the state for maintaining the existing exploitative class relations. The bourgeoisie make laws and frame political institutions to maintain its hegemony over property rights, society and culture. The proletariats, on the other hand, engage in political action to overthrow the bourgeoisie from power and take control of the means of production. The ultimate aim of class struggle is to destroy the capitalist mode of production and to establish a socialist society based on collective ownership of means of production. Marx attaches great importance to the organization of the proletariat into trade unions, gaining political power, compelling legislative recognition of their rights and interests, and above all, keeping up wages of collective bargaining, which could be achieved within a frame of bourgeois democracy. Karl Marx had predicted that the advance capitalist societies of the West would experience extreme class polarization and intense class struggle.

Marxian class analysis

In order to conceptualize class more explicitly, it will be useful to focus at a concept Marx used frequently in his work which he referred to as the 'system of social relations'³. Initially, the term social relations is used in social theory to refer to the set of social connections which arise between individuals when they engage in structured interchanges with society, but in the main these types of social relations arise within the production process carried on within the economy when we produce our livelihoods⁴ The

³ Most of the characteristics of social classes stated here can be found in *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Poverty of Philosophy*. An additional definition of class can be found in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* which states: 'In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them into hostile contrast with the latter, they form a class'.

⁴ For a discussion of the interconnections in social relations between bosses and workers see Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital,' in R.C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1978, pp.203-17.

concept of social relations therefore identifies two immediate principles referring to society and social history. First, it refers to the system of social relations individuals enter into principally for purposes of production, which are always the immediate result of the social and economic necessity which acts on them. These social relations always reflect a set of definite connections with other individuals with whom they must relate, and it is always within the system of social relations that social activity takes place. Second, the concept refers to the way in which the system of social relations entered into by individuals always structure the conditions under which the various social interchanges with society take place, and this structure often manifests itself in the form of dominant and subordinate class relations which are exemplified in the relations between bosses and workers, landlords and tenants and producers and consumers. Sometimes, these relations are called “structured oppositions” in that the individuals who occupy the class positions within these relations are opposed to each other (Bourdieu: 1988, 1-34).

Marx tried to systematize class relations by noting that each of the individuals within the class relationship had different ranks, different powers and different privileges and gradations. Marx conceived of class relations in the form of structured oppositions where the individuals within the class relations had different and opposing interests. He thought that class relations are largely structured and even defined by the roles individuals play in economic production, and to this extent he looked at how different societies tend to structure the way in which individuals enter into class relations and the different degrees of coercion and force that existed within these relations (Morrison: 2012, 57).

Marxian class analysis in Indian context

Social scientists have debated the applicability of Marxist class theory to the Indian situation. Marx himself was sceptical about India. He considered India as a part of “Asiatic mode of production” based on its stagnant, immobile production relations. In Marx’s analysis the British rule in India was a positive step, because it introduced some kind of dynamism in otherwise immobile Indian society. The British rule revolutionised the land tenure system, helped destroy the caste based *jojmani* relation and speeded up the process of industrialization. In the later part of British rule, there was a steady march towards capitalist mode of production. The British also introduced in the first half twentieth century some democratic reforms

which facilitated formation of trade unions and working class movement. The British rule in India thus intensified the conflict between capitalist mode of production and feudal mode of production. However Marx did not spell out how and when socialist revolution will take shape in India.

The Indian working class has had a somewhat different historical origin than that of its Western counterparts. In most of the Western societies the origin of the industrial proletariat is traced to the town-dwellers-the artisans and other social groups of the town economy⁵. But the Indian industrial working class originated mostly from the rural poor and the subalterns, the dalits, who had to migrate to the cities in search of work. They were never free of the spell of caste system and strong attachment to the feudal order of the village society⁶. Caste and other forms of ethnic consciousness has been the main deterrent to class formation in India all these years. The situation has not changed much even when India in on the path of rapid industrialization.

In the post independence period scholars have debated the efficacy of the class model in understanding Indian society. In the industrial urban sector there has been a clear formation of the capitalist mode of production. The trade unions are there which have tried to organise the workers along class line. The trade unions like All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Trade Union Congress (CITU), which adhere to Marxist ideology, want the workers to be a revolutionary force. The other trade unions like Indian national Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Hind Majdur Sangh (HMS), however, want reconciliation between the classes; they are not, in any sense, against the capitalist system. Studies by the historians and sociologists have found that the Indian workers strongly maintained their caste, religions and linguistic identities. Despite being part of the working class the workers are divided as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and so on. They strongly identify themselves with their castes as well. This strong attachment to these primordial identities in the urban industrial context affects the emergence of class consciousness and class

⁵ For this, see Solomon, M. Schwarz, *Labour in the Soviet Union* (1951), p. 1. The nature of the social origins of the industrial proletariat in Britain explains why the lead in labour organization there was taken, not by the new types of workers coming from the country-side, but the older established craftsmen. (For this, see Hammonds, *The Town Labourer*). In Scandinavia the social origins of the working class and the prevalence of guilds created an organic connection between trade unions and medieval guilds.

⁶ see G. K. Sharma, *Labour movement in India* (1982), p.13.

unity. In a study on the industrial workers in Kanpur, Chitra Joshi has shown how a strong working class movement of the early decades of twentieth century got split with the rise of communalism in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s (Joshi: 1985). This is one of the main factors that raise doubts about the efficacy of class model to the analysis of Indian situation.

In the agricultural sector also social the social scientists have debated, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, whether the mode of production is “semi-feudal”, pre-capitalist or capitalist. In different states of India follow different land tenure systems. The land reform programmes have not been implemented in a uniform manner all over India. As a result, agrarian class relations, modernization of agriculture, commercialization of agriculture vary from state to state. In certain parts of India, particularly Panjab and Haryana, a kind of capitalist production relations can be found. Other features like investment of capital, use of modern technology, market-oriented selection of crops confirm the rise of capitalist mode of production in these states, which have seen no land reforms. But the situation in most other parts of the country is quite different. The confused and complicated nature of mode of production in agriculture also raises doubt about the applicability of class model.

Finally, if we examine the patterns of mobilization and growth of political parties, we clearly see that the communist parties are facing a clear stagnation; they are not growing in terms of support base. On the other hand Indian politics and political parties thrive by exploiting non-class identities such as religion, caste, language and religion. This also suggests that Indian politics primarily operates on pre-modern and primordial identities. In the post-colonial India the Indian National Congress had a long run in power but there has been challenges from North-East India, from Southern India and even from the North and West one can see the rise of regional politics, ethnic politics, secessionist movements, language-based sub-nationalism, *dalit* politics, which pose serious challenge to building a modern secular state. This line of mobilisation of the masses clearly comes in the way to class-based politics led by an alliance of the working class, the progressive section of middleclass and the small peasants. The regional political parties, which operate on ethnic line cash in on regional issues and demands, now pose serious challenge to national political parties. The ethnic identities essentially work as a counter force to class identity and class consciousness.

Conclusion

A careful reading of Marxist writings on class helps in understanding that “class” cannot be understood only on economic terms because it has socio-cultural and political implications. The class model has differential application in different countries and in different socio-economic-cultural contexts. While it could have serious relevance for the capitalist West it cannot be equally helpful in understanding a society like India where there are serious problems in defining the mode of production and where the non-class factors like caste, religion, language, and region are the identity markers of the people which also form the dominant base of political mobilization. In this paper I have tried to locate the Marxian class analysis in India from economic, religious and political perspective. We have to wait and see if a broad-based alliance of the *dalit* (which combines caste-based oppression and class-based exploitation) and working class emerges in Indian politics in near future.

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