

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Gail Omvedt: Towards a Historical Materialist Analysis of the Origin and Development of Caste II

Welcome back to the class. We are looking at Gail Omvedt's essay, in which she tries to present a Marxian analysis on the growth and development of caste system in India. And we are discussing this as a part of our discussion on the Marxian influence on Indian Sociology. So, as I mentioned in the previous classes, Marxian influence has been quite marginal in the Indian sociology. Mostly it was overshadowed by structural functionalism and British anthropology. So, in the previous section of this particular essay, Gail Omvedt was doing a survey of the early attempts by different Marxian scholars to integrate a Marxian framework with that of the caste system in India and especially that of Ambedkar, Phule and then Ambedkar.

So, this section onwards, she is presenting her own argument about a fruitful synthesis of Marxian framework to understand caste system in India. So, the principles of a historical materialist theory of caste. In spite of many problems with existing Marxist theories of class and economic exploitation, the basic approach of Marxist methodology is useful for an adequate understanding of the structure and role of caste in South Asian society. So, the basic guideline for any analysis of the interest of the oppressed people is to ask, who are the exploiters and who are the exploited? How can the exploited organize their struggle to move in the direction of liberation? And what is the relation of the structures of exploitation to the historical possibilities of moving in the direction of liberation from exploitation? So, these are the kind of a fundamental question that anybody who is interested in humankind, anybody who is interested in the welfare of her own people must ask.

You are using sociological framework basically to understand who are the sections who are exploited and who are the sections who are the exploiters and what are the kind of historical context or historical reasons that these sections came into existence. To answer this question, Marx does not begin with class, which is really a derived and secondary concept in the total theory. But looks at how human, humans organize their production

and how they produce the surplus product embodying their surplus labor is extracted and appropriated by the non-producing sections of society. So, she is arguing that Marx does not really begin with the concept of class. And as you know that class is defined in Marxian theory as kind of relations with the means of production.

The people who own the means of production and the people who do not own the means of production and people who actually involved in the actual process of production. So, she says that what Marx focused rather was to look at the involvement of different section people in the actual process of production and who produced the surplus and then who took away that surplus. Who produced the surplus and then who extracted that surplus and because extraction of surplus is the illustration of exploitation and that is how you begin the kind of development of class system. The surplus product embodying their surplus labor is extracted and appropriated by the non-producing sections of society. This methodology leads us to look at the concrete forms of production in any society.

The concrete forms of production, expropriation and accumulation of surplus labor and this is typically the Marxian analysis trying to understand how you know surplus labor who produces and then who appropriates that. In British, in pre-British English society for example, we can answer the question of whether dominant caste peasants were exploiters or not by this criterion. Dalits and artisans apparently worked for the village community or the dominant peasant as we saw mostly in the case of the Jajmani system. The service castes or artisans they were permanently attached to this jajman systems, worked for the village community or the dominant peasants. They produced tools, ploughs, ropes etcetera for agriculture production.

They often worked as laborers on the land. But if we analyze what happened to their surplus labor, we can see that it was embodied in the crops grown by the peasants and that the greatest share of these crops were taken by the representative of the state. Jagirdas, Rajas, Deshmukhs, Sardas, Zamindars and of religion Brahmins. So, this is a very important argument that she puts forward. Though the land actually belong to the landlords who occupy a relatively upper caste position.

But the surplus that is produced based on the sweat and efforts of the lower caste were appropriated mostly by the representative of the states. Because there was huge very, very huge system of tax collection, very efficient system of tax collection. And this surplus was appropriated by them. These exploiters therefore appropriated the surplus labour not only of peasants but also of the craftsmen, field laborers' etcetera. Therefore, we can identify exploited jatis as the peasant caste, kunbis, kapus etcetera and the Dalits, artisans and others.

So, she attempts to argue that maybe starting with the agricultural caste, with the landowning caste almost every other caste below that can be seen as an exploited caste. In identifying the exploiters, we have to notice that it is not easy to identify them in terms of jati except for Brahmins who are almost never labored and always claimed an important share of the surplus. Because Brahmins never engaged in actual productive physical labor. They mostly owned the land in the ancient times, or they involved in other kind of activities like priesthood or teachers or scholars, but they involved in the actual physical labour was almost nil. Besides Brahmins, the major exploiters were the holders of state and political power, and this included households not only from the peasant jatis but also from the lower jatis as well.

But they were exploiters not as members of such jati but as holders of state power. Because they would be the representative of the state and their role is to expropriate this surplus and then give it to the state. In this methodological approach, we do not begin with the class. The more basic concept is that of exploitation and specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of the direct producers. In the strict sense, classes come into existence only with the capitalism and then only in the capitalist core areas of factory production.

So, she says that this category of class has to be seen as a kind of more modern capitalist phenomenon and not in the pre-capitalist era. Peasantries, tribal communities' etcetera are class-like. But their relations of exploitations are interwoven with community tribal kinship features in pre-capitalist systems. And even when these are linked to capitalist accumulation in a capitalist world system, thus their fight against exploitation takes place through communities, tribes, caste and kinship groups. So, she would rather characterize these types and communities and kinship groups as pre or class-like structures who continue to have this kind of features of say primordial affinities and other kind of things in their economic interest as well.

Class as identified solely in terms of ownership of the private property and the ownership or control of the means of production does not explain major aspects of exploitation and capital accumulation. Especially in the Indian context, it does not explain because the means of, the ownership of the means of production is so complicatedly distributed. A theory of historical materialism applicable in current circumstance will have to incorporate the elements of violence, force, domination, knowledge suggested by among others, Jyotibha Phule. So, that is what she argues. In analyzing how caste system or Jyativyavstha works, we would argue that it should not be seen merely as an ideological or superstructural.

Neither should it be identified simply as a cluster of concrete and interacting Jatis. It is a

system of what? A set of basically kinship-like social practices and the rules that surround them. So, it has to be understood as a system, as a set of basically kinship-like social practices and rules that surround them. The former are material, the latter are ideological. So, it has a material realm because they involve in actual process of production and the rules and regulations exist at the ideological level.

But in the sense of the term, often conscious, unconscious rules of behavior as contrasted with a conscious system of ideology, a distinction used by many anthropologists. The former are material, the latter are ideological, but in the sense of often unconscious rules of behavior as contrasted with a conscious system of ideology. So, it is about how you try to understand the way you behave, whether you are behaving on the basis of certain deeper ideological process, or you simply behave. The endogamous principles and practices that constitute the Jatis, the purity pollution behavior rules and occupational tasks governing the relations of hierarchy and exploitation exist among them are the practices and rules that constitute caste system. So, what are the specific rules that determine the nature of interrelation between different sections? It is the endogamous principles and practices, the restrictions on marriage constitute Jatis, the purity pollution behavior rules, behavior rules and occupational tasks governing the relations of hierarchy and exploitation exist among them are the practices and results that constitute the caste system, which we are familiar with, starting with Ghurye, with Srinivas, with Dumont, this has been the argument.

This set of practices and rules has its own dynamics and has deeply shaped Indian society and the Indian economic system. But it has also been shaped by changing economic relations, by conquest and changes in state formations, by involvement with the market and wage labors etcetera. So, she is basically arguing that not to look at caste as a static system, but as a system that keeps changing over the last several centuries. Specificity of caste, why South Asia? This is another important question. The caste system exists in South Asian subcontinent and there only.

While Brahmanic Hinduism strengthened, even gave it its full realization, caste exists also in Muslim Pakistan and Bangladesh among the Buddhist Sinhalese. While on the other hand, the long historical influence of Hinduism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism on Southeast Asian societies did not create a caste system there. Thus, caste is a social system characteristic of the subcontinent and that is interesting to see why it happened. Because if it were something so inherent to Hindu religion, then it should not have been prevalent in Islamic societies or it should have been prevalent in the Southeast Asian countries like say Thailand or Vietnam and Cambodia and other places where Hinduism was very very strong. The identification of caste as caused by in some sense Hindu religious ideology cannot explain the fact that the system appears to have its origin

before the consolidated dominance of Hinduism as a religion in India.

Similarly, racial theories of Aryan conquest or theories describing caste as a simple crystallization of what was originally an economic division of labour failed to explain why this happened in South Asia and not other regions of the world because the conquest, the economic development of economic surplus and an increasing division of labour etc. are characteristic of almost all regions and not only South Asia. So, why only here did a caste system emerge is what Gail Omvedt tries to answer. The situation suggests that there were certain social-cultural features of the subcontinent itself existing prior to the development of a surplus and prior to conquest that pushed social evolution in a particular direction is an argument. There are specific socio-cultural features that existed which existed prior to the development of a surplus and prior to conquest.

This locates the most important causal features or more accurately a necessary condition for the emergence of caste in the specific characteristics of the pre-state South Asian society prior to the Indus civilization and prior to the Aryan conquest. There is some archaeological evidence for this uniqueness. Archaeologists stress that since ancient times the subcontinent has had groups inhabiting different ecological niches and carried out carrying on varying practices of food production, extraction, hunters, fishers, collectors, later agriculturists with some form of inter-community relations involving exchanging of products. Stone tools in the subcontinent are frequently found in large factory sites indicating that they were made by one group for much wider use with some form of exchange. So, this is an argument that in the pre or in the historic period even before Aryan invasion or even before you know development of human civilization there existed different occupational groups or people who engaged in a different kind of activities of subsistence including say agriculturists or hunters and fishers who had some kind of practice of exchange.

These various groups may be seen as proto-castes, the previous form of caste. Once the surplus developed, processes of conquest took place and states and cities were established. These groups tribes became jatis were integrated gradually into a hierarchical order that included relations of exploitation, domination and ideological concepts and practices of purity and pollution. So, this is a argument again a very sweeping argument about how these different tribal groups you know came to be came to convert it into kind of a jati kind of groups. Certainly, crucial tribal feature was retained in jatis.

Certainly crucial tribal features was retained in jatis ranging from closed boundaries between tribes to the retainment of clan sections between many jatis. So, this whole idea about lineage and then clan and very strict rules about endogamy were carried out from

this tribal characteristic according to Gail Omvedt. These processes climaxed with the constitution of the caste system or varnasrama dharma as the dominant social structure of feudal state societies during the 6th to 9th centuries after a complex fight with competing religious ideological traditions. So, maybe she is talking she is saying that from the 6th to 9th centuries this kind of got kind of into more consolidated forms.

The development of caste society. While we can identify proto-caste features in the early Dravidian cultures, the caste system itself emerged as a process linked with the consolidation of classes, economic divisions, patriarchy, and the rights of the state. The development of Indian caste society is seen in different ways of different theories of caste. Generally, the more conservative social science theories like the legitimizing, idolatization of the system have little to say about any process of stages of development, but instead take the system as either essentially existing or evolving in a smooth harmonious process. So, she is talking about how various theories that try to present the chronological development of caste system often do not look into the kind of contradictions and conflicts and violence that involved in that or even the kind of stages involved in it. In contrast to the main radical theories including those influenced by Marxism, emphasize stages in the development of caste.

For traditional Marxist this means simply seeing caste in terms of the superstructure of the orthodox five stages. That is, primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. They try to see how kind of caste system fitted in each of these five stages. Strikingly, one of the most interesting adaptations apparently independent of Marxism is Ambedkars revolution and counter-revolution which divides the pre-Muslim period as divided into stages of one Brahmanism, the Vedic period, Buddhism connected with the rise of the first Madhava, Mauryan states and representing a revolutionary denial of caste inequalities and third that of Hinduism or the counter-revolution which consolidates Brahman dominance and the caste hierarchy. So, Ambedkar provides again a periodization talking about the Brahmanism that of the Vedic period especially that of Rig Veda and then the Buddhist period and then the third is the decline of Buddhist period and the rise of Hinduism with again cemented the hegemony of Brahmins.

All these approaches share a concern or looking at caste in terms of uneven development, contradictions, and radical and violent stages. Generally, we can identify four main periods following pre-class or proto-caste society marked by specific features of the development of Indian social structures including specific economic structures of class, forms, caste, patriarchy, and the state. The nearly 500 years of Indocivilization, she is giving it the periodization. The millennia long period from its fall and the ascendancy of the Indo-Europeans to the Gangetic Valley stages. A second millennium stretching up to the consolidation of the caste feudalism and characterized by the conflict between

major religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

A second millennium starting with the AD stretching up to the consolidation of caste feudalism and characterized by conflict between major religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. And the period of medieval caste feudalism characterized by the dominance of Hinduism and the lateral end of Islam stretching from the 16th centuries of AD to colonial rule. The period of medieval caste feudalism characterized by the dominance of Hinduism and later entry of Islam stretching from the 6th, 10th centuries AD to the colonial rule. And all these so important developments as changes in the caste system. So, he, for Gail the caste has never been an unchangeable system.

Caste did change in accordance with the last kind of a larger change. So, these are the four kind of stages that she identifies. The first stage, going back almost 4000 years, then the second, the third period starting from the AD beginning onwards and till the later period. Conclusion, Dalits and the anti-caste struggle. The lines of exploitation in pre-British India as defined in terms of the production, extraction and accumulation of surplus were structured through the caste system or Jati Vyavastha.

This identified a particular caste division of labour involving specific forms of hierarchy among the exploited with at least three major groups identified in most villages. Toiling peasant castes, most of whom were simply cultivators but with some village management. Powers held by dominant lineage, Biradari, Bhauki, artisans and service castes performing particular caste duties within the Jajmani-Balutari system and often lowest among these classed as Balutadars. A large caste of general labourers working for the villages and its dominant sections and classes as untouchables. Tribals and pastoralists outside the villages were also among the exploited sections.

So, she talks about these are the caste which can be seen as exploited caste. So, this does not include the Brahmins, this does not include the Kshatriyas, this also does not include Vaisyas to a large extent. It starts with the toiling peasant caste most of whom were simply cultivators but with some village management powers held by dominant lineage, artisans and then the Dalits, large caste of general labourers and then of course the tribals and pastoralists were kind of outside. The unique position of untouchables was not simply in living outside the village and performing the most polluted occupations. It was also that their position within the caste division of labour made them most exploited.

This is not simply a matter of traditional caste occupation. As you know many of the Dalit castes, they are the agricultural labourers and their labour was exploited, the surplus was extracted by the upper classes. Looking only at occupation, the Chamars of North India would have their analogue in the Chamars of Maharashtra and Madigas of Andhra

that all were traditionally leather workers. But more important was the functional position of chamars in the caste division of labour in being general village servitors similar to the Mahars of Maharashtra. Nearly everywhere in India, there was one large untouchable caste which performed this role, working as field labourers in almost slave-like conditions in the hierarchical irrigated villages and that is true in every every states you had this large number of numerically strong untouchable caste who worked as agricultural labourers in almost slave-like conditions.

This gave them villages as general village servants working for the village head man as well as visiting state officials. This gave them a key labouring role both in terms of agricultural production and as servants of the wider state machinery. They were the most clearly proletarianized segment of the exploited within the wider system of exploitation. So, she focuses on this particular Dalit groups who performed this important role. They exploited as a whole included a wide range of caste, the broad toiling caste majority.

Clearly it was a system which had built in contradictions among the exploited. Dalit labourers suffered from domination of village peasants, they also faced exclusion, oppression from all caste Hindus even from caste themselves ranked very low in the hierarchy. So, the Dalits had to face this kind of various forms of exploitation not only from the upper caste groups but also from the caste which are considered to be untouchables but who consider themselves to be superior to these groups. In addition, there were also two major untouchable caste in a single region. Mahars and Mangs in Maharashtra, Chamars and Churas in North India, Malas and Madigas in Andhra who were traditionally competitors opposed to each other and claiming a higher status in the hierarchy.

These divisions and contradictions to some extent justify the characterization of caste as having a retarding effect on class struggle. In that it institutionalized division among the exploited. So, this again a perennial problem because as we have seen or that even among the untouchable or the ex-untouchable groups, untouchability exists, and the kind of divisions exist and thereby to a large extent limiting these caste groups to come together and then put forward a unified struggle against caste system. Caste struggle like class struggle could become revolutionary only when it could pose an alternative, a more advanced system rather than being simply a negative protest or a competitive struggle for more economic or social cultural rights within the framework of exploitation. But whether it could do so obviously depends upon the possibilities of the historical conjunctures.

In the early era of transition, when the caste system of exploitation was being constituted, the limitations of the anti-systemic role of religions like Buddhism and

Jainism were that they could not be linked to a more productive historical system. During the period of the medieval synthesis after the defeat of this heterodox religions, only a negative rebellion appears to have been possible, represented by the Bhakti cults which embodied aspirations of the equally but accepted Hindu framework for this worldly social interaction. So, she is talking about how during different periods in the medieval period or even in the beginning of the second millennia you had these different possibilities offered. It was only from the time of British rule and the rise of capitalist industry society that a more egalitarian and more productive society became a historical possibility and was posed as such as an ideologies of radical democracy and socialism. This period saw the rise of new network, new working class struggle, the taking on of new forms of peasant struggles, but it also saw a new anti-caste revolt which was increasingly spearheaded by a Dalit liberation movement.

So, another very important historical juncture was of course that of the British rule and the introduction of modernity, new languages, new slogans, new mechanisms, new opportunities and that really provided the Dalits with an opportunity to stage a more concerted fight against caste system. So, this essay in summary as you must have seen tries to provide a combination of a materialistic history of caste system in India. It does not go by the usual arguments that it was divinely ordained and or racial theory of caste rather it tries to look at how the material conditions really enabled the development of caste. That is why Gail Omvedt is considered to be an important Marxist scholar who while who showed lot of sensitivity and nuances in combining these two frameworks, the Marxian framework and the Dalit perspective to provide a more nuanced and productive understanding of caste system in India.

So, we will conclude this session today and we will meet you in the coming class. Thank you.