

# The Class and Caste Question: Ambedkar and Marx

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Class and Caste is an idiotic binary..

..a product of lazy intellectuals, and identity champions on both sides...

Marxists as well as Ambedkarites...



# It has only resulted in..

- ☒ Many sterile theories and pontifications
- ☐ Juxtaposing Marx with class against Ambedkar with caste
- ☐ Aggravated divergence between the movements based on them to their own self destruction
- ☐ Castes and class cannot be contrasted

**Class is an analytical category whereas caste is a sociological category!**



# Marx on Class

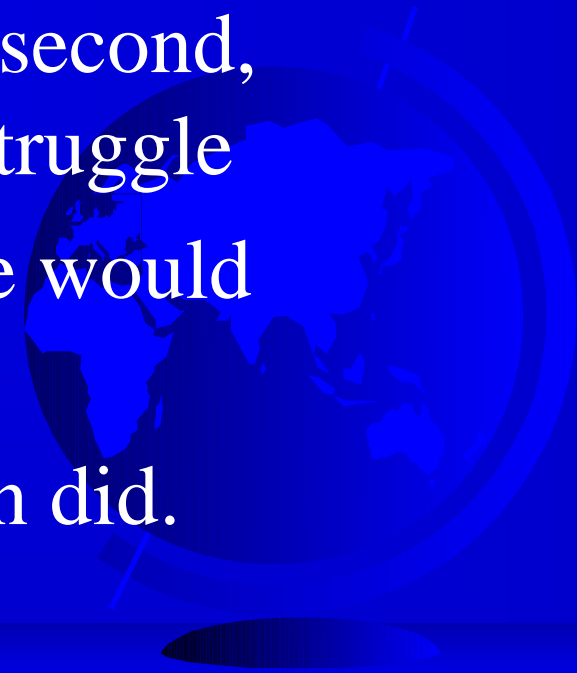
- Core of his theory is “Dialectical Materialism” conceived through philosophical route but validated by natural science
- Applied to social sphere > “Historical Materialism”
- Class is conceived as an element at a certain level of abstraction to see dialectics apply

**We will return to this idea at the end!**



# Marx on Class...

- Marx distinguished classes into two evolutionary phases:
  - *klasse en sich* (class in itself)
  - *klasse fuer sich* (class for itself)
- The first connotes position, the second, consciousness gained through struggle
- Class struggle reaching its acme would usher into revolutionary change
- Marx did not define class; Lenin did.



# Lenin wrote

*“Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a 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 organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and their mode of acquiring it”.*

(Vladimir I. Lenin: 'A Great Beginning: Heroism of the Workers in the Rear: 'Communist Subbotniks' in: 'Collected Works', Volume 29; Moscow; 1965; p. 421).

# To note

- It defined classes in Capitalism
- Four key expressions:
  - social production,
  - social organization,
  - Social wealth, and
  - Social economy
- All stressing on aspects of embryonic socialism in the process of incubating within existing capitalism
- We shall return to this at the end.



# Ambedkar on Class

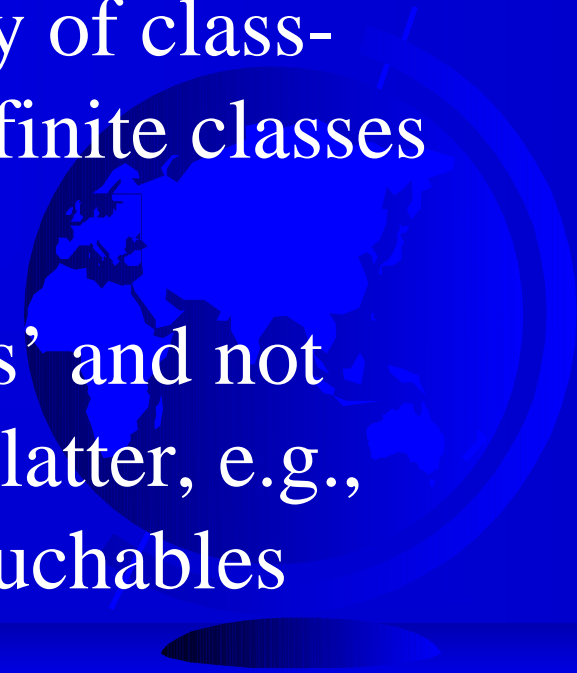
- Recognizes classes as the basic constituents of society
- “To say that individuals make up society is trivial; society is always composed of classes. “
- “This is a universal fact and early Hindu society could not have been an exception to this rule, and, as a matter of fact, we know it was not.”
- *A Caste is an Enclosed class*





# Ambedkar on Class....

- His class however was not Marxian
- It came closer to Weberian conception
- His classes did not clash: “It may be an exaggeration to assert the theory of class-conflict, but the existence of definite classes in a society is a fact.”
- Even later he always used ‘class’ and not caste while fighting against the latter, e.g., Depressed Classes for the Untouchables



# Ambedkar's Class Struggle

- In 1930s he tried class politics
  - 'Brahmanism and Capitalism'
  - Independent Labour Party
  - Struggle against Khoti
- Describes himself as a working class leader
- Surprisingly, he announces renouncing Hinduism
- Writes *Annihilation of Castes*

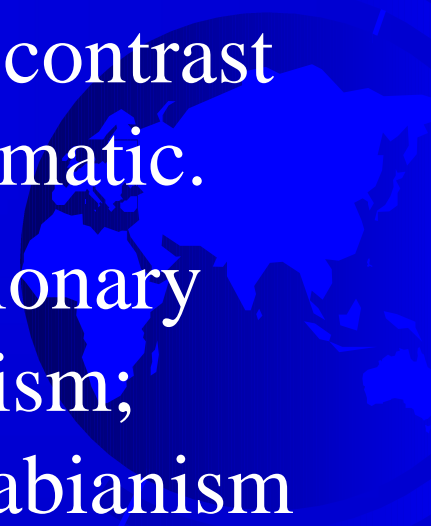


# Class Slipping into Caste

- Unlike Marx, usage of class was not central to his schema
- It only reflected his desire to bring all the Untouchable castes together as Depressed Classes or Dalits.
- But for this label, the content of his movement remained overtly caste based
- Consequently, his following remained largely confined to his own caste



# Difference between Marx and Ambedkar

- For Marx class was to spiral up history through revolutions, for Ambedkar it was to gradually improve its own condition
  - Marx tried through an integral theory man realizing his 'species being'. In contrast Ambedkar's approach was pragmatic.
  - Marx was motivated by revolutionary possibilities of scientific socialism; Ambedkar was influenced by Fabianism
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# Other Influencers

- ❑ Ambedkar did not find anything in Marx of help to him in fighting castes
- ❑ Dalits wanted it here and now!
- ❑ Alienated from the practitioners of Marxism in Bombay
- ❑ Marxist metaphor of base and superstructure!
- ❑ Enigmatic attitude towards Marxism



# Ambedkar on Castes

- Diagnosed castes as enclosed classes
- Brahmans first enclosed themselves, which then was emulated by others and was enforced through a system of endogamy and exogamy
- It implied, intermarriages would annihilate castes
- Later, in *Annihilation of Castes*, he dignoses them to be rooted in Hindu scriptures
- Dynamite *Dharmashastras*!




# Strategies to Fight Castes

- Identity building: untouchables as sons of the soil
- Electoral politics: from separate electorate to party-building
- Working with the rulers: from the British Raj to the Congress Raj
- Conversion, the ultimate strategy

**“None of his strategies really succeeded during his life time.”** – [Christophe Jaffrelot




# Accomplishments

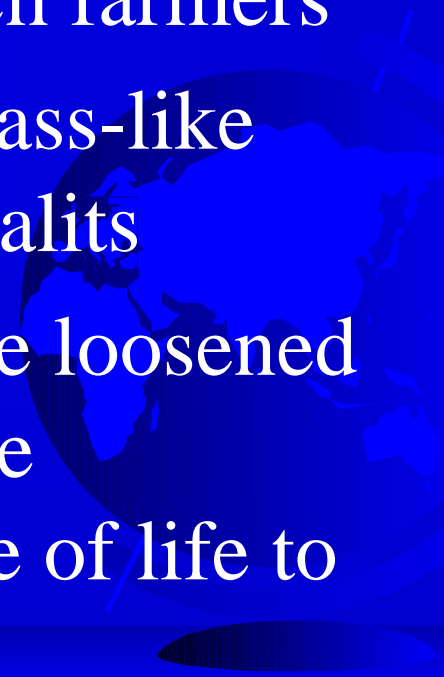
- ❑ Over six decades max 10% Dalits are catapulted to be the visible middle class
  - ❑ 90% Dalits in rural areas and urban slums live crisis ridden lives and pay costs
  - ❑ In exchange, castes have been legitimated in modern India
  - ❑ Caste are a bigger and messier menace than ever before
  - ❑ Pragmatism left Dalits directionless
  - ❑ It served well opportunists to pursue their self interests in the name of Ambedkar
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# Marx on Castes

- Marx touched on the caste system in a number of places in a discursive manner
  - He considered it as a special case of division of labour: “crude form of division of labour”
  - He expected industrialization of India due to railway network “will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.”
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# Did Marx Err on Castes?

- Castes touched by capitalism lost their ritual differences as can be seen in Dwija band
  - Later, it can be said of the Shudras, the caste band of the class of the rich farmers
  - Castes are reduced today to a class-like formation : Dalits versus non-Dalits
  - Spread of capitalism would have loosened their hold a great deal but for the constitutional grant of new lease of life to them
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# Marx rather Erred on Class

- Marx conceived classes in a particular way and expected revolution to happen in advanced countries in his life time
- Revolutions happened but none confirmed to his theory
- Marxism was to be a live science; it is made into a dogma by the Marxists
- There are huge problems of theory to be resolved by us

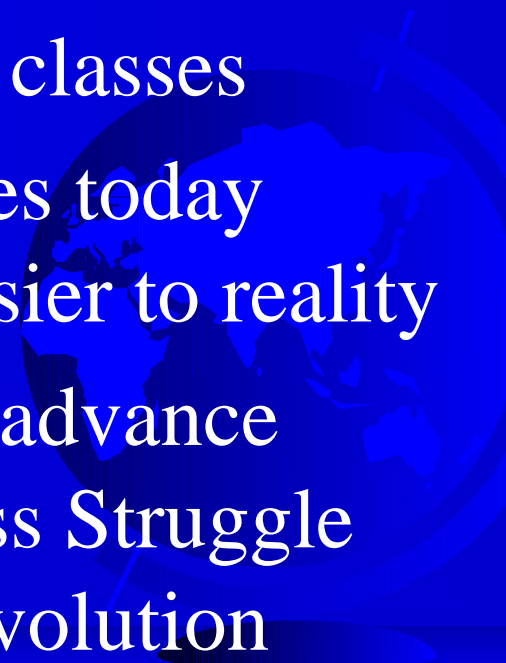


# Class Conception

- Economic definition of a class is the class collocation of the production agents due to the production relations
- Production relations in real life (and not pure capitalist mode) involves analysis at several levels of abstraction
- Consequently, determination of classes will differ from 'pure' working class and capitalist
- Not just Economic Definition but Economic Identification of classes



# Class Conception...

- Must include not only economic instance but also the political and ideological ones
  - The changes superstructure and class struggle bring about in the economic structure must influence the definition of classes
  - Constricted conception of classes today makes application of Marx messier to reality
  - With this conception, we could advance towards a unified theory of Class Struggle and thereby a new theory of Revolution
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# Towards a Unified Theory

- Pure capitalist relations is an abstraction; the reality reflects many relations not necessarily based on surplus value
- Classes should be determined not only on pure capitalist mode of production but at the socio-economic system level
- Theory of alienation, the driving force in Marx's theory of revolution would better apply to classes so determined



# Towards a Unified Theory...

- This will entail broadening of the first three elements in Lenin's definition
- It is no longer just the producer who is exploited but will include non-producer who is oppressed
- Will automatically apply to different phases of capitalism without any messy theorization that fall short of keeping pace with resilience of capital



# Towards a Unified Theory...

- All labouring Dalits, Women, Tribes, workers in informal economy, who are excluded today will thus become Proletariat
- Class Struggle will encompass the battles against caste, gender, race and informalization of every kind with far greater fire power
- This alone can bring about true revolution and lead us towards realizing our '*Species Being*'





# Castes to be Subsumed by Classes

- If this approach has been used castes could well be subsumed by the classes
- Class analysis is to be done in concrete conditions obtaining in the country and not on an assumed level of abstraction with borrowed moulds
- Annihilation of Castes could well be an integral part of the class struggle

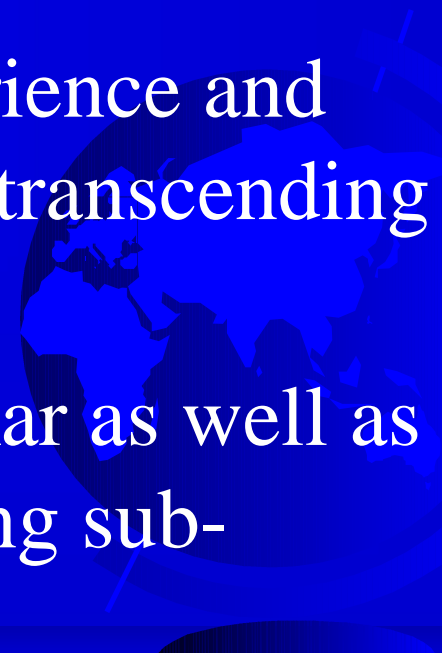


# Marxism Needs Rewriting

- While the core tenet of Marxism holds, its derivative structure needs to be drastically rewritten
- Modern technological advances, managerial innovations have changed the world beyond recognition
- A revolution and not reform (discrete patch work approach) is needed in our thinking
- It is a historic challenge before all those who want socialist future



# And to the Ambedkarites

- The core character of caste is hierarchy seeking and splintering like amoeba
  - It can never be the basis of struggle for any radical change
  - They need to review their experience and radically reorient their struggle transcending barriers of 'caste certificates'
  - Identity politics is anti-Ambedkar as well as self-destructive. It goes searching sub-castes
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# Remember

- Ambedkar's dream of Annihilation of Castes can only be accomplished through a democratic revolution in India!
- Dalit emancipation is entangled with revolutionary future of India
- And there is no revolution without their own participation!!

**Thank you**

