

INTERSECTIONS OF CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER IN RURAL INDIA: TOWARDS A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

Dr. KRISHNA MURARI

*Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, PGDAV College (Evening),
University of Delhi, Nehru Nagar, 110065.*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to unveil the two-pronged discrimination faced by Bahujan women, especially Dalit women, in rural settings pertaining to manual work. Workplaces relating to the agricultural sector continue to be a toxic atmosphere for women and gender fluid people coming from marginalised sections who face discrimination, not only on the basis of their gender identity but also their caste and class. The detriment such discrimination causes to Bahujan women and non-binary people is not only economic in terms of the wage gap but also has implications on their mental health and sexual autonomy. While examining the myriad implications such arbitrary hierarchies have on the mental and economic growth of Bahujan women, efforts would be made to deliberate on a Marxist solution for the debates that come up with respect to the assertion of Dalit identity.

Keywords: *Caste, class, gender, intersectionality, oppression, feminist movement, Marxism*

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

It was as a result of the second wave of feminism that the term intersectionality was coined by feminist activist Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term 'intersectionality' to explain the layers of oppression faced by people belonging to more than one marginalised communities. As a result of which, they face not one but multiple levels of oppression owing to their different identities. For instance, a black woman is likely to encounter discrimination by white people being a black, as well as by black men because of her gender identity. The term intersectionality supposes that there are different levels of oppression and that the most oppressed of all must be given more space when talking about the marginalised people. This sentiment is also shared by revered Indian anti-caste leader who also led the Dravidian movement in the South against the Brahminical patriarchs who writes,

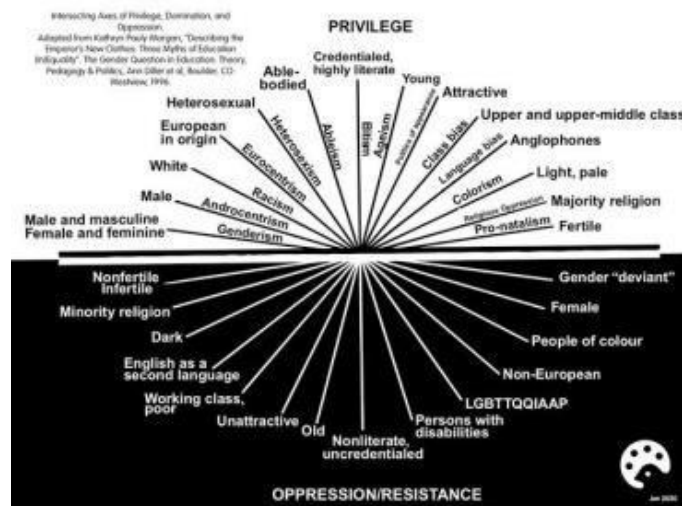
"If a larger country oppresses a smaller country, I'll stand with the smaller country

If a smaller country has a majoritarian religion that oppresses minority religions, I'll stand with the minority religion

If a minority religion has caste and one caste oppresses another caste, I'll stand with the caste being oppressed

In an oppressed caste, if an employer oppresses his employee, I'll stand with the employee. If an employee goes back home and oppresses his wife, I'll stand with that woman".

Through this poem, Periyar highlights the complex dynamics of oppression by lucidly explaining how one can be oppressed by one and be an oppressor to the other which can not be understood if we look at the experiences of the oppressed and the oppressor from a linear perspective. The 'Wheel of Privilege/Oppression' depicts several layers of oppression and privilege in a binary fashion which puts one person in the form of different axis. At one end stands the privileged of the oppressor while on the other end stands the oppressed or unprivileged.



CASE STUDY: BODHGAYA LAND MOVEMENT¹

"Aurat ke sahbhag bina, har badlav adhura hai!"

(Without women's contribution, every struggle is incomplete)

The revolutionary words that shook the throne of upper-caste dominance slyly perched on by the oppressive Mahants of Shankar Math, reverberated in the air of Bodhgaya - the land of spiritual and political revolution. The Bodhgaya Land Movement, spearheaded by the socialist leader inspired by Gandhian ideals of non-violence, became the first rebellion to assert the land rights of Dalit

¹ [“Aurat, Harijan Aur Mazdoor, Nahin Rahenge Ab Majboor!”—The Clarion Call Of Bodhgaya Land Movement, Deepshi Chowdhury](#)

agricultural labourers that eventually brought the Brahmin priests to their knees. Yearsof caste violence, humiliation and economic exploitation of the landless Bhuiyan and Musahar castes ultimately drove them to the edge and thus, they came marching under the banner of Chhatra-Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (CYSV) to claim back the land that once belonged to them. The winters of 1978 Bihar were beginning to heat up at the sight of the first confrontation between the Maths's Mahants and the labourers when they joined hands with Vahini student activists to guard the agricultural produce cultivated with their blood, sweat and backbreaking hard work.

The young men and women of Vahini braved life-threatening assaults that came from the badly bruised egos of Mahants and their henchmen and courted arrests. What started as a resistance against the bourgeoisie landowners who siphoned off the surplus yield and the influential religious figures who held disproportional assets, evolved into a movement that brought the questions of caste, class and gender to the forefront. The rose-tinted picture of a jovial homogeneous farming community portrayed by the mainstream media came crumbling down as the more hideous image of India's agricultural sector came to light. The rage in the hearts of the peasants and labourers was fueled by centuries of oppression practised by the upper-caste local leaders supported by the state machinery. Illegal usurping of land and *benami* (bogus) land transfers; furthering of caste hierarchies by the Panchayats; sexual and economic exploitation of Dalit women - the list was endless. The heroic fight ultimately earned them rights to a roundabout 1,000 acres of fertile and well-irrigated land redistributed by the government, of which 110 acres were registered specifically under the name of women.

WOMEN FARMERS OF BODHGAYA

The cries of Bahujan women, who constituted an overwhelming fraction of the struggle for equal land rights reflected their deep-seated agony. Antagonized not only by the exploitative dominant castes but also by the men of their own community, the women who had now found their voice contended against transferring the deeds of the redistributed lands in the names of men. The men who regularly indulged in alcohol abuse followed by domestic violence had become a nuisance for the women. The tedious routine of household chores beginning from the break of the dawn, back-breaking fieldwork, looking after the children along with other miscellaneous tasks throughout the day had started taking a toll on the women. Exhausted under the patriarchal set up of work distribution that prescribed traditional gender roles and allowed limited economic autonomy, the women started insisting on their share of land. Having no ownership of land, widowed and deserted women left alone to fend for themselves in a male dominated society found it challenging to ensure a sense of financial and social security.

Learning at the education camps '*shivirs*' set up by the women activists daily, the women labourers acquired a critiquing lens that questioned the patriarchal notion of monogamy and the institution of marriage, the practice of patrilocal residence and on the other hand, promoted inter-caste marriages

and women's education. Influenced by the feminist thinking of Vahini's women activist Manjhaar, these women who sowed, irrigated, harvested and threshed the crops realized they formed an equally valuable component of the agricultural force and therefore, argued for separate deeds of land in their name.

Perplexed by the demands put forward by the women, the men activists criticized them for breaking the unity of the movement. Countering their criticism, the women proclaimed that the struggle was not just for land rights but acquiring the means of production from their Brahmin oppressors that strengthens their power in society. However, if the Dalit women face oppression by Dalit men should the latter not wage a fight against the former. The men could finally see the rationale behind an apparently reactionary demand. Risking the chance of receiving the ownership of land altogether, the men supported their demand for land transfers solely in their name. The Mazdoor-Kisaan Samiti stood by the women in front of administrative officers hesitant to break the tradition and rejected the proposal for joint titles in the name of the couple.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVE ON INTER-SECTIONALITY

Although, proponents of international feminism who only focus on identity politics do not seem to agree with this, quite the same views can be found expressed in Marxist texts which recognise the various levels of oppression. However, instead of advocating for several fragmented social movements centered around one identity and the form of oppression faced by that community, Marxists instead concentrate on the source and foundation of all forms of oppression and aim to dismantle it through a unity among all the oppressed communities. The root of the various expressions of oppression that we see is for them the economic structure or the relations of production of that society. According to the base-superstructure theory propounded by Karl Marx, a German economist and a leader of the proletarian class, a society is based on the economic structure of the society and the relations of production between different classes - the material conditions of a class, which in turn determines the superstructure i.e. the socio-cultural setup and political scenario of the society. Since then, many Marxists have also criticised the base-superstructure theory as it does not recognise the agency of a human in deciding how he aims to shape oneself and focuses too much on the impact the material conditions in which a human is born, on their cultural practices and politics that determines their class character. The common standpoint however remains that the proletarian class has utmost revolutionary potential as written in Marx and Engel's Communist Manifesto and that by uniting the proletariat alone can one abolish all sorts of private property that give birth to these hierarchies and thereby, end all forms of oppression - be it in the form of caste, economic class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religion.

Quoting from the Communist Manifesto, where Marx calls for a proletarian unity against the bourgeoisie and exposes the farce of identity politics that alienates the working class based on the contrasting forms of oppression faced by different workers (In the Indian context, distinctions between an upper-caste worker and a Dalit worker),

"The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labor. Wage-labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

Similarly in Feminism is For Everybody, renowned black feminist theorist Bell Hooks asks feminists to focus on the systems of oppression and the material conditions in which these loathed hierarchies developed instead of focusing on the oppressors who are a part of the system themselves. She says,

"Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center more than 10 years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism."

In the context of India, we see Marxist feminist Anuradha Ghandy who read and wrote extensively on the caste question while leading the workers and farmers' movements and organising the tribals of Bastar. Throughout her political career as a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist, Ghandy who herself came from an affluent Parsi family, gave up riches to devote herself to creating class-consciousness in the women workers, farmers and tribals of Maharashtra as well as addressed the problem of sexism, patriarchy and casteism within Communist movements. In her work, Philosophical Trends in Feminist Movement, she discusses and critiques several strains of feminism (eco feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism and anarchist feminism - to name a few) and then, explains why she chooses to advocate for proletarian feminism.

Emphasising on the need for rejecting bourgeois liberal feminism and embracing the Marxist ideal of proletarian feminism, she writes,

"Now they have become propagandists for feminism, meaning patriarchy is the main problem of women, we have to fight only against patriarchy. But patriarchy has its roots in class society. In all societies it is perpetuated by the exploiting classes, i.e. feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. So

fighting patriarchy means fighting against these exploiting classes. But the feminists are against recognizing this. They believe women's conditions in this society can be changed by politically lobbying with the governments and by propaganda alone. In reality this feminist stream today is representing the class outlook and the class interests of the bourgeois and upper middle class women in the country."

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