

The Dalit Issue—Some Problems

Anirban Biswas

Four decades ago, when the struggles of the peasantry and the working class were seemingly sending tremors through the country, there was hardly any reference in the left literature to terms like *dalit* or *adivasi*, or even *lower caste*. Some notions of identity that did not exactly conform to the traditional precept of class were implicit in the titles like the *ryot coolie sangham* or the *girijan* movement of Andhra Pradesh, but in Bengal, where the historic Naxalbari uprising took place, nobody found anything in the Naxalite literature that suggested that caste could be an identity for a person living mainly on manual labour, and if such identities did exist, they were relevant only for social customs etc.

But such identities cut across class barriers and often shaped attitudes to peasant struggles. In a brief discussion of the point in the perspective of the historic peasant struggle in Gopiballavpur of West Midnapore in 1969-70, one of the chief organizers of the movement has expressed this fact clearly enough. It is tempting to quote him, "In the Gopiballavpur area, there is a caste group called '*mal*' or mallakshatriya. The mal-inhabited villages were the first to provide us with shelter and to participate in our movement and organization. In the neighbouring Baharagora area of the district of Singbhum, the mal villages were the first to get organized there. These villages were also in the forefront of the struggle that began in 1969 with attacks on landlords and seizure of land. Then the santal, munda, bagdi and kora villages joined the movement. In the Gopiballavpur area, there were a large number of people belonging to the middle castes, e.g *тели, sadgop, khandayet, raju* etc. Among them, there were some non-cultivating landowners, rich peasants and middle peasants, but a considerable section consisted of poor peasants and agricultural labourers. With the spread of the movement, not only the poor peasants, but also the middle peasants belonging to those castes came to join. But as the tide of the movement began to recede when severe police repression was let loose, the participants from the middle castes began to desert and even joined the resistance groups organized by the joint efforts of the landlords and the police. But the *mal, santal, kora and bagdi* communities braved the repression to remain with the movement. We could go to any *santal* village for shelter and indeed we managed to get them without concealing our political identity. *There was a small relatively well-to do section among the santals, who could be called middle peasants. This section too remained unwaveringly with the movement. Often it happened that in a santal village, our accommodation was arranged in a relatively well-to-do household.*"¹

Today it is difficult to build a Gopiballavpur-type peasant struggle in Bengal, because the land question has long ceased to be a burning issue here. But what emerges from the reviewer's commentary is that the attitude to struggle often cuts across familiar class barriers and the sense of identity oppression is important.

In Bengal, there is a common notion that there is no caste war because the upper caste Bengali bhadralok is much more liberal than their counterparts in

other states, e.g. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. At a superficial level, this is somewhat true, because the principle of roti (caste segregation in respect of dining) is not much in evidence at least in comparison with other states. In the countryside, however, this is somewhat in existence. On the other hand, if one cares to look at the inter-caste marriages, which take place in considerable numbers in the urban areas, it is not difficult to find that these so-called caste-annihilating matrimonial alliances, in the overwhelming majority of cases, take place among upper caste groups. The common bondage here is the nature of profession; upper castes invariably prefer to enter into such alliances when the groom is an intellectual worker or the bride comes from a similar family. This shows the limits of the liberalism of the upper caste babus. To this, one may add the fact in Bengal, almost all the leaders of major political parties are from upper castes. The reason is that the voices of the lower caste people and the other backward classes in Bengal are far less articulated than in other states. It is this lack of articulation that enabled Jyoti Basu to declare, when Mr V P Singh decided to implement only a part of the recommendations of the B P Mondol commission, that in Bengal there was no category that could be called as belonging to "other backward classes".

Some of the scheduled castes in Bengal, however, have been increasingly vocal over time. It may be argued that the relative spread of literacy is one important factor in this self-assertion. One may take the case of *namasudras* as a point of reference. The maximum concentration of these *namasudras* in Bengal is in the two 24-Parganas and Nadia districts. Under the influence of the *matua* movement led by Harichand Thakur and then his son Guruchand Thakur, this community undertook a programme of expansion of literacy about six or seven decades ago. In the census report of 2001, the literacy rate among *namasudras* was recorded as about 71.93 percent, which is higher than the rate for the entire population of the state and significantly ahead of other dalit castes. The self-assertion among *namasudras* has much to do with this spread of education.

This also raises a problem. Owing to their relatively advanced state, a middle class of significant size has grown within the community, and taking advantage of the reservation facilities, *namasudras* have entered government jobs in a significant way. Except in class one jobs, the persons of this community are in probability represented more than proportionally in relation to the population in government services. Whether they should be de-reserved for government services except, of course, for class one jobs is an important question, because when proportional representation is achieved reservation attains its aim and thereby loses its relevance. It is often seen that ideologues belonging to this community deliver well-argued speeches in favour of reservation in seminars and public gatherings. As against the various explicit and implicit upper-casteist ideas, such speeches and arguments are useful. But when the self-same persons are asked if they want their community to appropriate a disproportionate share of the benefits at the expense of other *dalit* groups and *adivasis*, they feel annoyed. They obviously do not want to give up their reservation privileges in favour of other more backward dalits. This attitude is a big stumbling block to the formation of larger *dalit-adivasi* unity, and even unity among *dalits*. Narrow sectarian community outlook is, to be sure, a promoter of disunity. Another

question, which is much more important from the long-term point of view, needs a serious consideration. Participation in all types of work and jobs by all caste groups and religious communities is a desirable objective. But even if this objective is achieved after much toil and trouble, the basic antithesis between mental and manual labour will remain, so will other types of antitheses e.g. class inequality, gender inequality etc. Much important is the revaluation of the existing notions of merit and efficiency. If it is admitted that the accumulation of merit in the Indian society has taken place over the ages not only through intellectual work, but also through the productive practices like agriculture, handicrafts, and similar other things that require at the same time an exercise of the body as well as of the mind, too clear. Struggle for reduction of this inequality, that has so long been eschewed by those who see reservation as an end in itself, should be on the immediate agenda of all those who want to see a better, more democratic and more egalitarian society.

For the time being, attention should be turned more to those who feel themselves more oppressed and are more prepared to defy the forces of exploitation. As suggested earlier, attitude to struggle is not of the same order among different caste-groups. This must be taken into account in any effort for a broad-based democratic struggle. □□□

Footnote :

1. Santosh Rana's introduction to Santosh Rana & Kumar Rana : *Paschimbanche Dalit O Adivasi* (Dalits and Adivasis in West Bengal), CAMP, Kolkata, 2009