

'IDENTITY MOVEMENT'

Identities: Some Questions for Discussion

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[Text of the talk delivered at 'Forum for Democratic Women Writers', Hyderabad]

I have gone through the objectives of your forum which you have announced, both at the Vizag meeting and in your 'manifesto'. You have made a good attempt. I do believe that starting of one such women writers' association will make many men and women happy.

I cannot join your Forum because if one joins an organization, one must do some of its work. One has to attend each and every meeting. It is wrong to be a member in name only without doing anything. I cannot devote time required to do some of the work connected with the organization. I cannot spend my time on anything other than learning and teaching Marxism. But I like every organization that holds progressive ideas. I will extend my cooperation to the best of my ability.

There are some issues in your objectives that require discussion. These are not criticisms; merely my suggestions and doubts.

There are essentially three aspects in your statement of goals. This forum will

1. provide proportionate representation to various identities.
2. give decisive representation to social groups experiencing additional oppression.
3. recognize specific identities whenever they emerge and coordinate them.

The essence of all the three aspects is the same. You are going to recognize all identities and will try to accommodate all of them in the forum. This is a good objective. It is necessary to follow this method when several identities exist.

But, your objective is not easily understandable just by the fact that you have announced, 'This is our objective.'

It is necessary to understand some important points here.

What is 'identity'? Everyone in this forum knows about it. Differences in caste, differences in religion, differences in tribes, differences in regions, male domination over women, hierarchy within the castes, indigenous people and differences therein—thus, there are so many kinds of identities.

The first and the foremost question that must arise for those who face the problems arising out of identities and those who think about identities is why are there so many kinds of identities in the first place? Are these differences natural or social? If they are natural, then there is no need for organizations concerning them.

Naturally arising differences remain as natural characteristics and do not manifest as problems. If the differences between human beings are social, they certainly become problems. One needs to think about them. So the first thing is to know why identities have formed and are forming.

The second question: Should these identities remain thus forever? Should they ever go? What will it be like when the identities go? It will be like equality. Is it not possible for people to be without the differences of being dalits, OBCs, minorities, OCs and remain alike? It is possible. We should know about it. That's all.

For those who are in a lower position economically and socially, immediate solutions and arrangements are essential in many aspects. Let there be any number of such arrangements, they are all temporary/ad-hoc in nature. While making use of such arrangements, we have to find the path for a permanent solution.

The goal of those who fight for identities should not stop at identities, conserving each one's difference; the fight about identities must include the fight for liberation from identities.

The aim of your forum may not be to perpetuate identities. But, since your objective does not include rejection of identities and since it does not form a part of your objectives, it implies that identities are to be preserved.

Your goals are not stated in such a way that they encourage your members to think about the elimination of identities and creation of conditions of equality among people. You must understand this limitation.

Does a person have one identity, or several identities?

Let us consider a Dalit woman. Her being a dalit is one identity. Her suffering the domination of her husband as a wife is the second identity. As a labourer, being under the domination of an employer is the third identity. When a person has so many identities, is any one of them fundamental; or do all identities exist separately and independently without exerting any influence on each other? If one has to learn about identities, this is the primary question to ask. The question of what is fundamental under the circumstances.

We cannot speak of too many issues here. We are trying in 10 minutes to speak of issues that need 8 hours a day for three months to discuss. Whether we understand it or not, it is enough if we can focus our attention on the fact that 'among all the differences and identities that prevail among people in a society, only one of them will be a fundamental issue.'

In human societies, that fundamental issue is *relations of labour*. Another name for it is *relations of production*. These relations do not exist among animals. They exist only among humans. The human animals in fact become humans only after they begin to *perform labour*. If all the humans are similar in performing labour all would have similar identity. Only after the passing of several thousands of years, differences began to emerge in human relations. Class of Slaves and class of Masters began and these relations underwent changes to some extent as a result of the struggles of the slaves. Such changes have been taking place in every country and at present we live in a

society that is composed of classes of workers and capitalists. If you look at India, we find that caste system had begun a long time ago.

For human society, 'relations of labour' is the fundamental issue. These relations exist forever: in the past, present or future. These relations of labour were once characterized by equality. Gradually, when the exploitation of labour began, they have transformed into *unequal* relations. They remain unequal relations to this day.

All those groups who live without doing any labour and by exploiting the labour of others - in the form of land-rent, interest and profit-constitute the class of Masters/Owners. It is an Exploiting class. The entire labouring population who work and loses a large portion of their labour to the owners and live in conditions of dire poverty with meagre wages constitute the class of labourers or the Working class. This is the class which is subjected to exploitation. The real reason for wealth and poverty is exploitation of labour.

There are many sections in the exploiting class. Landlords who live on land-rent, Money-capitalists who live on interest, Merchant-capitalists who live on Commercial-profits, Productive capitalists who live on Productive profits—within this again agricultural-industrial capitalists, bankers—all these constitute the Exploiting class.

There are several sections within the class of labourers. The principal sections are: Manual or physical labourers and Mental or Intellectual labourers. In every section, we again find different subsections such as: skilled labourers and unskilled labourers; those who perform the bottommost manual labour and within that those engaged in unclean labour, most difficult kinds of labour and so on. If we talk in terms of the language of identities, all these are different identities.

Capitalist is one identity. Worker is another identity. How can these two kinds of people become equal? If both perform labour equally and if exploitation of labour disappears, both will have the same identity. If both are in similar situation, it amounts to non-existence of any difference.

We may briefly say that the population of India today is divided into just two classes: those who perform labour and those who do not perform labour but exploit others' labour. This is the fundamental aspect of the society. All other identities arise as a result of the exploitation of labour and Exploiting division of labour.

While the fundamental fact of exploitation of labour accompanied by unequal division of labour is thriving, fighting against the identities that are born out of it will merely change the form of a given identity but its essence will remain intact.

If we consider the caste question, it has been there since remote times. People of the 'lower' castes tolerated it for some time. Later on, movements for annihilation of caste were organized with the aim of 'eliminating castes' altogether. But now, strange ideas of identity have begun according to which *people of lower castes consider their caste with pride*. These notions do not demand that such 'identities should not exist'; instead, they demand that the 'these identities must remain as they are!' People of the 'Madiga' caste, for example, declare themselves as "I am madiga" by bearing their caste name in their names. People of other lower castes are also doing the same. Women, while talking about male-domination, bear the names of their fathers and husbands in their names.

Thus, no one is inclined to give up their identity. By consolidating their identities, they try to achieve some rights. All people must have equal rights. They must demand rights. But, there is a big contradiction in acquiring rights based on conditions of inequality. They believe that in order to acquire rights, inequalities must exist. They are unable to appreciate the possibility of existence of 'equality and rights' together. All present-day identity movements are aimed at preserving their own identities. For this a good deal of terminology has emerged. 'Identity', 'identity consciousness', 'identity movement', 'identity politics'—and with such other terms, the advocates of Identity politics are wallowing in the delusion that they are organizing some movement.

People of the lower castes are not thinking along these lines : 'what is this lower caste? When all this 'lower' position go? What is the solution for this? When will all human beings become equals?' They are just demanding, 'This is our identity, recognize our identity and give us our rights'. They are thinking that their duty is to preserve their identity and through it gain some rights.

In this women writers' forum, when you say that you provide proportionate representation to all identities, what would you do for that? In this forum, positions like president, secretary and membership of executive bodies will be there. You may select office bearers by following proportionate representation. Similarly, let us say you will publish collection of stories written by the writers of your forum. For that also you will select stories on the basis of proportionate representation. Through this forum, you can only do things of this sort.

A story written by a dalit woman writer will be printed in a book brought out by this forum. Or, she will find a place as a member of the executive. This must happen. But, there are thousands of other Dalit women with similar identity outside the forum. What can the women writers do for them?

For that, a dalit woman writer must acquire the perspective to grasp the fact that 'these unequal identities must go and there should be conditions of equality among human beings'. If not, even if her stories appear in four publications, she is in the executive 2 or 3 times, it will not even change her own identity. If there is no vision to reject identity, those writings will not benefit the identity group in any way.

There is an adjective 'democratic' in the name of your forum? 'Democracy' indicates people's rights. In reality, there's no democracy in the outside world. Since this is a society based on exploitation of labour, we cannot expect true democracy.

But I understand that the organizers of this forum have added the adjective 'democratic' to indicate that there will be no domination over the members. This is a good objective.

In the end, we must recall the questions which we have dealt with earlier.

Identity implies conditions of inequality among people, doesn't it? Exploitation and oppression isn't it? What is the basis for all these conditions? Are these natural features, or are they result of the contradictions in society?

Are identity movements meant to perpetuate Identities or eliminate them?

The writers of this forum must think about these issues. They should understand that there is a limitation in the objectives of this forum. These are my suggestions. □□□
[Translation from Telugu : C. Padmaja]