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In the Fight for Social Justice: Some Experiences

Overcoming social oppression and economic exploitation of the dalits is one of the objectives that is sought to be achieved by our Constitution. Many laws have been enacted for the purpose. Various schemes are being implemented. However, if we look at the experience of their implementation and the results, the situation does not seem to look sanguine. The main reason for this is that the forces that benefit from the maintenance of the status quo are exerting a stronger influence over the government and the civil society than those who are fighting for a radical change in the conditions of the dalits. Another reason is the inherent weaknesses in the understanding and activities of various caste, class and mass organizations which espouse the cause of the dalits. I will share here some of the experiences gained through our activism and about the strengths and weaknesses of the Dalit Social Movements. Also about the reaction of the various forces that seek a change in the conditions of the dalits and those opposed to it when such issues are taken up.

I will also analyse some of the experiences with regard to both

the positive and negative role played by various forces during the course of three important campaigns – the struggle for the formation of the SC/ST Commission, direct action against untouchability and the struggle undertaken to enact a law for a SC/ST Sub-plan.

Let me first deal with the struggle for the formation of state SC, ST Commission in Andhra Pradesh.

There is a widespread belief in various quarters that untouchability has almost been eradicated. Many people ask the question: where is caste discrimination in our state? Bourgeoisie-landlord parties would deny any discrimination against dalits and that even if it exists it is not as severe as portrayed by the Left parties, dalit organisations and some voluntary organisations. The RSS/BJP and its allied outfits propagate that some Christian organisations are aggressively campaigning on this issue to encourage and defend religious conversions. Even some dalit leaders belonging to the bourgeoisie-landlord parties, play down the extent to which caste discrimination is practiced. Even the mainstream media is silent on this issue. Whenever they are forced to talk as a consequence of some incident, they often twist facts.

A state wide survey was conducted in October 1999 by the Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination (KVPS) to assess the situation on the ground as far as untouchability and caste discrimination are concerned. Our activists visited 11,000 dalit bastis during a 15 day period. The findings were an eye opener.

However, only if such findings have the seal of a government agency, would they acquire universal acceptance. As the saying goes, that 'it cannot be a truth unless it comes from the horse's mouth'. It is for this reason that we started a campaign demanding the formation of a Commission to study the prevalence of caste discrimination in the state and suggest remedies to eliminate them.

A sustained struggle was carried out in 1998 and 1999. Thousands of people participated in the 'Chalo Assembly' call given on March 22. Members of the Left parties in the legislative assembly raised this issue inside the House. It is because of the pressure exerted both outside and inside the Legislative Assembly that the government was forced to appoint a one-member Commission chaired by retired High Court Judge K. Punnaiah on 23.03.2001. This Commission, which

THE MARXIST

toured the entire state, collected evidence on the discrimination meted out to the dalits and their status. It organised public hearings. It received memoranda and complaints from individuals, organisations and parties. On the basis of the information collected, it submitted a 1996 page report to the government. The report endorsed our findings that caste discrimination prevailed on a bigger scale in the state than what people had presumed. The Report had made 42 recommendations.

Another struggle had to be launched to force the government, to establish the 'State SC, ST Commission' and to implement the recommendations of the Punnaiah Commission. Finally, in 2003, the government enacted a legislation consequent to which a state SC/ST Commission was formed with Justice K. Punnaiah as its first Chairman.

During the three-year tenure of Justice K Punnaiah in the Commission, its active involvement and intervention on various issues provided a moral boost to the dalits. The Commission demanded accountability on the part of the government, despite it not being mandated to supervise or regulate the failure in implementation of laws. After the tenure of Justice K Punnaiah was over, the ruling party appointed its own representative. Consequently, the activities of the Commission got reduced. The post fell vacant consequent to the Chairman contesting elections in 2009 as a candidate of the ruling party. Despite the ruling party returning to power it has not appointed a Chairman for the past four years.

Nobody had the illusion that with the formation of the Commission at the state level, discrimination will be eliminated or that all the problems of the dalits will be addressed. We have looked at it as an instrument and platform to mobilise people against discrimination. If the Chairman is active, there is increased scope to bring pressure on government machinery. Actually, this had happened during the tenure of the first Chairman. This was possible because the Chairman during that period was really concerned about the plight of the dalits and was not a political appointee. But this was not the case with the next Chairman who was a beneficiary of political patronage.

Despite it lacking any real power, ruling parties and classes are unable to tolerate even its mere existence, because the Commission

has its utility as an instrument for activists in their struggle. This is the reason why the Chairman's post continues to remain vacant till date.

Interestingly, dalit organisations, who are otherwise vocal, have remained silent in spite of the government keeping the post unfilled for the past four years. They have not shown the least interest in revitalizing this institution. They have failed to display even a microscopic part of the concern that they normally exhibit on the issue of reservations. This exposes the alienation of the leaders of these organizations, from the dalit populace in the rural areas. Most of these leaders are employees based in urban centres.

Now let me analyse the direct action struggle against untouchability.

The Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination (KVPS) had organised a state wide direct action struggle against untouchability in 2006. In Rangareddy district, I personally along with 25 other young activists conducted a cycle yatra for 13 days between April 2 and 13, 2006 to motivate dalits for direct action to assert their rights. The yatra traversed through 152 villages and covered 950 kilometres. In 69 villages direct action was carried out with events like entering temples, breaking the two-glasses system and other similar activities. Again in 2007 similar cycle yatras were carried out for 10 days in 8336 villages, covering a distance of 41,000 kilometres.

This programme attracted wide attention throughout the state. We received both praise and brickbats. Some sections criticised us saying that we were instigating conflicts in otherwise peaceful villages. Some criticised us saying that we were sowing discord and enmity between people who were living as brothers. In many villages, a few dalits stopped us from entering the villages saying that the upper castes were treating them well and that they are living in amity and there is no caste discrimination. On enquiry, we found that these persons were actually acting as touts at the behest of upper caste landlords. In many cases, as opposed to men, dalit women came out bravely to narrate the reality. Men, mostly older ones, emphasised more on the problems related to welfare schemes, lands and burial grounds than about the discrimination that they were facing. They knew that the upper caste landlords in their villages would not be annoyed if dalits complain against the government. Deeming that they would not be able to win,

THE MARXIST

if a conflict with the upper castes took place, they were willing for a compromise on social oppression.

There were criticisms from diametrically opposite sides on the issue of temple entry. Some felt that communists are encouraging religion. Others wondered why we are preventing dalits from converting to other religions by encouraging them to continue as Hindus, a religion which is the basis for the caste system. This was one criticism. The other was why are communists who are atheists encouraging temple entry? The issue of untouchability is totally ignored in both these criticisms. The issue is not about encouraging this religion or discouraging the other. Our campaign had nothing to do with religion. Irrespective of our personal beliefs, if some individual or group of believers, demand the elimination of caste-based discrimination in their religion and equal rights to enter a temple, we would stand by them. This is a means of fighting against caste discrimination.

The reaction of the leaders of the bourgeoisie-landlord parties, particularly the local leaders was very mischievous. Some leaders, adept at deception, met the yatra team and while heaping praise on the campaign, ruled out any discrimination in their village. However, once they had left, those dalits who were unable to articulate in front of them, exposed the prevalence of discriminatory practices. In some villages, the dalit leaders were tutored to tell the yatra team that there was no discrimination in the village, discourage the team and tell them that it would be better for them to go to another village. In many villages such leaders set aside their political differences and came together against the dalits. In some places, people from the backward castes were more aggressive than those from the upper castes; in some instances women were more aggressive than the men in resisting direct action.

There are many instances where people rallied for justice when there were attacks, atrocities and harassment of dalits. Dalit organisations did a good job in the aftermath of Karamchedu, Tsundur and the Lakshimpet incident. Though there is no unity among the leaders of the dalit organisations, they are reacting after an incident occurs. However, they are not conducting campaigns against untouchability and discrimination and for asserting their self-respect and equality.

It would be wrong to conclude that since most of the dalit leaders are employees living in urban areas they are unable to comprehend the issue of discrimination in rural areas and are unable respond. These very leaders are actively working in the villages on the issue of categorisation of Scheduled Castes. This shows that the problem lies not with their understanding but in their beliefs and approach. There is a difference in the manner in which these organisations react and work on the issue of reservations and the manner in which they respond to the issue of untouchability. Every year on April 14, leaders of dalit organisations celebrate the birth anniversary of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, in many villages and towns. They express their anger and indignation on the issue of untouchability and discrimination. But most of them do not strive to rouse the consciousness of dalits by visiting the villages and campaigning against untouchability, even for four or five days a year.

Communists are accused of ignoring the issues of social oppression and of giving exclusive emphasis to class struggle, especially on economic issues. This criticism may be partially true. But the irony is that, most dalit organisations and leaders who criticize us on this score, are the ones who focus solely on the issue of reservations and economic benefits.

It is not an easy task to prepare those dalits, who countenance untouchability regularly, to confront it. A question repeatedly posed is "You will be here today and confront the system, but who will be there with us tomorrow when the upper caste landlords attack us?" This is a valid question. Only after we instilled confidence by stating that we will always be there and stand by them, did dalits come out to confront discrimination. Direct action confronting the discriminatory practices were possible only when our Organisation had the necessary mechanism or if there was any other organisation that gave them the necessary confidence or if some individuals from that village came forward to lead them with a strong individual consciousness. Where such conditions did not exist, the yatra could succeed only in conducting the campaign. It has to be underlined that it would not be possible to eliminate discrimination unless the dalits get united and the village has already existing organisations like that of the trade unions, agricultural workers, peasants, other dalit organisations and NGOs, and political forces like the Communists that stand for social

THE MARXIST

justice. In some villages, we also witnessed the restoration of the old system, despite conducting a special campaign.

The third movement was for enactment of the law on sub plan and nodal agency.

It is well established that there is discrimination against dalits not only on social issues also on issues concerning economic development.

Dalit bastis and adivasi habitats are generally neglected in village development programmes. Contrary to the claims of the government, injustice is meted out to dalits and adivasis in the matter of budget allocation, which needs to be done according to the ratio of their population. On these issues too dalit organisations and NGOs have been working for many years. Observing that representations and memorandums will not yield results, the Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination organised a struggle campaign in February 2007. 25 district and state level leaders observed a *satyagraha* for six days. Due to the pressure exerted, the government was forced to pass orders appointing a nodal agency in November the same year. These orders are yet to see the light of the day. Concluding that if there is to be a guarantee for the implementation of the sub-plan, it has to be mandated by law, a *satyagraha* was conducted for seven days in 2011. The government appointed a ministerial sub-committee headed by the Deputy Chief Minister to look into the feasibility of the demand. As the government was sitting on the recommendations of the committee and not taking any decision, a protest programme was conducted on March 27 under the auspices of a broad united front consisting of 100 organisations.

The government was forced to move and enact a law in December 2012. Though it is a positive development, there is no guarantee that the amounts allocated for dalits and adivasis will be spent for dalits and adivasis only. There are many lacunae in the Act also. To overcome these lacunae and ensure that the law is implemented sustained pressure has to be exercised.

If we observe the manner in which various forces had conducted themselves during the course of these three struggles, many interesting facts emerge. Different positions were taken by different forces, in the movement against caste discrimination and in the campaign for the sub-plan.

Science has proved that all human beings are physiologically the same irrespective of their castes. Humanitarian values teach us that all are equal and that the relation between caste and occupation has been cut. Despite this, it is because of political and economic reasons that caste discrimination continues. Caste discrimination is useful as an important instrument to ensure that poor dalits do not challenge the hegemony of the dominant caste landholders in the rural areas. If dalits reject discrimination and act according to their own thinking, it would be difficult to subjugate the remaining poor and backward sections in the society. The non-dalit poor will give more importance to the work relationship they share with dalits than the caste relationship they share with the landlords and move towards class unity. Then the poor will be able to augment their strength in the fight against class exploitation and concentration of land. This will strike at the very roots of the power of the ruling classes. That is the reason why, even to safeguard their class exploitation, the ruling classes consider it prudent to continue with caste discrimination. Under these circumstances, even for class struggles it is important that dalits gain the necessary independent strength to fight against caste discrimination. Hegemonic forces, irrespective of their political affiliation, want the dalits and other poor to be subservient to them. It is even more necessary to ensure that dalits remain under their control for the sake of votes in a parliamentary democracy. That is the reason why the rural hegemonic forces and ruling class parties would like to continue with the discrimination.

Ruling class parties and hegemonic forces have no qualms as long as the dalits wage struggles for the implementation of welfare schemes of the government. In many instances, those ruling parties which are in opposition extend their support to such struggles. Even the parties in power make many promises, some of which are even implemented. However strong the activism of dalits on these issues, it does not pose a challenge to the exploitation and political hegemony of the upper castes. Above all, they can always coopt some among the dalits by making them brokers, religious agents and followers. These people even while living among the dalits ensure that there is no threat to the influence of the ruling parties'.

Dalit organisations played a more active role in the movement for the sub-plan as compared to the movement against caste

THE MARXIST

discrimination. Many dalit intellectuals and groups had done enormous work for many years in thoroughly studying the sub-plan. They played an important role in creating awareness. Dalit representatives in ruling parties and dalit officers in the State bureaucracy mounted pressure, though to an extent from their own platforms. Even though dalit organisations did not mobilise substantially for the agitation, their leaders participated enthusiastically. As the implementation of the dalit sub-plan does not annoy the rural hegemonic forces, even dalit representatives in the government played an active role. In contrast to this, dalit representatives in ruling class parties totally ignored the movement against caste discrimination, though some of them had expressed their solidarity personally. As opposed to this, though leaders of dalit organisation praised the movement, they did not show much interest in participating or strengthening it.

The government, which was forced to enact a legislation for the sub-plan is now claiming that it had gone ahead and enacted the law for the welfare of dalits, despite opposition from all other parties. The Chief Minister of the state has even started honouring himself as a 'friend of dalits' (*dalit bandu*). They are conducting a campaign called 'Indiramma dreams'. Ministers and legislators of the ruling party are competing with each other in heaping praise on the Chief Minister for this achievement.

Successive governments have not shown any interest in propagating against caste discrimination. They have shied away from conducting a special discussion in the legislative assembly on the issue. For four years, they did not appoint a Chairman to the SC, ST Commission. Dalit representatives who have benefited from reservations have failed to react against untouchability, revealing the intense pressure exerted by the rural hegemonic forces on them.

There is no mention or discussion on untouchability and caste discrimination in the legislative houses. However, ruling classes indulging in self-praise about the number of schemes they have initiated for the welfare of dalits, is a regular feature. Even this is missing in the mandal and zilla parishads where the influence of the rural hegemonic forces is more intense.

On the whole, two important conclusions can be drawn. Bourgeoisie parties will in the end compromise on issues like

reservations and sub-plan. If necessary they may reach an agreement, because they know that their hegemony or exploitative system remains untouched. They are familiar with the methods of coopting leaders of such movements to ensure that such movements do not go out of their hegemonic sphere. But on issues like caste discrimination and untouchability, these parties are firm in their resolve to keep the atrocious system intact. They try to overtly or covertly sabotage all efforts for their elimination. Because they know that to retain their hold over the village poor, they have to ensure the continuation of caste discrimination.

With regard to the activities of organisations working for the cause of the dalits, experience clearly shows some of the weaknesses in their work which prevent them from achieving the expected results.

Six of the key weaknesses are the following:

1. Failure to mobilise dalit masses to assert their rights: Though there are many organisations, institutions and individuals working against the caste system and for the cause of the dalits and other backward sections, most of them are content reacting to specific incidents. They do not conduct a sustained campaign and work to ensure that dalits assert their rights and fight against the discrimination they face in their day-to-day lives.
2. Less practise, more rhetoric: There are ceaseless arguments and discussions on various aspects of caste. Will caste system die without renouncing the Hindu religion? Will caste system cease without the elimination of the class system? Can caste discrimination and untouchability be eradicated without the caste system being ended? Many a times, discussions on these issues stoop down to the level of mutual recrimination. Theoretical discussion and arguments are necessary to clarify issues. However, we should not be content confining ourselves to arguments alone. Those issues that cannot be resolved through arguments can be settled through practice. The worth of any organisation lies in the practice of its ideals.
3. Lack of faith in eradication of untouchability: Some people express pessimism about the possibility of eradication of untouchability and discrimination without destroying the caste system. It is incorrect to see the issue in this manner. Untouchability and extreme forms of discrimination can indeed be eliminated from the public sphere through continuous and concerted struggle.

THE MARXIST

4. Unending fragmentation: Division more than unity appears to be the inclination of various caste and identity organisations. This constitutes the main obstacle in taking forward the task of achieving social justice. Even if some sort of unity is achieved in the aftermath of some grave incidents (like for example, Karamchedu, Tsundur and other such incidents), this remains momentary and temporary. Differences persist as they are primary. No efforts are made to achieve broad unity to realise a particular objective. The need for organisations that can work as catalysts and with determination to achieve such unity is very important in the present juncture.

5. Lingering sectarian tendencies: Exclusivist tendencies like only dalits can understand the problems of dalits, only dalits should work for dalits were strong in the past. Though this sectarian tendency has weakened to an extent, it still remains a considerable force. Without overcoming these tendencies and uniting all those forces that come together in the fight against caste discrimination, waging an isolated battle will not be successful. In the struggle for dalit self-respect, dalits should no doubt play a central role. However this should not mean that the efforts to mobilise democratic and the non-dalit sections, should be ignored.

6. Insufficient attention from class movements: Those forces that are working for building an exploitation free society, mainly communists, are forming many organisations to mobilise people to bring them into movements. They are organising them as workers, peasants, agricultural labourers, students, youth and women, according to their specific needs. Though these organisations have as one of their tasks, the struggle against caste discrimination and working for the welfare of dalits, they are unable to continuously focus on this objective. This has not been possible because of the various issues and concerns that these organisations have to take up.

Any organisation or individual interested in eradicating untouchability and discrimination should strive to overcome the above weaknesses and build a broad based united movement. In the last fifteen years of its existence, the Organisation for Struggle Against Caste Discrimination has tried to practice the above understanding.