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# Excerpt from an Introductory Essay to Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States

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## 1. Theoretical Background

The origins of the caste system in India are shrouded in mystery. The most predominant and widely popular theory traces it to the Aryan invasion of India and links it to the process by which the invaders could subordinate the indigenous inhabitants and integrate them as peasants and slaves within a stratified society. Thus it is believed that the “twice-born” castes, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, are descended primarily from the original Aryans or later invaders from outside, while the masses of Shudras, Atishudras and tribal peoples, the majority of Indian peasants and workers, are descended primarily from the conquered non-Aryan natives. In South India, where there were few castes recognized as Kshatriya and even aristocrat landlords were often classified as Shudras, the majority of the population are thought to be non-Aryans or Dravidians, while in north India a larger section are considered of Aryan origin while only tribals, ex-untouchables and other low castes emphasize their non-Aryan and indigenous descent.

This “popular” – level theory was originated first by racist-oriented British and European scholars and in particular by H. H. Risley, a British Census Commissioner. Such scholars argued that there were basic racial and physical differences among the various castes. This “Aryan theory” was quickly taken over by Indians, at first by Brahman intellectuals who sought to use it to prove their superiority over the low castes within India and their racial equality with the “white men”, and later by cultural radicals such as Jyotirao Phule and the leaders of non-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu who stressed the equality and moral superiority of the original non-Aryans or Dravidians. Of all non-Brahman intellectuals and leaders, in fact only B. R. Ambedkar really rejected the racial theory (Ambedkar, 1946, 1960). But as an explanation of caste, the “Aryan theory” is inadequate. It does not explain why the Indo-European invasions should have given rise to caste in India only and not elsewhere, nor why caste seems to be strongest in the areas least affected by such invasions (i.e. South India). In addition, as Morton Klass has pointed out, there is no proof at all of any massive invasions by racially distinct groups in the 2000–1000 BC period, and there seem to have been elements of traits connected with caste that were indigenous to the pre-Aryan Indian societies. (Klass, 1980)

Klass’s, recent important book, *Caste : The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*, puts forward an alternate hypothesis. He argues that caste originated with the first

development of an economic surplus in India and that it was the means by which tribal societies consisting of originally equalitarian clans adjusted to the inequality generated by this surplus. This would place the origin of caste at the very beginning of Indian class society, with the first development of settled rice and wheat agriculture in the subcontinent leading to the rise of the Indus valley cities. In this view, the system was adjusted to and modified by Aryans and other invaders, but the theories these Sanskrit-speaking people formulated to explain it only served to give it a firm ideological foundation, and hardly prove that they themselves "invented" caste.

Whatever may be the case, whether it had its beginnings with Aryan invasions or earlier, it is clear that caste in India has existed for a very long period and that it has survived through major socio-historical changes. For India has certainly not been an "unchanging" society from 2000 BC or 1000 BC to the present. It has undergone major changes in systems of production, forms of political rule and culture. In Marxist terms, we may say that caste has coexisted with several *different* modes of production, from the very earliest ones which we would define essentially as tributary modes through the feudal period up to the present when capitalism has come to dominate and caste though it is taking on new forms, is clearly far from vanishing. From this we can conclude that caste cannot be identified with any *single* mode of production as such, though certainly the existence of a surplus and economic inequality is necessary for its existence (in both these characteristics it is similar to patriarchal structures and women's oppression). At the same time, caste had a very different relation to Indian feudalism and existed then in a very different form than it does today in the period of rising capitalism, and this also has to be taken into account in analyzing the nature of caste, class and land in India.

An analysis should begin with some basic definitions. First, what is *caste*? Though there is often violent disagreement among scholars, Marxist and otherwise, about the origins of caste, its relation to the rest of the social structure and in particular to the economy, there is a surprising amount of agreement about what caste actually is. Caste is a system in which a person's membership in the society is mediated through his/her birth in a particular group which is assigned a particular status within a broad social hierarchy of such groups; this group has particular accepted occupation or range of occupations and only within it can a person marry and carry on close social relations such as inter-dining (*roti-beti vyavahar*). This group is a corporate group that has certain defined rules of behaviour for its members and exercises some degree of authority over them, including the right to expel those who defy its authority. A person is born into such a group, is a lifelong member (unless expelled) and is not able to legitimately join any other group.

As many scholars, from Irawati Karve to Morton Klass have pointed out, this most basic group or unit of the system is not actually the *jati* or "caste" but rather the sub-caste or potjati (Klass refers to them as "marriage-circles"). These are the actual functioning units of the system which regulate marriage, and are known to their members by special names (e.g. Vellalas; Somvanshi Mahars). Their membership has been estimated at a median of between 5000 and 15,000 each (Marriott and Inden, 1974-985). In turn, these groups are known to the broader society largely by the name of their *jati* (e.g. as Vellalas or Mahars).

During the feudal period, when the caste system was maintained by the feudal state, the *jatis* themselves had a concrete social existence as the basic unit of the social division of labour, and the *jati* name most commonly was an “occupational” name, meaning “peasant”, “barber”, “potter” or the like), but today the *jatis* exist only as clusters of sub-castes. In turn these *jatis* claimed and still claim a certain broader status as Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or Shudras within the all-India hierarchical *varna* system.

It, therefore, seems that caste is primarily a social phenomenon; the sub-caste which has been the most enduring element within it is primarily a unit of the social system of kinship, though the broader *jati* was for a long time the basic unit of the social division of labour (i.e., part of the economy) and even today caste still has definite economic effects.

In contrast it is tempting to say that *class* is basically an *economic* phenomenon – and this is indeed how most people view the issue. However, we feel this is a vulgarization of Marxism. Class should be basically defined in terms of the *social* Marxist concept of the *social relations of production*, and this is not such a simple concept. Of course it is commonly known that Marx himself never identified the “economic” or the “base” simply with technology or the labour process (which he normally calls the “forces of production”) but rather sees this as a combination of forces and relations of production. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition comes from Volume III of Capital:

*The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of ruler and ruled as it grows directly out of the production itself, and in turn reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community, which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the means of production to the direct producers, a relation always naturally corresponding to labour and thereby its social productivity, which reveals at the innermost secret, and the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence. This does not prevent the same economic basis – the same from the standpoint of its main conditions – due to innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural environment, racial relations, external historical influences etc. from showing infinite variations, and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances. (Marx, 19; 791-2)*

The complication here has two aspects. First, the “relations of production” are really given two definitions in this passage, first in terms of the form “in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers”, and second in terms of the relation of the “owners of the means of production to the direct producers” – and these two may not be precisely the same (e.g. tool-owning artisans exploited via the *jajmani* system). Second, the form “in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out” in many societies may concretely include economic, social and political factors mingled together, while Marx is specifically taking only the *economic aspect* of this relation or form to define the “social relations of production”, and this is often something of a formalistic abstraction.

Marx himself of course recognized and stressed that it is really only with the birth of capitalist society that the *economy* comes to exist as a concrete phenomenon separate from the political, social and other levels of society. By the same token it is only with capitalism that classes come into existence as phenomena clearly and apparently define first at the economic level, the level of production. In contrast, in pre-capitalist societies, classes which are defined in terms of the relations of production and always exist wherever there is a surplus “pumped out” of the direct producers, and enveloped along with these relations in social, religious, political and other super-structural forms.

Thus it is only in a very *formalistic* sense that we can distinguish “caste” and “class” and say that one is mainly a “social” and the other is mainly an “economic” concept, and that both have probably co-existed in India since the beginning of the generation of a surplus and economic inequality. In concrete fact, the situation was more complex. In pre-capitalist Indian society (we may say with the full-fledged feudal period from about 600 AD), unpaid surplus labour was pumped out of direct producers via a system that was itself defined and organised in terms of caste while the sub-castes were a basic unit of the kinship system, the *jati* itself was a class phenomenon and was a basic unit of the division of labour; with this, caste structured the very nature and existence of the exploiting and exploited sections. Exactly how this was so we shall try to define in the next section. But the result was that it was impossible to speak of a “caste system” and a “class structures” separate *concrete* phenomenon; the two in fact were interwoven (thus those who say that in feudal society “class and caste coincided” in a sense are right()) and in fact we should say that the Indian feudal social formation was actually based on a *caste-feudal mode of production*.

Today, though, “class” and “caste” are separate, and we speak of the dominance of a simple capitalist mode of production. The reason is, that the beginning of capitalism under colonial rule not only began to create new classes (workers, bourgeoisie) but also began a process of *separating out* a “caste system” from the “class structures”. This meant on the one hand redefining and reshaping caste as a new kind of social phenomenon; it also meant redefining and reshaping classes in the rural areas a “landlords”, “tenants” and “labourers” even before the emergence of the new capitalist rural classes of kulak farmers and agricultural labourers. Today, with this redefined caste system maintained under the dominance of a capitalist mode of production, what we are faced with is a very complex mixture of caste and class, a mixture that has tremendous regional variations. Not only do more “feudal” and “capitalist” forms of classes and caste-relations mix, but castes also affect the existence of classes and vice versa though now both exist on a separate basis.

One conclusion from this is that low castes and especially the ex-untouchables (dalits) are, like women, a *specialty oppressed section*, one that can and must organize independently, one whose liberation is crucial for any revolution in India. They are also a section whose majority are proletarianized toiler-agricultural labourers and workers. But as a section, their nature is different from that of the basic revolutionary class, the proletariat, and it is unscientific and misleading to speak of “caste and class” as parallel phenomena and parallel struggles in which the working class leads an “economic revolution” while the dalits lead an “anti-caste revolution”. Now, because the new form of caste is conditioned

by and under the dominance of capitalism, it can only be abolished by a social revolution under the leadership of the proletariat. But at the same time, because caste still is a material reality with a material base and important economic results, because it has become in fact the primary means for dividing the toiling masses, it is equally dangerous to ignore caste, to suggest that dealing with it can be "postponed" until after the revolution or that "economic unity" can come first, and to argue that "all struggles are class struggles but they only have a caste form". Caste is not only form but also concrete material content, one that now must be solved as a crucial obstacle before any revolutionary movement. In fact, the mechanical tendency to overlook the superstructure has led to ignoring the ways that this social system of caste has historically shaped the very basis of Indian economy and society and continues to have crucial economic implications today.

In the rest of this paper we will first outline the basic structure of caste feudal society in India. Then we will summarize the changes that occurred under British rule and the varying forms of class (or "class-caste") struggle that took place then. Finally, the new class structure and the role of caste in the rural areas in the post-colonial bourgeois state will be examined with as much attention to regional variation as possible.

## **2. Caste-Feudal-Society**

There is a broad agreement among Marxist scholars that by the time of the British conquest the Indian social formation was primarily feudal in character, though there were elements and survivals of other forms of exploitation, particularly tributary forms in the case of the Mughal empire and South India (Kosambi, Pavlov, Gough, Gardezi). There were also of course interspersed areas of tribal modes of production, and one broad region (Jharkhand), had its character defined by the fact that tribal modes prevailed for a much longer period of time (Sengupta, 1980: Singh, 1978). But in the rest of India feudalism was dominant and was characterized by the fact that the most important means of production, the land, was essentially controlled by feudal exploiting classes at the village level. Periodically the ruling states (both the Mughals and Hindu states) laid claim to "ownership" of the land but in practice were not able to enforce this; while on the other hand the main producing classes (peasants, artisans and labourers) had certain types of rights to the land and to the means of production. They were primarily subordinate tenants dependent on the village feudals for their access to the land and the performance of their functions.

But the nature of these village feudal classes and the very structuring of the relations of production they dominated were defined in terms of the caste system. To understand how this worked, we shall begin with two points made about the traditional system by non-Marxist scholars and then turn to some insights of the Russian historian V. I. Pavlov.

The first important observation is that of Andre Beteille, who has pointed out that along with the thousands of castes, there were also in fact indigenous "class" type classifications that divided the rural population of India into four or five main socio-economic groups according to their position in the system of production. In Bengal these are *zamindars*, *jotedars* (most often big ryots or big tenants), *bargadars* (sharecroppers) and *khetmajdur*; along with these of course were merchants and artisans (Beteille, 1974 : 126). Almost identical classes can be identified in nearly every region of India. In Tamil Nadu there were

*mirasdars* or *kaniyachikarar* (Landlords), *paykaris* (tenants), functionaries and artisans, and *adimais* and *pudiyals*, who were bonded labourers and field slaves (Sivkumar 1978 & Gough, 1977; Mencher, 1978). In Bihar Harcourt has distinguished *ashraf* (landlords), *bakal* (village shopkeepers), *pawania* (artisans), *jotiya* (small peasants directly cultivating their land, sometimes divided into well-to-do cultivators and sharecroppers and a class of low caste landless labourers usually known by the name of the most numerous labourer caste at the local levels (Harcourt, 1977 ; 234-5). Other scholars speak of a basic north Indian division into *malik* (landlord), *kisan* (peasant), and *mazdur* as well as artisans and merchants (Singh, 1978; Thorner, 1976). In Maharashtra the cultivating ryots, though all of the Kunbi caste, were divided at the village level between the dominant *patil* lineage, the *kulwadis* or *uparis* (tenants, small cultivators of sub-ordinate lineages or late arrivals); *balutedass* (artisans) and the labourers who did some batedar work also but were generally called by their caste names of "Mahar-Mang". In all these classifications, it can be seen that there is not only a division between the exploiting classes (village landlords, merchants, priests and state officials) and others, there are also divisions among the village toilers between peasant cultivators, with peasants usually divided into two sections artisans, and labourers, and the latter divisions coincide with jati divisions.

Second point stressed by many scholars (Klass, Neale) is that due to the caste system access to produce within the village was almost never on the basis of market exchange. Rather it was through caste (jati) the services performed by the different castes and a right to a share of the produce, traditionally claimed on the basis of such services. This is often described in terms of a division of the grain heap at harvest time: members of the different caste or Sub-castes (from barbers to carpenters to untouchable field labourers to priests) who had performed their traditional duties throughout the year at that time claimed as their right a prescribed proportion of the grain. Besides this, they also had various other kinds of socio-economic rights, from prescribed places and tasks at village festivals to certain shares of food at specific times to (occasionally) allotment of land for self-cultivation. Of course this system did not, work "automatically". In fact the allotment of the shares of grain or of other goods (long with the major share of village land, was under control of the dominant sub-caste or lineage at the village level; it was these in fact who were the village feudal rulers and they are sometimes referred to as the "managerial caste" or "dominant caste".

In most cases (the traditional "zamindari" areas) these village landlords were from traditional non-cultivating castes who often derived their control over the land from its conquest by an early ancestor or its grant by a king or overlord. (Or from one-time cultivators who came to be largely non-cultivating landlords). Normally, these were sharply distinguished in *varna* terms from the village toilers. In north India, they were mainly "twice-born", Rajputs, Brahmans, Bhumihars. In many parts of south India the distinction was just as strong even though no castes were recognized traditionally as Kshatriyas; in Tamil Nadu these landlords were mainly Brahmans or Vellalas who distinguished themselves from the exploited section as *sat-shudras*, while in Kerala though the Nayar landlords only had a

status as *shudras* nevertheless they maintained their ritual distance from Izhva tenants and untouchable labourers by classifying all the others as some form of “excluded” caste.

In the traditional “ryotwari” areas the situation was a bit more complicated for here it seemed that the village “dominant caste” or “managerial caste” were not in fact non-cultivating landlords but were the cultivating ryots such as Marathas, Kammas, Reddis etc. In such cases we can see the survivals of the earlier period of a tributary mode of production when the main exploitative relations were between a majority group of peasant cultivators and the state. But with feudalization the headman (patil, parel, gauda) developed as an intermediary; the headman’s sub-lineage became in effect the village feudal rulers and came to be non-cultivating landlords who dominated not only the artisans and labourers but also junior lineages and “guest families” of peasant cultivators. Pavlov has estimated that these headmen had the right to 15–25% of the village produce (1949, (77–80), and Perlin has shown in the case of 17<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra that rising higher feudal families often “bought up” village level *patilki* rights to increase and centralize their land holdings (Perlin). Thus, the non-cultivating landlord caste in the zamindari areas, and the headman’s lineages in the ryotwari areas were in fact essentially feudal landlords; they were the lowest rung in the very extended and stratified ladder of feudal exploitation, and they along with the representatives of the feudal state at all levels enforced and maintained the caste-defined behaviour which structured the ways in which “unpaid surplus labour (was) pumped out of direct producers.”

Pavlov’s analysis helps to show one important way in which this structuring differed from European feudalism. This was not simply in terms of the existence of “birth-ascribed” class membership nor in terms of the fact that religious and cultural factors shaped the economic structure—all feudal societies are ascriptive in some sense and in all religious and political factors directly enter into production relations. The difference was in the relationship *among* toilers. In Europe, though membership in the exploited peasantry was defined by birth, there were no such birth-limits to performance of specialist functions. A peasant might do his own carpentering or other work, or there might be specialist carpenters, but even if there were a boy from a peasant family who faced no absolute barriers to entering such occupations. In various ways guilds might regulate entry into skilled crafts, but this was not part of the basic social rules. Similarly an impoverished family that lost its land might be forced to mainly work as wage-labourers (and there were in fact wage-paid field labourers in medieval Europe), but again it was only economic obstacles which placed people in such positions or prevented them from moving out of them, and not social ones which assigned them to groups who were held to be by birth, and nature fit only for tasks as labourers.

In contrast, Indian caste feudalism split the exploited classes into several permanent major sections. Pavlov argues against applying the very word “peasant” to India, for essentially this reason:

If this conception is based on personal participation in agricultural production the category will have to include sections as incomparable in social and proprietary status as the untouchables among the servants of the community, and its upper sections which (in

Maharashtra, for instance) took part in cultivating the soil. But these did not in any sense form units in a single class/estate (1978:48). Thus he decides to reserve the term “peasant” for only the tillers of the soil among the upper castes who held the Land is “*ravats*” and he notes that this section constituted only a minority of the population in contrast to the European notion of the peasant as a land-tilling majority.

Below these cultivating rayats were inferior tenants and sharecroppers of lower castes or sub-castes. And along with them was another numerous section in rural society, the artisans (*kammas, balutedars*). They included a wide range of castes from relatively high-status goldsmiths down to leather-workers, rope-makers and others often classed as untouchables; but they were always socially and economically subordinated not only to the landlords but to most of the cultivating peasants as well. A very important fact stressed by Pavlov is that *production of the means of production* for agriculture (carts, rope, leather, iron) was carried out through the *jajmani / balutedari* system in which the craftsman was not paid in exchange for each item he produced but was considered as a village servant entitled on a ongoing, hereditary basis to rewards that included the allotment of grain at harvest time, a whole bundle of social and economic perquisites and occasionally the allotment of land for self-cultivation. In contrast to this, production of *consumption goods* such as cloth, jewellery, etc. was nearly always carried on for exchange though again by members of specific castes. (Pavlov, 1978: 51-57).

The lowest of the castes within this system were usually considered untouchable on the grounds that they performed polluting occupations, and were forced to live in separate settlements outside the village boundaries. Significantly, almost everywhere there were one or two large untouchable castes who not only did specific craft duties but were also bound to the performance of *general mental labour* that included acting as general plough servants and field slaves for landlord families, carrying and fetching services for the village headmen and higher state officials, woodcutting and other general casual labour for the village.

Would village servants and labourers be called “peasants” in any sense? In fact their position was an ambivalent one. On the one hand they were *agricultural producers* in the sense that, they performed functions that were crucial for agricultural production. But they had no recognized right to the land itself, and they were never considered to be “peasants” or “tillers of the soil”. (Though many untouchable castes have traditions which define them as descendents of ancient native sons-of-the-soil, this was never recognised by the wider society). In contrast to European labourers and artisans, their economic position did not result from impoverishment or choice of a specialization, but was rather an ascriptive one within a system that maintained a *permanent* class of field as well as village-resident artisans.

Thus besides the exploiting classes of merchants, Brahman administrators and landlords, there were three major sections among the exploited producers in Indian feudal society; the *kisans* or peasants; the *kamins* or artisans; and the untouchable labourers. The *kisans* were almost always drawn from the main “peasant” or land tilling caste of the region, and in fact their jati name was also frequently the word for “peasant” in a local language.



They were Kunbis, Jats, Lurmis, Reddis, Vokkaligas, Kammas, Vanniyas etc. and they were always classed as shudras in varna terms. Similar in status and almost in the same category were castes whose “traditional” function was that of sheep herding, cow-herding or vegetable gardening (Malis, Yadavas, Ahirs, Dhangas etc.) but who often became cultivators and sometimes constituted the dominant caste in villages where they were a majority. It is important to note that while the kisans were mainly an exploited section of toilers, the village feudal class (from patils to zamindars, deshmukhs, and others) could be drawn from their ranks, and in this sense they had an access to economic and social mobility that other sections lacked.

Below these, the artisans were always drawn from specific castes known by the name of their function to the wider community; they were also classed as shudra in varna terms. Finally there were the labourers, who were untouchables or ati-shudra in varna terms and were the most exploited (though not the only exploited) section at the base of the system. Next to the major kisan caste, these were often numerically the biggest caste in the village and today also they represent castes that are quite big in the Indian context – (Chamars, Chuhars, Mahars and Mangs, Malas and Madigas, Holeyas, Puleyas, Parauyans and Pallans).

Should these three sections be called different “classes” or different sections of a single exploited class? This may be simply a matter of terminology. What is important is that in the Indian caste-feudal mode of production, the economy was structured and the surplus “pumped out” in such a way that it maintained in existence such highly subdivided and unequally exploited sections of toilers. For anti-feudal struggles the conclusion is important : While it would be correct to say that in India as elsewhere “agrarian revolution” (the revolutionary transformation of relations of production on the land) was central to the anti-feudal struggle, this could not be attained simply through the abolition of landlordism. Rather it required, a thorough attack on the caste system itself and a transformation of relations of production *within* the village and *among* the toiling masses in a way that would assure the artisans or village servants and labourers as well as the kisans could gain basic rights to the land itself and to produce.

### **3. Colonial Rule and Anti-Feudal Struggles**

Indian feudalism was not, of course, revolutionized by an indigenous development of capitalism. Rather it was transformed by the imposition of British colonial rule, which subordinated the entire Indian social formation to the needs of the development of capitalism in Britain. The concrete form in which colonial rule both sowed the seeds of capitalist development as well as maintained semi-feudal structures in existence in India provided the conditions under which anti-feudal as well as anti-imperialist movements developed in India. An important aspect of this was the transformation/maintenance of the caste system and its relation to the rest of the society.

First, the British abolished the pre-existing purely caste-defined access to land and other goods and imposed legal relationships of landownership and tenancy backed up by courts operating on a definition of legal private property. Along with this, new factories, mines and

plantations as well as the new schools and bureaucracy recruited their workers, students and employees on a basis of formal equality in which caste membership did not in and of itself bar any section from entry. The state ceased to be a protector of the traditional caste hierarchy enveloped in the feudal relations of land control, and instead began to emerge as a colonial-bourgeois state. *To this extent*, new classes began to come into existence and important democratic and capitalist transformations began in India.

But these transformations were not equivalent to the abolition of caste or feudalism, and they could not automatically lead to such abolition. First, the very subordination of the Indian economy to imperialism meant that the openings in the new factories, mines and schools were limited because the growth of Indian industry was limited because the British needed only a small section of “clerks” to man their bureaucracy. In spite of formal openness, the pre-existing power, wealth and social traditions of the upper castes gave them an overwhelming advantage in filling that higher positions opening up. The majority of the population remained dependence on agriculture. And here the British alliance, for political reasons, with the land controlling village feudals and higher landlords and with the merchants insured that their power was maintained at the local level. This was both an “economic” power (in fact they had control of the majority of the land) and a “political” power, for the limitations of the colonial administration meant that in most cases the village landlords with their gangs and their unquestioned social privileges normally exercised coercive and “judicial” powers as well. Further, within the village much production continued to be organized via the jajmani system which did not really wither away until after independence, and this in turn meant a continued subordination of artisans and the untouchable labourers whose traditional caste duties became a major part of the feudal unpaid labour (*vethebegar*) extracted by landlords.

But while agrarian production continued to be broadly organised on semi-feudal lines, there was one important difference. Now, the British imposition of legal rights of property ownership (however omitted and enveloped these were in traditionally defined “privileges” i.e., *vatan*, *inam* and other rights) in a sense *constituted* for the first time classes of “landlords”, “tenants” and “labourers” as legal-economic entities formally separate from the caste system, and at the same time *constituted* the “caste system” itself as a concretely separate system. “Caste” and “class” no longer coincided; rights were appropriated on an individual basis and no longer linked to kinship a sub-caste membership, and the jati was no longer the basic unit of the social division of labour. The *separation* of the economic and social levels that is so characteristic of capitalist society began in India under colonial rule. Thus semi-feudal society under colonial rule had significantly new features.

Caste and class continued to be heavily interlinked. The educated, elite was overwhelmingly drawn from the higher castes who had formerly a literate tradition, that is Brahmans, Kayasthas and others. Men from peasant and artisan castes of shudra status constituted the large majority of factory workers; while dalits could find some openings in factories or on roads and railways, generally they filled the lowest, most unskilled jobs. In the mines and plantations it was the sections most exploited in feudal society (dalits) or those outside of feudal relations altogether but brought into them by colonial rule

(adivasis) who formed the bulk of the work force. Merchants and moneylenders were mainly drawn from the vaishya castes who had traditionally performed this function, and though they gained power over peasants as *sahukars* and got control over such of the land on mortgage, they generally did not emerge as actual landlords or owners of the land but preferred simply to control the crops. It was from their ranks that an industrial bourgeoisie, ultimately a national bourgeoisie, began to take shape.

In terms of their legal position, landlords were a mixed lot : in some parts of the country they were legally defined as such (as zamindars, kotedars, talukdars etc.) while in other areas they emerged within a ryotwari structure as those who acquired large amounts of land through various means (from traditional ownership including former patil and inam rights to buying up land with advantageous of education and bureaucratic connections), and farmed it mainly through tenants. Nevertheless in caste terms they were almost always drawn from the previous village feudal classes, the Rajputs, Brahmans, Bhumiars, Vellalas, Nayars, Nambudiris, Deshmukhs etc.

Below these could be found a large peasant section including owner cultivators as well as various types of tenants. These were overwhelmingly shudra in varna terms and they included both the former kisan castes as well as artisan castes. By the end of colonial rule it was clear that most of the specialist castes many of whom had been ruined and displaced by imperialist competition – were direct cultivators of the land rather than performing their “traditional” occupation. At the same time there was a process of differentiation among this peasantry. The better off sections of owner-cultivators and the richer tenants (and these were almost all from traditional Kisan castes) began to consolidate their position and even emerge as exploiters of wage labour and other forms of labour extracted from the lower castes, while others became peasants steadily more impoverished. The rich peasants benefited from caste forms exploitation of in their villages, even though they also had an interest in opposing the caste privileges and economic power of the landlords-moneylenders-bureaucrats. Finally, at the bottom the status of the untouchable labourers continued much as before; though now it often took forms of debt-bondage, and legal contracts, these untouchable servants -serfs often continued to be known by the traditional terms for field slaves (e.g. *panniyal*). Still, among the growing numbers of agricultural labourers, these were many who had originally been middle caste cultivators or artisans and were thrown now into this position by impoverishment; these often had a more free status and there were some areas (e.g. western Maharashtra, the Andhra delta) where dalits as well as caste Hindu labourers were more mobile and less bound.

Under British rule there was thus a broad *correlation* between caste and class which duplicated the main classes of the pre-colonial caste-feudal period. Nevertheless it was only a correlation, and not an identity, and in every caste there could be found some individuals who could get education, a little bit of land, some access to new opportunities. The fact that artisans and even untouchables had form a rights to land ownership, to education and to new occupations was connected with the emergence of “caste” and “class” as separate structures, separate but highly interconnected, and this was the

material base on which the very complex anti-feudal struggles of the colonial period emerged.

These anti-feudal struggles included the kisan movements, the non-Brahman anti-caste movements, and the dalit and agricultural labourer movements. Of these the kisan movements have been the most thoroughly studied; they centered around demands for abolition of *zamindari* and so primarily involved the interests of middle and rich peasants who had traditionally recognised claims to the land as tenants or as cultivators. But they also included a large number of related issues – demands for restoration of certain lands grabbed by the zamindars, opposition to forms of forced labour collectively termed as *vethbegar*, opposition to money-lending, demand for cheap access to water resources etc. – and they frequently involved poor and low caste peasants. Further, both the climatic struggles of the kisan movement – the Tebhaga movement in Bengal and the Telangana revolt – transcended the limitations of the earlier kisan movement and involved large sections of the rural poor.

Anti-caste movements, in particular the broad non-Brahman Movements of South India, were also generally anti-feudal. Just as the kisan movement could generate a “united front” allying both peasants and labourers against the landlords, so the more radical non-Brahman movement could emerge as an alliance of shudras and atishudras against the high castes. For the large section of peasant and artisan masses, their oppression was in terms of caste as well as class, and as some educated sections began to develop within each jati these took leadership both in more conservative forms of organisations (caste associations which essentially accepted the caste hierarchy but sought to use caste identity to compete for a higher position within it) as well as in more radical challenges to the system itself. Toilers as well as many educated sections began to reject their hitherto accepted position as shudras within an established varna hierarchy and to see themselves as non-Brahmans or non-Aryans or *bahujan samaj* fighting an exploiting Aryan elite or *shetji-bhatji* class which had organised the caste system—as a means of subjugating and dividing them. The Satyashodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and the Self-Respect movement in Tamil Nadu at times took the place of the kisan sabhas in these areas and engaged in sometimes direct attacks on moneylenders or landlords as well as in a fierce challenge to the ritual status of the elite. In north India anti-caste organisations generally took a more conservative form in which the middle castes mainly claimed kshatriya status. In Bihar the middle peasant-kisans organised through the Triveni Sangh as well as in the kisan Sabha, while in northwest India the Arya Samaj and Kisan Sabhas became interwoven expressions of the (mainly Jat) kisans against their (mainly Rajput) feudal exploiters.

At the same time the untouchable labourers, inspired by such struggles but only partially included in them, began to organise separately. Movements based on their notion of themselves as the original “sons of the soil” (Adi-Andhras, Adi-Hindus, Adi-Dharm etc.) began to emerge in the 1920s, and a new term expressing a totality of socio-economic exploitation, *dalit*, began to be used from about 1930 in Maharashtra and north India. Struggles began to take place not only in the towns to claim education, legal rights or use of tanks, and temples (the Mahad satyagraha, the Vaikom satyagraha), but also in the

villages to claim land (either forest land or cultivable waste), higher wages and the ending of *vethbegar*. The late 1930s, the same period in which the All-India Kisan Sabha emerged as a united organisation under left leadership, saw the emergence of separate dalit-based agricultural labourer organizations in Bihar (led by Jagjivan Ram) and Andhra (led by Ranga and the Communists). In the same period Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party to link dalit, peasants' and workers' struggles. Finally, people in the tribal areas, now subordinated to new consolidated feudal exploitation, also began to organize in a new fashion that stressed their identity as *adivasis*.

The Telangana revolt (1946–1950) was in many ways a climax of all of these movements. While both the Kisan Sabha and agricultural labour organizing had been strong in the Andhra region, in Telangana itself the mass organization which was a base for the revolt was the Andhra Mahasabha – which combined social reform, anti-caste and nationalist features. It had earlier taken up anti-untouchability and anti-*vethbegar* as well as cultural campaigns and to these a new Communist leadership linked militancy and anti-landlord struggles. Thus dalits, artisans and the landless as well as substantial village land holders were involved in the revolt, and when the revolutionaries took up both abolition of zamindari and distribution of “excess land” to the landless – the first time this really was brought forward as an issue in struggle – in practice they were meeting the needs for land of the low castes as well as the cultivating kisans.

But in spite of these achievements and in spite of the long history of sustained struggles, by and large they remained under rich peasant and middle class hegemony. In the end it was Gandhi and the Congress, rather than the socialists and Communists who maintained leadership in the anti-imperialist as well as over the anti-feudal struggles.

On the one hand this was a failure of the left, and this meant the inability of the working class, peasant and dalit forces to evolve a militant anti-feudal movement that could unite all the various aspects of the anti-caste and peasant struggles, and to combine these with the fight against imperialism. In spite of impressive local efforts under communist leadership in such places as Andhra and Kerala, there was by and large a separation of struggles at the national level. In the Kisan Sabha movement, for instance, the issue of caste and untouchability was generally ignored, the specific problems of the dalit labourers were underplayed, and there was no real analysis of the specific characteristics of Indian, feudalism. The result was that the “Agrarian revolution” and the “abolition of landlordism” came to mean in practice only the abolition of *zamindari* and giving land title to the *tenants* that is, to those who had some historically recognized claim to the land, primarily the middle caste kisans. For example, a final climatic resolution on the abolition of landlordism of the All-India Kisan Sabha in 1947 reads as follows:

*With the abolition of landlordism all agricultural land must in the first instance be declared the property of the state and then be given in permanent ownership to actual cultivators of the soil. All agricultural labourers must have a minimum wage. All other tillers of the soil must get proprietary rights in its under their direct cultivation and cultivable waste land must be distributed among poor- peasants and agricultural labourers (Rasul; 1947: 147).*

Here the actual cultivators of the soil seem to be identified with the middle class tenants, while there is a virtual acceptance of the continuing existence of a class of agricultural labourer who do not have the same rights as other “tillers of the soil” The evidence of the Kisan Sabha debates on this issue suggests that leaders were defining the problem of tenants and labours in European terms, and missing most of the Indian caste-defied specificities.

One result was that dalits largely remained apart from these kisan struggles and even when they did take part they could usually not consolidate any gains in rights to the land because they were not traditionally “tillers” and there was no broader powerful peasant movement conscious enough to assure that they could win such rights. Even in the great Telangana revolt, where dalit labourers fought alongside caste Hindu kisans, the kisans who got land as tenants managed to keep their gains while the dalits and other landless who got the “ceiling land” generally lost these. Here it may be said that a general failure of the left (both of socialists and communists in this period) was both to overlook the anti-feudal character of the anti-caste and non-Brahman movements and to overlook the specific needs of dalit labourers and artisans within the broader peasant movement.

There was also a problem in combining the anti imperialist and anti-feudal fight, a problem partly related to the great difficulty the communists had in organizing and in evolving a well-defined policy. Until the middle 1930s (partly as a result of Comintern directives) the communists militantly organised the working class but did not lead any anti-British struggles and remained isolated from the national movement. Then the Socialist party was formed, as a pressure group *within* the Congress, as a left nationalist and not an independent working class party – and when the Communists switched their policy after 1935 to that of the “anti-imperialist united front” they did so by simply joining the CSP and so, in effect, accepted the same policy of “working from within”. But this was at a time when in many areas independent anti-feudal and potentially anti-imperialist forces were emerging, most notably Ambedkar’s Independent Labour Party in Maharashtra and Periyar’s Self-Respect movement. But communist and communist-influenced cadres were directed to leave these parties and join the CSP instead even though they were getting some considerable influence at least in the case of the Self-Respect movement and were helping a movement towards a more militant anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle (Murugesan and Subramanyam, 1975). The result was to deprive these movements of left and working class influence, and in turn to isolate the Communists from the dalit movement in Maharashtra and the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. The repercussions of both are felt today. Nor did the fact of working within the Congress really help the leftists to topple a conservative, Gandhian leadership, rather they only helped to increase its mass base.

And on the other hand this Gandhian leadership succeeded quite brilliantly in forging a policy for a bourgeois form of anti-feudal and national struggle that did bring together under Congress leadership all aspects of the anti-feudal movements but only in a distorted, conservative and fragmentizing manner. One aspect of Gandhi’s genius was in fact that he could give an all-round programme that promised something for every section of society. In the case of the kisan movement, the Congress supported or even organized struggles

where they had no choice or where they could be controlled, and always with certain conservative policies : to accept the principle of compensation and the ultimate right of landlords, to avoid “violence”, etc. (Desai, 1978). At the same time it sought to avoid connecting the kisan movement with that of the issues of labourers. In turn the Congress very cautiously encouraged a limited form of organizing agricultural labourers but only (under Jagjivan Ram) where this was useful as a counter to a left-led Kisan Sabha. But for the dalits as such, Gandhi’s main emphasis was to avoid their economic issues entirely; to avoid also any militant action against caste oppression as such; and in fact to avoid organizing them altogether except as “Harijans” who were objects of paternalistic sympathy and “uplift” from caste Hindus who were consciously given control of the organizations such as the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The brilliance of Gandhi’s “constructive programme”, (from the view point of the bourgeoisie) was that it provided something for the dalits and those who were motivated by their plight, but only in a way that increased their sub-ordination to the rural elite and diverted them from radical struggles. In other words, the Congress policy almost consciously fostered disunity among the various sections of the toiling masses while at the same time preaching a harmony with the exploited; while the left led many militant struggles and sought to intensify contradictions in the countryside according to their understanding but failed to build up a militant unity of all sections of the oppressed.

Thus the promise inherent in the mighty Telangana revolt, in the all-round participation of Communists in anti-landlord, and anti-untouchability struggles among agricultural labourers and peasants in such areas as Andhra and Kerala, or in the attempt of Ambedkar in the late 1930s to formulate a programme to unite workers peasants and dalits remained unfulfilled. Congress hegemony was maintained; the kisan movement ended up serving the needs of the rich peasants; the non-Brahman movements fell under middle class leadership and the dalit and anti-caste movements in general failed to become a thorough dalit liberation movement. When independence was won in 1947 it was under the domination of the bourgeoisie and in the form of a bourgeois state.

**(To be continued in next issue)**