Ambedkar and the Left

Gail Omvedt

September 3, 2012

An article by Anand Teltumbde, "Not Red versus Blue" has been recently arousing controversy. Dalits have attacked it. In attempting to "mediate" between Ambedkarites and Leftists, Teltumbde according to many has fallen into the trap of turning Ambedkar into a semi-Marxist.

In fact, Teltumbde does distort Ambedkar in a subtle way. He writes, "Ambedkar practiced class politics, albeit not in the Marxian sense. He always used 'class' even for describing the untouchables." The one example Teltumbde gives is to Ambedkar's essay on caste, which was written in 1916 for a seminar. In this essay, "Castes in India: Their Genesis, Mechanism and Development", Ambedkar begins by describing a caste as an "enclosed class." However, this is a beginning point, not a conclusion, and it is far from absorbing castes into a Marxian notion of class. Ambedkar's elaboration of the mechanisms and development of caste make it clear that caste is a very different category from the openness of class as determined by division of labor. He is apparently using "class" in a somewhat general fashion in his phrase, "enclosed class," not in any specific economic sense.

Ambedkar also of course occasionally uses the term "Depressed Classes" to refer to Dalits. However this was taken over from British usage, where the term was simply an administrative conventional one used to identify untouchables. The British here were not in any way making a reference to the Marxist concept of class, but rather using the term as equivalent to "category."

In all of his writings from very early, Ambedkar is quite conscious of Marxism as a powerful intellectual and ideological force, and also quite conscious of his differences from it. He refutes the Marxist notion of social, cultural and religious factors being "superstructural" features which have no real causal significance. In a 1938 article in Janata, he takes up the architectural analogy and says that if the cultural and religious factors are the building erected on an economic "foundation," then before the foundation can be uprooted the building should be demolished: thus he turns the metaphor upside down, arguing effectively that religious and cultural factors have to be tackled first of all. If Lenin had been born in India, he argued in another article, he would first of all have attacked the religious foundations of slavery.

Class is defined in terms of the division of labour. But, as Ambedkar noted, caste is not a division of labor but a division of labourers: many castes among the single "class" defined in terms of a similar position within the division of labor fragment and divide that class, making unity impossible.

Teltumbde's article shows his consciousness of the practical problems that Ambedkar faced with the Marxists. Early Communist organizing was strongest in the textile mills, for example. But here, because of caste discrimination, Dalits were relegated to the lower paid department. In the weaving department, when the thread broke, the custom was for the workers to hold it in their teeth; it was unacceptable for caste Hindu workers to allow dalits to do this. Thus they could get work only in the spinning department. Communists ignored this discrimination for a long time. Teltumbe argues that only when Ambedkar threatened to break the strike of 1928 did they remedy this; there is, however, little evidence that they did so even then. No effective campaign was mounted to get Dalits entry; the discrimination remained.

Ambedkar saw this partly as a result of the Brahman character of the early communists, but partly also as a result of the tendency of Marxism itself to ignore "non-economic" issues such as caste. For Ambedkar, of course, caste was a thoroughly economic reality also, as well as a social one; it determined the economic position of Dalits and bahujans by relegating them to certain positions in the socio-economic order. This was an inalterable feature of Indian society, related to its religious and cultural foundations. Marx, in contrast, had seen caste as inimical to human development, but believed that it would be overcome through industrial development. Ambedkar, of course, as much as Marxists wanted industrial development as a necessary foundation for the removal of poverty, but he did not see it as sufficient to overcome the realities of caste discrimination and exploitation.

When Ambedkar wrote, in "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Indian history," that the history of Indian was one of a mortal struggle "between Buddhism and Brahmanism," he was making a reference to the accepted Marxist doctrine that history was a history of class struggle. In India, Ambedkar was in effect arguing, the situation was different: the struggle was a cultural and spiritual one.

In Manmad in 1938 at a meeting of Dalit railway workers, Ambedkar made his famous statement that we have two enemies – Brahmanism and capitalism. Here, taking capitalism as an enemy meant that in a sense he was declaring for an alliance with Communists. What they had in common was the anti-caste struggle. But then, would it be sufficient for Communists to give lip service to the struggle against Brahmanism? This was not so simple.

The fact is that though Ambedkar was a socialist, he was (as Teltumbde knows well) not a Marxist but a democratic socialist. Teltumbe calls him a Fabian. In fact, although at one point, in his book States and Minorities, he called for "state socialism" as a solution to the problems of economic exploitation, he also moved away from this. Marxists tend to focus on States and Minorities, but ignore the fact that by 1952 with the election manifesto of the Scheduled Caste Federation he was turning away from "state socialism" towards a more Deweyian pragmatism. There he argued that rapid industrial development was necessary; where state control worked best its should be used, but where private industrial ownership could give the most rapid development, this would be acceptable. In this sense, Ambedkar was not a Fabian so much as a pragmatist.

Ambedkar turned to Buddhism at the end of his life an, saw Buddhism as an alternative to Marxism: in the fight for "liberty, equality and fraternity" Marxism, he argued in a final essay, could achieve equality, he conceded, but not liberty; Buddhism was therefore superior. And, he denied the concepts of increasing impoverishment leading to revolution, denied the role of class struggle, but concluded that of the "residues of fire" in Marx, the most important was the theme that "philosophers have only interpreted the world the problem is to change it." This was true also of the Dhamma, he would argue: the goal of religion is to understand the world, the goal of the Dhamma is reconstruction of the world. Like Marxism, his was a philosophy aiming at social transformation, but he refused to accept the violence implied in class struggle and the mechanical relegation of everything to an economic base.

Teltumbde wants to argue for a "convergence" of dalit-bahujan and leftist forces. This is impossible, the differences are too strong, and the Left has shown no tendency at all to rethink on its fundamentals. This is true for the "parliamentary" parties, the CPI and CPM, as well as for the "revolutionary" Maoists. It is in this sense that the moribund nature of this traditional left shows. However, there can be an alliance. This was something which Ambedkar had stood for, and it remains a hope.

South Asian Anarchist Library

Gail Omvedt
Ambedkar and the Left
September 3, 2012

https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/ambedkar-and-the-left/
Originally titled "Ambedkar and the Left" published in authors blog "seeking begumpura" which was later republished in roundtableindia and then copied to south asian anarchist library

sa.theanarchistlibrary.org