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India

# The Struggle Against Dalit Oppression in India

- Reviews section -

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### **Review of Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (Navayana, 2018)**

The Indian state has imprisoned the Dalit intellectual Anand Teltumbde on trumped-up charges of terrorism and subversion. His activism and writing on caste and class are needed more than ever in the struggle against both casteism and capitalism.

Anand Teltumbde is a man of many shades. A senior professor at the Goa Institute of Management who identifies as a Marxist, Teltumbde has multiple qualifications: a degree in engineering from Nagpur's Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, a management degree from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, and a doctorate in cybernetics from the University of Mumbai.

But his public persona is that of a Dalit writer and intellectual, and a long-time activist concerned with Dalit and civil-liberties issues. In his long-running column for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Teltumbde has often been critical of India's existing Dalit leadership. He recently turned seventy in a Mumbai prison, having been taken into police custody three months earlier under preposterous terrorism-related charges filed by the National Investigation Agency.

His book *Republic of Caste* is a collection of essays, reworked for publication, that take up a set of key issues concerning the relationship between caste and class, and assesses where Dalits stand today. Teltumbde develops his own perspective on Dalit emancipation through a critique of India's mainstream communist and Ambedkarite political movements.

## Caste and Class

In a chapter on the relationship between Marxism and the Ambedkarite movements, Teltumbde explores the gulf between two currents that should be allies, but are quite often hostile to each other. The overwhelming majority of Dalits are working class, or rural proletarians and semi-proletarians. But there has been very little serious collaboration between the Dalit liberation movements and the Indian left.

Teltumbde argues that Marx was aware of caste as a major impediment to India's progress; both he and Lenin stressed the need for Marxists to focus on objective reality. He criticizes the approach of the Indian communists to the caste question, which was shaped by two factors: practical and intellectual. One was the fact that the bulk of left-wing leaders were upper caste. An unconscious Brahminism made them ignore the special oppression of Dalits.

At a theoretical level, they sought to explain caste or explain it away through a crude application of Marx's base-superstructure metaphor. Their problem in making sense of India's caste system was similar to the one facing Marxists in other parts of the world when dealing with questions of race, ethnicity, or gender forms of social oppression that cannot simply be subsumed under a reductionist class approach.

As Teltumbde shows, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the most influential leader of the struggle for Dalit emancipation, demonstrated the possibility of class- and caste-based movements coming together. He tried to organize trade

unions, formed an Independent Labour Party (ILP, named after the British party of the same name), and urged the communist-led Girni Kamgar Union to address the question of caste segregation in employment, which would help foster class unity on terms favorable to the most oppressed groups.

It is India's communist organizations that Teltumbde indicts. Over the last thirty years or so, different sectors of the communist movement using that term in the widest possible sense have concerned themselves with Dalits and made demands relevant to their social condition. However, there remains a strong belief among them that caste as a special oppression can be solved within the limits of capitalism, through some sort of equalization process.

Teltumbde appears to side partly with radicals within the left-wing movements who want to overturn capitalism, and partly with Dalits who argue that caste oppression must be integral to any fight for emancipation. But he does so within a Marxist framework, suggesting that Marxists should see class unity as something that develops through a struggle against an enemy class, rather than as a pre-existing reality around which a movement can be built. In the course of that struggle, there will always be differences that have to be addressed and negotiated.

## Two Camps

However, the points missing from his argument, or the simplifications that he makes, prevent him from proceeding further in his critique of India's several communist parties. One such factor should be stressed here.

The bulk of the communist movement in India falls into one of two camps. First of all, there are those advocating for a basically parliamentary road, however dressed up with revolutionary rhetoric it may be. They are committed to a two-stage theory of revolution, according to which the enemy in the first stage is imperialism, semi-feudalism, and only particular sections of capital, rather than capitalism as such.

Second of all, there are those advocating for a Maoist-style revolution rooted in the countryside, favoring insurrection over parliamentary politics, but also see imperialism, semi-feudalism, and comprador capitalists as the enemy. The section of the far left which is oriented towards the urban working class and mass struggle is much smaller, and its arguments have very little impact on the political scene.

As a result, Indian Marxist analysis of caste has most often related to the problem of "semi-feudalism." This means that a blindness to caste divisions within the working class has persisted, because they have trouble perceiving caste as something that survives under modern capitalism, rather than as a relic of semi-feudal conditions.

Even when Marxists formally acknowledged that such divisions exist, they do not take seriously the need for strategies to combat them in order to unify the class. As Teltumbde himself points out, if the communist movement had taken caste seriously from the beginning, a separate Dalit movement should not have been necessary.

## Ambedkar and Marxism

Teltumbde also takes a critical look at Dr Ambedkar himself, and those who claim the mantle of Ambedkarism. He examines Ambedkar's philosophical pragmatism, relating it to his teacher John Dewey, and presents Ambedkar as a kind of Fabian socialist. This explains his attitude to Marxian communism critical of their methods, while sometimes sympathetic to certain goals.

In the 1930s, when Ambedkar believed that reform within Hinduism to ensure equality for Dalits was not possible, he turned to class as a category, launching the Independent Labour Party (ILP). But the actual ILP candidates put up in the elections of 1937 mostly came from the Mahar sub-caste among Dalits: it was unable to attract support from other sections of the working class, even among Dalits, showing the gap between the party's ambition and its achievement.

Later, in 1946, when Ambedkar proposed a model of state socialism in the tract "States and Minorities," he again came to use the language of class, although he wrote the treatise itself on behalf of the United Scheduled Castes Federation. Ambedkar's differences with the communists also included his approach to the state, and to education. He was opposed to any violent revolution, hoping for change without bloodshed, and expected the educated middle-class intelligentsia to take the lead.

In spite of these differences, Teltumbde suggests, Marxism remained a reference point for Ambedkar, even if it was only to argue that his methods were better than those of the Marxists. This implies that he saw the Marxists as his competitors, albeit inferior ones.

One conflict zone between them was in Bombay, where both Ambedkar and the communists were active. In the city's textile mills, communists dominated the powerful union for half a century. Dalits found themselves debarred from jobs in the better-paid weaving section, as the non-Dalit workers believed they would be polluted if they touched threads that Dalits had woven.

As late as 1938, Ambedkar was still raising this issue. One would search in vain for any communist intervention here. The assumption that class unity could be achieved only by sweeping the caste fault lines under the carpet would eventually come back to haunt the communists. As Teltumbde notes, they tended to locate caste in the "superstructure," even though caste locations were very often linked to production.

On the other hand, he is deeply critical of latter-day Ambedkarite groups for their preoccupation with electoral politics. They were as opportunistic as the mainstream electoral CPs, and were quite aggressively anti-communist, as well as hero-worshipping Ambedkar. He argues that Ambedkar himself would have firmly rejected this approach.

## Reservations

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages in India, memes have appeared on social media claiming that Indian doctors cannot treat patients properly because of reservations, which have supposedly eliminated the meritorious. This is a reference to the policy of affirmative action: the reservation of places in publicly funded schools and colleges for a range of socially deprived, historically oppressed and marginalized groups, with similar arrangements for public-sector jobs.

As Teltumbde correctly says, any discussion of caste in India soon enough becomes a discussion of reservations. One might gather the impression from such debates that casteism would not be a serious issue were it not for reservations.

Teltumbde's take is a complex one. He is sharply critical of the elite and forward caste critics of reservations, who talk of "merit," ignoring the social hierarchies that surround each individual. He notes that opponents of reservations ignore the fact that their much-revered Hindu social order was based on "reservations" of the worst kind. Brahmins did not have to display any merit to assume dominance over society; the untouchables did not have to commit any

crime to be condemned for generations to a societal hell.

At the same time, Teltumbde is skeptical about reservations based on caste, albeit for reasons very different from those of the Brahmanical elite. He points out that the logic of having a set of reserved seats in local, provincial, or central legislatures would have made sense only if there had been a separate electorate. Dalits being a small fragment of the population, even in reserved seats, and especially at the higher levels, the Dalit candidates most likely to win are those approved by the bourgeois parties, which are themselves dominated by the upper castes.

As a result, the policy of reservations, instead of becoming a way to build a strong Dalit fighting force, has led to the co-option of a small layer of Dalit politicians. He argues that Panchayati Raj – a system of local self-government in rural districts – has become de facto ruled by the dominant castes.

However, there are problems with Teltumbde's arguments about reservations. It would be one thing if all the places available through the reservations policy had been filled up throughout India. But as Maroona Murmu of Kolkata's Jadavpur University has shown, reservations have not been properly utilized, in spite of the egalitarian promises of the Indian constitution. Take one example Murmu gives from the higher-education system of West Bengal: in the 2014-15 academic year, out of 49,217 professors, just 3,037 came from Scheduled Castes (6.16 percent), and a mere 451 from Scheduled Tribes (less than 1 percent).

The core argument Teltumbde makes is for a strategy that brings class and caste together. This does not mean endorsing the fakery of "economic reservation," whereby the authorities are to reserve seats for the "poor," rather than simply on caste grounds. Since the reservation policy is intended to deal with forms of social exclusion that are similar to racism, it is not related to poverty. If poor students lack the necessary resources, the answer is to provide more funding for the education system.

## Annihilation or Reform?

Teltumbde believes that there is a need to reform reservation strategies at the very least. If caste has to be annihilated – as Ambedkar demanded in a famous pamphlet – then a caste-based reservation policy, operating in an environment where only untouchability is abolished, not the caste system itself, does not really seek to get rid of social inequality and oppression.

Dalit intellectuals and activists had hoped that the untouchable castes who were at the forefront of the original struggles led by Ambedkar would forge a broader unity among various oppressed Dalit subcastes. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is based on this conception – the term "Bahujan" referred to all non-elite castes. In practice, however, instead of building such unity, those castes projected themselves as superior and tended to concentrate advantages for their own benefit.

Although the BSP has been the most successful of all the attempts to build up a Dalit-based electoral party, it has disproportionately favored its core component, the subcaste of Jatavs/Chamars. The Hindutva forces identified this limitation better than anyone else. By supporting politicians of non-Jatav Dalit castes, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was able to eat dramatically into the electoral base of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh (UP).

One chapter of Teltumbde's book contains a valuable discussion of the BSP. It is not a Dalit party by self-definition: its name expresses its hope to constitute a majority bloc that would be wider than Dalits. In practice, even in UP where the BSP has been a regular fixture in coalition governments, it has not succeeded in winning support from

shudras at the bottom of the caste hierarchy (now categorized among Other Backwards Classes or OBCs). Recent attempts to enlist Brahmins and other elite groups to the party's side have eroded the Bahujan identity.

Teltumbde does not make the same arguments as right-wing critics of the BSP, and points out the double standards of those critics, who never subject the BSP's rivals to the same harsh scrutiny. However, he believes that the BSP has largely ceased to be a vehicle that can truly fight for Dalit emancipation.

## Violence and Repression Against Dalits

In several chapters, Teltumbde takes on the role of the Indian state, examining its violence towards Dalits and its handling of dissent, even though it routinely claims to be the "world's largest democracy." His book contains a detailed account of the Khairlanji massacre of September 2006. An upper caste mob murdered an entire family of Dalit Mahars, the Bhotmanges: the women were paraded naked and gang-raped before being killed, the genitals of the two boys were crushed with stones, and all the bodies were thrown callously into a canal.

In contrast with many other such cases, the government had to take action of some kind because of protests initiated by local Dalit women and taken up by Dalits elsewhere. Having been forced to assign the case to a fast-track lower court, the government made sure of the appointment of a public prosecutor who would present a weakened brief.

This court was supposed to apply the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, which Rajiv Gandhi's government had passed under pressure from Congress supporters among minority groups (Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims). The legislation strengthened the penalties for discriminatory acts of various kinds. However, the court concluded that there was no caste angle to the crime, and so the Act did not apply.

Nor did it see any grounds to consider "outrage to women's modesty" (Victorian legalese for sexual violence). The court also ruled that the crime was not premeditated. As Dalit organizations and civil rights groups argued, all three findings flew in the face of the evidence.

Although several fact-finding reports had revealed that between 40 and 60 people were involved in the assaults, only 11 faced charges. The six who were sentenced to death had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment by the High Court of Bombay. It is not even clear if the principal culprits were put on trial.

In his analysis of the case, Teltumbde makes a number of points. The Bhotmange family had broken caste codes; they were assertive, and hence they had to be "put in their place." At each stage, there were Dalits (Mahars) present in the administration and the local police force, and among the doctors who performed and supervised the autopsies. For Teltumbde, this shows that merely having some Dalits in important posts will not address the systemic oppression and violence suffered by Dalits as a whole.

India's social transformation since independence had turned rural Dalits into a part of the agricultural proletariat. Violence against Dalits therefore often has a dual character, with a specific caste-based motivation and a broader class-based one, buttressed by the sense on the part of rural capitalists that Dalits in particular are deserving of such violent treatment.

Lax in its handling of violence against Dalits, the Indian state is quick to deploy repression against them for dissent. The authorities frequently label Dalits and other groups notably Adivasis as Maoist or Naxalite subversives if they protest about anything, using anti-sedition laws inherited from the colonial state, along with the more recent Unlawful

Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

Arrests of Dalit activists under these laws are commonplace: many spend years in prison awaiting trial, denied access to bail, only to be released when the courts find them innocent. Teltumbde's own arrest under the UAPA is yet another confirmation of how accurate his indictment of the Indian state is.

## Lessons from Gujarat

Violence against Dalits is greatest in Narendra Modi's own state of Gujarat. The author discusses how Gujarat became the region where Hindutva forces succeeded in winning support from Dalits, despite their own aggressive casteism. But the state's experience also shows how Dalit politics can be shaped in a different way.

It is Dalits who flay and dispose of dead cattle. In July 2016, a so-called cow-protection group assaulted a Dalit family at Una because they were skinning a dead cow. Dalits, led by a young man, Jignesh Mewani, responded by boycotting this form of work, as well as the cleaning of sewers. They sought to earn their livelihoods in alternate ways by demanding land from the state government. The state government had formally allotted over 160,000 acres of land to Dalits three decades earlier, but the land was never actually handed over.

The agitation led to the immediate transfer of 300 acres, which did have a positive symbolic impact. As Teltumbde reminds us, while Ambedkar himself stressed the importance of land rights, the mainstream Ambedkarite movements have not pushed for this as a route to greater emancipation. By the end of 2019, Dalits had received about three thousand acres of land – slight progress, albeit at great cost.

Elsewhere, the author explores the arguments put forward by a section of the Dalit middle-class intelligentsia, who depicts neoliberalism as a caste-neutral system. The Bahujan Samaj Party voted in favor of the proposal to open up India's retail sector to foreign capital, which would allow companies like Walmart to enter the country. Defending this move, these intellectuals suggested that foreign investment would be beneficial for Dalit entrepreneurs, as it was not casteist.

Teltumbde rebuts the claim that neoliberalism has been or will be comparatively beneficial for Dalit capitalists. He looks at sectors where Dalit capitalism is meant to have been a success, suggesting that these are simply extensions of the old, caste-based Dalit occupations. And as Teltumbde points out, the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has acknowledged that there is really no "level playing field," even among capitalists, by seeking to have the reservation policy applied. He compares the rhetorical function of "Dalit capitalism" in India to that of "black capitalism" in the United States, as a diversion from the real struggle for emancipation.

## Hindutva Co-Option, Congress Betrayal

Teltumbde directly confronts the attempt by Hindutva forces to co-opt Ambedkar. M. S. Golwalkar was the second of the Supreme Leaders (Sarsanghchalak) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the architect of its key theoretical ideas. When we look at Golwalkar's writings, it is easy to see how he identified Muslims, Christians, and communists as the enemy. But Golwalkar and his co-thinkers also had to bring the Dalits into the fold, in order to construct a homogeneous Hindu majority against these alleged enemies. This posed a serious problem.

When Balasaheb Deoras was chief of the RSS, the group's leaders attempted to win over Dalits. In pursuit of this goal, they put about a fable concerning the alleged friendship between the RSS founder Keshav Baliram Hedgewar and Ambedkar, and attempted to depict Ambedkar as having been hostile to Muslims and communists, and as a champion of Hindus. In response to this, Teltumbde cites Ambedkar's 1945 work, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, where he wrote the following:

If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity.

Teltumbde presents a wealth of information to show that the practice of the RSS-BJP is entirely at odds with Ambedkar's thinking, and utterly hostile to any notion of genuine equality with or for Dalits.

He also puts forward stinging condemnations of the BJP's principal rivals, the once-dominant Indian National Congress and the recently formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). He criticizes the AAP, which mobilized support on an anti-corruption platform, for refusing to face up to caste and capitalism as structural realities in India, and attacks the Congress for its historic opportunism towards Dalits.

The party has treated them as vote banks, to be placated with tokenistic measures, without ever being allowed to stand on their own feet or to achieve meaningful equality. Teltumbde sharply disputes the Congress claim to have represented Dalit interests: despite decades of post-independence Congress rule, about nine Dalits in ten still lead impoverished lives as landless laborers, small-scale farmers, village artisans, slum-dwelling casual workers, and peddlers in the informal sector of the urban economy.

As the author recalls, Mahatma Gandhi rejected the idea of a separate electorate for Dalits. His 1932 agreement with Ambedkar, the Poona Pact, made Dalit representation subject to the votes of their oppressors, the upper castes, through reserved seats. The Simon Commission had proposed separate electorates, which would have meant Dalit voters alone would elect the Dalit candidates. Gandhi saw this as a blow to the Hindu community and religion. Bringing nation and religion together long before the current Hindutva leaders, he went on hunger strike, demanding an end to the separate electorate for Dalits.

Gandhi's supporters threatened Ambedkar, warning that if their leader died, they would take revenge on people from the Depressed Class people. The result was the Pact, which Ambedkar felt compelled to sign. It increased the number of Dalit seats; however, since the electorate was a common one, Dalits were mostly dependent on support from voters and parties of higher castes. This has remained the case to the present day.

## A Break With Orthodoxies

Republic of Caste, on a careful reading, presents the reader with a picture that differs sharply from two forms of congealed orthodoxy: the rhetoric of liberal modernization, which deems Indian-style neoliberalism to be necessary for progress, or the kind of Marxism that presents India as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial economy.

Some questions remain. The most important is his critique of identity politics, and his desire that all subcastes of Dalits should be consolidated into a class. Yet Dalits are socially differentiated: as Teltumbde himself records elsewhere, some 4 percent of the Dalits form a middle class. So who is a Dalit? The identity is actually a political project, as is the BSP's Bahujan.

## The Struggle Against Dalit Oppression in India

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Secondly, after years of Dalit feminism, it is disappointing that Teltumbde does not examine the relations between class, caste, and gender, apart from his examination of repression, rape, and sexual violence. Economic and Political Weekly has published several important essays on this triad, including a dialogue between Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege and Chhaya Datar.

Overall, however, this is a careful work, which distinguishes between those the author sees as opponents within a zone of possible engagement, like the BSP and the Indian left, and those he considers forces of exploitation and oppression, namely Hindutva, the mainstream bourgeois parties, and capitalism. It should become a touchstone for discussion among radical Dalit organizations and sectors of the Marxist left.

[Jacobin](#)

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