

If CPI (M) really believes in uniting the Dalit and communist struggles, it must put some Dalits into leading positions

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The party has actively participated in the struggle for Dalit rights in India, but still does not have Dalits or Adivasis in its top-decision making body.

The Communist Part of India (Marxist) has recently embarked on a new direction by raising the “Jai Bhim-Lal Salaam” slogan, which combines the greetings of Dalit activists with that of the communists. The party’s general secretary, Sitaram Yechury, and its Telangana unit are both particularly keen on this slogan. Another catchphrase, “Lal-Neel Unity Zindabad”, which praises the unity between the communist red and [Dalit leader] Ambedkar blue colours, indicates that the party has broadly accepted the principle of social justice as part of its agenda.

The formation of the [Bahujan Left Front](#) in Telangana in January must be seen in this context. This outfit, led by the CPI(M), comprises 27 other political parties and social groups. It seeks to fight the Assembly and general elections due in the state next year, on the principle of social justice. The Bahujan Left Front leadership has repeatedly said that the party will contest all 119 Assembly seats and 17 Parliament seats in the state. The CPI(M) approved the formation of this outfit at its 22nd Congress in Hyderabad in April.

The Bahujan Left Front is not an electoral alliance of the kind other parties enter into for the sake of forming the government in different states. It has the underpinnings of re-positioning the ideology of the CPI(M) itself. It is also meant to re-shape the Ambedkarite Dalit movement.

The fact that the chairman of the Bahujan Left Front, Nalla Surya Prakash, is a Dalit gives credibility to the formation. Prakash is the former president of the state Bahujan Samaj Party. Given the mood in the state, this will have a major impact on other political parties, whether the new party wins the election or not.

Identity politics and the communists

The CPI(M) has been an active participant in the struggle for Dalit rights - in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and so on - particularly after the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in the 2014 general elections. The Left party’s state units have a significant number of leaders from the Dalit and Other Backward Classes communities too. But the lack of Dalits and Adivasis in the CPI(M)’s top decision-making body, the politburo, is a matter of concern. The politburo - a body of 17 members - has a good number of Shudra Other Backward Classes. For instance, former CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat is a Nair (a Shudra) from Kerala, and VS Achuthanandan and Pinarayi Vijayan are Ezhavas. There are women and Muslim representatives in the politburo too, but not a single Dalit or Adivasi representative. This poses a serious credibility problem for a party that has historically fought for the most oppressed people in India.

The lack of Dalit and Adivasi leaders in the politburo could be attributed partly to the principle of democratic centralism that the party follows in its organisational structure, where policy is decided centrally and is binding on other members. It is also partly to blame on the political approach of the leadership, which steers clear of identity politics. The demand to include Dalits and Adivasis in the party's top-decision making body is seen as part of identity politics.

But this is not a realistic approach to take in India. For instance, if Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Congress's Rahul Gandhi wear their caste on their sleeves - Modi has repeatedly spoken of his Other Backward Classes background while Gandhi has referred to his Brahmin lineage - the CPI(M)'s Yechury or Karat might not want to talk about their caste. However, it is inevitable that their caste will be discussed. Ambedkar would find out what caste they belong to just as Marx would find out their class background.

Additionally, political theory in India has increasingly become caste centered. Caste is an enclosed class, class is caste with definite production and labour relationship.

In my view, the castes of India can be broadly divided into two categories: The productive castes (all Shudras, Other Backward Classes, Dalits and Adivasis) and the anti-production castes (mainly Brahmins and Banias). I made this categorisation - based on the class nature of castes in relation to the use of their labour power in the production process - in my book *Post-Hindu India*, after taking a lot of data from various castes.

Brahmin theoreticians have contributed to the stigma around productive labour in India, with some castes living off the basic production process for a long time without contributing to it. For example, the so-called mental labour of the Brahmins (by writing and reading books, priesthood and so on) over the centuries did not help the production process in any way because of the iron curtain of caste between them and the rest of the productive castes. Similarly, members of the bania community - the traditional trading class - established their monopoly on businesses in India over a long period of time and have now acquired total monopoly over capital itself. But they never helped with [production](#).

Indian Marxists have avoided examining the caste character of capital and power in the past. But once they begin to read Ambedkar and Marx together, they find it is possible to do so. The communists must understand that caste as an analytical category is a major contribution of Ambedkarism, just as class as an analytical category was a contribution of Marxism.

Ambedkarism and Marxism

The real integration of Ambedkarism into the theory and praxis of Indian Marxists will take time, but the immediate question is how they will overcome their centralised decision-making on the question of leadership, as well as their inability to elevate at least one member of the Dalit and Adivasi community to their top decision-making body.

The demand for an inclusive-decision making body among the communists is as urgent as it is in India's highest court. In 2007, [KG Balakrishnan](#) became the first Dalit Chief Justice of India. If the Supreme Court could address this problem, why not the CPI(M)?

Nobody is arguing for disruptive changes at one go. It is true that most of India's mainstream political parties are dominated by members of the upper castes. But these parties at least include a few Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in their power structure, even if that is an exercise in symbolism. But the fact that the main communist party of India does not even have that symbolic layer points to a crisis in credibility. To defend this, the communist party cannot repeat its argument

that “formalist promotions do not help”. Even a symbolic presence is better than no presence of a Dalits or Adivasis in the party’s politburo.

If the Indian communists keep on hanging to communist leader Lenin’s very Euro-centered statement that “the intellectual leadership of the communist party comes from without”, they leave plenty of elbow room for communal forces to rule India and destroy its basic democratic fabric. Europe was and is a casteless class society. It does not have the scope to produce an Ambedkar there, only the scope to produce a Marx. India should definitely combine Marx and Ambedkar and work out an integral theory to annihilate caste and abolish class.

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