

Capitalism and Conjugated Oppression: Race, Caste, Tribe, Gender and Class in India

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The recent global protests for *Black Lives Matter*, have brought attention – for now at least – to racism and oppression of minorities as pressing issues to address everywhere. In this article, we argue that racism and oppression of minorities need to be understood as part of global histories of capitalism to which they are systemically linked; capitalism has expanded through social divisions. Over the last few years, our work has been devoted to showing the processes through which this has taken place in India; how capitalism has entrenched caste, tribe and gender difference (Shah and Lerche 2018; Lerche and Shah 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020).¹ Against the expectations of the modernisation project, neither economic development nor neoliberal reforms have led to the withering away of caste, ethnicity or gender as markers in labour oppression and exploitation. Instead, such ‘difference’ and ‘othering’ have been ‘modernised’ too.

Globally, in the words of Philippe Bourgois, class-based exploitation and ethnic discrimination ‘interact explosively’ and produce ‘an overwhelming experience of oppression that is more than the sum of its parts’. He labelled this ‘conjugated oppression’ (1988, 1989, 1995: 72). Here we explore how social oppression and exploitation along the lines of caste, tribe race, ethnicity, gender and class are indeed inextricably linked, as different sides of the same coin, and how such ‘conjugated’

oppression divides the labouring classes and serves the interests of capitalism; and we sketch the challenges for this to change.

Work and income data across the globe indicate a strong relationship between race, caste, ethnicity, gender etc. and class. In India, it is well documented that social oppression and exploitation are inextricably linked. The ‘general’ [higher] castes, dominate regular jobs, government service and high-end business and capital. Most of them have been able to avoid low-end informal and precarious casual labour jobs employment with no job security, sick cover nor social security. This, though, is how a high proportion of (especially) Dalits and Adivasis scrape a living.² Together with large groups of Muslims and sections of the OBC groups they are hard hit by the ‘graded inequalities’ in India (Thorat and Madheswaran 2018). They are historically disadvantaged and they suffer from discrimination in the labour market and in access to skill (see, for example, Thorat and Newman 2010, Deshpande 2011, Kannan 2018a). No wonder there is a huge pay gap between the general / higher castes and the rest, with Adivasis earning less than half of general castes, and Dalits not much more.³ Concerning gender, patriarchy in India has led to a very low female workforce participation ratio as especially caste women and Muslim women predominantly undertake unpaid social reproduction work within their

households. For women in paid work, the gender pay gap is significant and gender harassment is common.⁴

Elsewhere in the world, in place of caste and tribe it is ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ that structure oppression, along with gender, sexuality etc. In the US, labour market statistics show that on average, ‘Hispanic and Latino’ people and ‘Black and African Americans’ have worse jobs than ‘White’ populations, and they are much more likely to be unemployed. Unsurprisingly, they earn significantly less, too.⁵ The same patterns are found in the UK where ‘White British’ people are more likely than ‘Black’ people to be in good jobs. The ‘White British’ group is also less likely to be unemployed and their average disposable income is higher than that of other groups.⁶ The gender pay gap is significant, and women of all ethnic minorities are more likely than White British women not to work.⁷ It is well documented that these inequalities are based both on historical discrimination and related differences in qualifications, and on-going discrimination in access to work and pay (see e.g. Borowczyk-Martins et.al (2017) and Heath and Di Stasio (2019)). There are also major variations between the position of different ethnic minorities, for the same reasons.

These global patterns are no coincidence. Stuart Hall (1986), Anna Tsing (2009) and others have argued that the culturally specific character of the labour force is central to the way capitalism has grown. Race, gender, national status and other forms of difference are essential for the ‘differentiated forms of exploitation’ of capitalism (Hall 1986:24). Capitalism maintains, develops and refines such differences. Etienne Balibar (1991), amongst others, details how racist ideologies developed hand in hand with the genocidal oppression and exploitation of other parts of the world by European powers from the end of the 15th century. Others have shown how gender and social reproduction likewise are central to the processes of oppression and exploitation (e.g., Federici 2004, Farris 2015, Ferguson and McNally 2014). As David Camfield (2016) argues, class relations and relations of race/gender/sexuality are co-constitutive.⁸ Class based exploitation and social oppression along the lines of race/ethnicity/caste/gender/sexuality/place produce ‘extreme relations of oppression, inseparable from each other in capitalist accumulation’ (Lerche and Shah 2018: 5).

These processes are reliant on creating further social divisions between workers. For

example, Etienne Balibar shows how during the 19th century the French bourgeoisie divided the working class by singling out sections of it as ‘dangerous classes’, as an ‘object of fear’ that should not have the same rights as others, and how migrant workers nowadays have been placed in that position too, deprived of political and workplace rights. WEB du Bois (1998 [1935]) documents how, after the US civil war, capital and erstwhile slaveholders succeeded in uniting white workers with them to savagely and bloodily oppress black populations, and David Roediger outlines how, as part of the creation of a racialised workforce in the US in the 19th century, black labour was stigmatised as ‘ignorant’, ‘smelly’ and labelled an ‘inferior race’ (1991: 178).

In India, as we have argued (Shah and Lerche et al. 2018), the continued and changing social relations of oppression of Dalits, Adivasis and other social groups have been an integral part of the expansion of capitalism, through three interrelated processes. First, *inherited inequalities of power* led to their adverse incorporation into capitalism through processes controlled by dominant social groups and the state. Extreme historical disadvantage and powerlessness have for most Dalits and Adivasis translated into lives at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid in the modern economy. Meanwhile, the dominant players most often emerge from landed and higher caste groups who used their historical economic and political leverage in the capitalist economy (Shah and Lerche 2018: 17-19).

Second, Adivasis and Dalits have become the fulcrum of *super-exploited casual migrant labourers* in India (Shah and Lerche 2018: 19-24; 2020). Across the world, immigrant workers undertake the hardest, lowest paid hyper-precarious informalised jobs at the bottom of society, more often than not denied citizen rights and labour rights in the country where they work (see eg Ferguson and McNally 2014). In India, the around 100 million seasonal migrant labourers are predominantly internal migrants from the poorest and most exploited regions. Capital uses them to cheapen production by undercutting local labour power, thereby fragmenting and disciplining the overall labour force. From most Adivasi and Dalit rural households, men and a large proportion of women find themselves doing the worst, hardest and most insecure jobs, while being paid the least. Many poor OBCs and Muslims

also migrate. Adivasis and Dalits dominate in the brick kiln sector where working conditions are extreme, and are overrepresented amongst construction workers, harvest workers, and low-end jobs in manufacturing. Wage theft is common as is exploitation by middlemen. They are super-exploited: employers don’t even pay enough to cover the cost of theirs and their household’s long-time social reproduction and care. They must also rely on the meagre assets and income of family members back in the villages: seasonal labour migration involves the whole household. Akin to international migrants, they are stripped of most citizen rights where they work. They have no access to government services such as PDS, schools or housing, no voting rights, and no labour rights. As Covid19 has shown, they can be kicked out of work and lodgings with impunity and be treated like sub-humans by governments when expedient.

Third, *conjugated oppression* is part and parcel of this. Old practices of stigmatisation of Dalits, Adivasis and other minorities have lessened since Independence, reservations have enabled some to get good jobs, and anti-caste discrimination legislation have had some impact. But oppression and stigmatising have not gone away, they have transformed and been made to work in new ways, enabling the expansion of the exploitative social division of labour and power in the modern economy. Minorities are still discursively constructed as ‘dangerous classes’, stigmatised, and if need be violently oppressed. In central India, Adivasi villages have been burnt to the ground and women routinely raped, while ‘encounter killings’ are spreading to more states. Killings of Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims and pogroms against seasonal migrant workers occur with disturbing regularity. On a day-to-day level, they are compelled to endure caste and ethnically based slur, while sexual harassment and rape against women from these communities continue unabated (Shah and Lerche 2018: 24-29)

This enforcement of conjugated oppression by government, political parties and high caste employers, and also by relatively low caste informal workers across the country, is nothing new. However, in recent years it has taken a turn to the worse, along with the jailing of leading Dalit, Adivasi and human rights activists as ‘anti-nationals’ and ‘urban naxalites’. Such ongoing and extreme ‘othering’ of Dalits, Adivasis and activists enables the treatment of them as second-class

citizens and keeps them at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies.

Caste, ethnicity, race, and gender relations etc. are of course not the same. But what these social relations have in common is that they all play significant roles in the structuring of oppression and exploitation as capitalism makes use of existing social divisions for its own needs. Despite obvious differences across the world, a common trend is that capitalism has not led to the formation of a homogeneous working class. Instead, it has formed nationalist, racist and misogynistic alliances with the dominant mainly male, labouring groups – be they White English, White American, or OBC and GC Hindus – that these labouring groups enter in order to defend their ‘privileges’ against the ‘dangerous classes’. Such groups of labour are made to believe that it is in their interest to ‘kick downwards’ at the ‘othered’ social groups at the bottom, to defend what little extra they have. Though this stigmatisation between workers has a long history – even Marx warned against it, in relations to divisions in the English working class (Anderson 2010) – it is still rare to see labour organisations tackling head-on such divisions to ensure proper representation of the most oppressed and exploited groups within their decision making structures. The debate, discussion and organisation that has emerged around *Black Lives Matters* is a good moment for labour organisations, movements and activists to confront the oppression of minorities as part of the exploitation of labour.

Appendix: ‘Dangerous Classes’ Now and Then

The term ‘dangerous classes’ (*classes dangereuses*) played a central part in the bourgeois discourse of the labouring classes in mid-19th century France. As we have argued elsewhere, drawing on among others Balibar (1991), the new urban working class, consisting of poor immigrants from the countryside, were routinely discursively constructed as thieves, criminals, beggars, prostitutes, gamblers, vagrants etc., living in their own filth, in ‘breeding grounds’ for ‘evildoers of all sorts’, and as carriers of disease (Shah and Lerche (2018: 15);). They were dangerous as individuals, awakening an epistemological fear within the bourgeoisie, and were seen as an unruly, potentially dangerous mob (See also Chevalier (1981) [1958], Mullaney (1983), Scheu (2011)).

The discourse – as expressed for example by H. A. Frégier in 1840 - squarely blamed the dangerous classes themselves for their poverty and conditions, and argued that the only way out of the squalor was moral self-improvement. This, obviously, served to obscure the link between the emergence of the working class and its conditions, and the development of capitalism, and thus denied legitimacy to a political strategy focusing on upending such processes and relationships (Mullaney 1983).

Marx used the term ‘lumpenproletariat’ to distinguish between the proletariat proper and its politically reactionary fringes – which he characterised in ways so similar to the ‘dangerous classes’ category that in the first English translation of Capital Vol I in 1887 it was the latter term that was used (Merrifield 2019).

As global capitalism developed during the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, the bourgeois discourse changed. It incorporated into socially accepted society what was now seen as ‘the deserving’ sections of the working classes, who were encouraged to take part in the vilification of the ‘dangerous classes’ at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. As argued in the main text, this divide was structured along lines of racism, casteism, ethnicity, nationality/migration etc.

More recently the ‘dangerous classes’ and the ‘lumpenproletariat’ terms have been revived by writers on the left. They have flipped around their meaning, and now emphasise the potential of such classes to fight against oppression and exploitation and to pose an actual and progressive danger to the existing order. Franz Fanon (1963), the Black Panther Party and Amílcar Cabral argued, to varying degrees, that the racially oppressed lumpenproletariat were playing a politically progressive role (Merrifield 2019, Worsley 1972). As pointed out by Scheu (2011:129) Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitude’ versus ‘empire’ theorisation of modern capitalism takes this a step further as it uses the term ‘dangerous classes’ for what it sees as the very core of the new progressive classes, namely those ‘nomadic’ groups that ‘travel empty handed in conditions of extreme poverty’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 133). This chimes with the common post-structuralist view that those at ‘the margins’ of capitalist society, instead of the working class, are the real harbingers of change (see, eg, Esteva 1992). Guy Standing, from a different perspective, also argues that potentially the ‘precariat’ may become a new,

actually dangerous, class, although it isn’t there yet (Standing 2015).

What most of these diverse scholars grasped, and what has influenced our use of the term ‘dangerous classes’, is that groups that are ‘othered’, oppressed and exploited along the lines of race, caste etc., can indeed find strength to fight against such oppression; that this is a progressive struggle; and that the overcoming of divisions imposed along lines of race, caste etc. are central for a progressive development today. This means that while for us it is important to maintain that the ‘dangerous classes’ discourse is still used as a means of oppression, those classes it is directed against are indeed also politically dangerous for the powers-that-be.

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Endnotes

1. For the Hindi version of the volume Shah, Lerche et. al (2018), see references.
2. In 2017-18, only 13.8 of the group ‘Others’ (ie higher castes) were Casual Labourers whereas the percentage for Dalits and Adivasis were 41.2% and 31.1%. Among Muslims and OBCs, 26.4% and 22.9% were casual labourers (Government of India 2019: A-401-402, A-440).
3. In 2017-18, the average wage income of Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims, and OBCs were only, respectively, 48%, 57%, 66% and 67% of the average wage income of general caste people (Kannan 2019). Poverty among Adivasis and Dalits were 82% (2009-10), using the World Bank poverty line of (then) \$ 2 a day (Kannan 2018a: 35).
4. The female workforce participation ratio was only 24% in 2017-18. However, the official figures are disputed. Concerning the gender pay gap, the rural and urban casual women workers earned only 68%/60% of their male equivalents (in 2012). (Kannan 2018b: 12). Gender relations among Dalits and especially Adivasis are less hierarchical and women’s work participation ratio higher. On sexual harassment of casual women workers, see for example Parry (2014).
5. In 2018, while 41% of ‘Whites’ worked in ‘management, professional and related’ jobs,

only 31% of ‘Blacks and African American’ and 24% of ‘Hispanic and Latinos’ did so. Registered unemployment among ‘Black and African American’ and ‘American Indian and Alaskan Natives’ were nearly twice as high as among ‘Whites’ (6.5% and 6.6% against 3.5%); for ‘Hispanic and Latinos’ unemployment was 4.7 per cent. The average wages of ‘Black and African Americans’ were only three-quarters of those of ‘Whites’ and even less for the other minorities discussed here (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

6. In the UK, the ‘White British’ group is significantly better represented in top managerial positions than the ‘Black’ group (11% against 5%), while the opposite is the case for ‘Elementary’ jobs (10% of Whites against 16% of Blacks) (Gov.UK, n.d.). Disposable income of Bangladeshis is a whopping 44% less than that of ‘White British’ and the disposable income of Pakistanis and Black Africans is not much better (Corlett 2017).

7. The 2019 overall pay gap was 17.3%; among full time employees it was 8.9% (Office of National Statistics, n.d.) Female employment of all ethnic minorities is less than White British. This is especially pronounced for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis (female employment less than half of White British) (Corlett 2017).

8. David McNally (2015) suggests this is in fact inherent in Marx’s thinking as well.

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