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The Challenge of Identity Politics

Today, all over the world, identity politics has become an important feature of politics and political activities. Till the 1960s, the concept of identity politics did not even exist. It is from the 1980s that identity politics came into prominence.

BACKGROUND

The 1980s saw the advent of imperialist globalisation fuelled by global finance capital. The neo-liberal outlook and policies began to hold sway. The thrust for imperialist globalisation and the mobility of finance capital was also provided by the new scientific and technological innovations like information technology. This phase of world capitalism coincided with the decline and the setbacks to socialism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The retreat from socialism led to the weakening of the universalist goal of emancipation of the people from exploitation through the struggle to overcome the capitalist system which is the basis of exploitation.

The setbacks to socialism also saw the revival and the resurgence

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of ethnic identities and fratricidal conflicts. This erupted in a dramatic fashion in the Balkans, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

The advent of an aggressive finance driven capitalist globalisation and the weakening of socialism set the background for the rise of identity politics.

It is the emergence of ethnic identity politics and fratricidal conflicts which led to the break up of Yugoslavia and conflicts based on ethnic nationalism. The creation of Slovenia, Croatia, the wars in Bosnia and the disintegration of Yugoslavia into various new states presaged the global spread of identity politics. There were conflicts between different nationality groups in the former Soviet Union also. International finance capital and European capital saw the opportunity for the penetration of these markets and exacerbated the national antagonisms. The creation of a number of new states were accompanied by the establishment of market economies with neo-liberal regimes.

Globalised finance capital finds it convenient to deal with the people fragmented on the basis of multiple identities. It makes it easier to penetrate the market and take control. Consumerism and the market caters to all the disparate groups, but their fragmentation into innumerable identities prevents their coming together to challenge the exploitation of capital and its domination of the market.

The Capitalist State under imperialist globalisation is dealing with competing groups – who make claims for access to the social surplus and economic goods. Multiple but discrete (separate) groups is better for the ruling classes than a universal solidarity forged across communities and groups who resort to radical politics and demand a equality in distribution of the economic goods/surplus.

The phase of global finance driven capitalism and the technological changes brought about by information technology had its resultant impact on society. It is this period of 'late' capitalism that gave rise to post modernism. Post modernism poses as a post Marxist theory and provides the basis for identity politics.

WHAT IS POST MODERNISM?

Post modernism is a bourgeois philosophical outlook which arose as a result of the success of late 20th century capitalism and the retreat from socialism. It is antithetical to Marxism.

It arose out of a profound sense that the 'Enlightenment' project is dead or exhausted. The Enlightenment which began in Europe in the 18th century and became firmly established in the 19th century espoused universal values of individual freedom, progress and rationalism.

Post modernism questioned all the enlightenment values and rejected any philosophy or politics which was 'universal' and 'totalising'. Post modernism dismissed all 'totalising' theories as so called 'Meta-Narratives'. All grand narratives i.e. Meta narratives – liberalism, socialism or any universal theory – is rejected. All such movements based on the universal goal of emancipation, according to post modernism can only lead to new forms of repression and oppression. Post modernism does not recognise capitalism or socialism as a structure or system. It sees knowledge and power as mediated by language and there are different ways of seeing it. History therefore can be seen only in a context and relatively.

Post modernism only recognises a mosaic of identities, differences and conflicts. Hence what is possible is recognising the fragments of a particular identity. What is possible are particular struggles or autonomous social movements which are based on a fragmented politics of 'difference' and 'identity'.

Post modernism poses to be a radical social theory. But it is in reality not antithetical to capitalism. It is not an alternative to bourgeois theory and is utilised as a hostile counter theory to Marxism.

It is out of the post modern, 'post Marxist' philosophy that identity politics has emerged.

WHAT IS IDENTITY POLITICS?

Identity politics means individuals are defined by their identity based on race, ethnicity, gender, language or religion or whatever identity that the person perceives to be his identity. According to the theory of identity politics, a person may have multiple identities but it is the

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identity which he or she perceives to be the defining one that determines that person's identity. So a person may be male, a worker and a black. If he perceives his colour as the main identity, then that would be the identity by which he should be recognised. He is to be mobilised as a black person and not on the basis of his being a worker. According to identity politics, it is not the class that he belongs to which determines his identity. Identity politics promotes difference and separateness to stress one's distinct identity. People getting together and mobilising on the basis of a common identity, whether race, ethnicity, caste or religion, to put forth their demands or assert their rights of the State and society is termed identity politics.

Nation and class associated with the rise of capitalism were the basic categories which mattered from the 19th century onwards. Political parties and movements based on these factors were a major feature of politics. It is true that the people who were mobilised by such movements and politics was on the basis of identity of language, nationality or religion. However, in the struggle for nationhood or in the fight against national oppression, people from a linguistic nationality which encompasses different classes, communities and religions got together. It was not based on one exclusive identity. Even when religion became the basis for a nation-state like Pakistan, it subsumed within the religious community a number of different identities. What distinguishes the contemporary concept of identity politics is that it negates the concept of class and seeks to prevent class consciousness emerging by setting out a theory of fragmented identities.

Theorists of identity politics say that a particular oppression can be understood and experienced only by the people of that identity. Hence Others are excluded from joining the fight against that oppression. This helps to fragment the fight against all forms of oppression. If only those who experience racial oppression can fight racial oppression, it excludes the possibility of building a common movement with progressive whites and others such as the Civil Rights movement in the US in the 1960s.

For them class is just one type of identity. It rejects the concept of class exploitation by capitalism and the ruling class order. It does not recognise the basis of class exploitation under capitalism and the concept of a class divided society ruled by the ruling classes. Unlike

Marxism which sees exploitation as an objective phenomenon and the consciousness of exploitation as subjective depending on the consciousness of the individual, identity politics posits that oppression itself is a subjective feature dependent on the individual who experiences it.

By the criteria of identity politics the working class will be deconstructed as male and female, dalit and other caste identities and also by linguistic-nationality and ethnic origins. This would mean virtually the negation of the concept of a working class, or other class categories such as peasants, agricultural workers etc.

Identity politics therefore is suitable for conducting politics in a manner which leads to competitive or limited cooperation among limited groups to lay claims on the State for a share in the resources or for a change in their individual status. It does not pose any basic challenge to the system.

Identity politics is ideally suited for the bourgeois ruling classes and global finance capital. Fragmentation of identity is harnessed by the market. In fact in advanced capitalist societies, various life styles are celebrated and fashions and goods are designed to cater to them as part of the consumerist society.

In the case of less developed capitalist countries identity politics facilitates the penetration of global finance capital and their capture or control of the market. The 'difference' between identity groups does not affect the homogeneity of the market and its products.

By its nature, identity politics excludes and demarcates those of one identity from others. In fact its identity is established by its being different from the 'Other'. Based on race, religion, caste or gender, the Other has to be excluded and often pitted against.

Identity is established by denying other identities of the individual. A black worker is seen as a Black, his identity as a worker is disregarded. A women who is a worker is identified by her gender and not by the status of a worker.

Identity politics mobilises only the minorities within a society. A minority based on race, religion, ethnic community etc. Even women are broken into various sub-categories and are mobilised on the basis of their specific identities. The process of segmenting of identities goes on by giving it a theoretical basis.

Identity politics, at best extends only to having a coalition with

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various other identity groups who are also minorities. It does not envisage the organisation and movements of the majority of the people to involve them in any struggle to change the system.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF IDENTITY POLITICS

The logic of identity politics is to convert it into an adjunct of bourgeois politics. Wherever identity politics takes hold it divides the people into separate and disparate groups often in conflicting and competing terms.

In a bourgeois State it is true that various sections of people suffer from different types of social oppression. Identity politics seeks to mobilise such people on the basis of their perceived oppression. However, it does so in a manner of excluding others and by inculcating the consciousness that the common basis for exploitation or oppression does not exist and their own identity and perceived oppression is the only real reality.

Identity politics masks the fact that even if in some types of oppression based on race and gender are solved or reforms are brought in, it does not mean an end to exploitation as long as the capitalist order remains untouched. Identity politics refuses to recognise the class character of the State. It posits the State as neutral and autonomous.

Identity politics is typically carried out through NGOs, voluntary organisations and what is now fashionably called civil society. Beyond that, so-called autonomous social movements are encouraged. Many of these organisations are supported by the bourgeoisie, the State and western funded organisations. Such NGOs and voluntary organisations which are themselves operating as separate and fragmented units are ideal vehicles to take up the idea of separate identities.

It should be understood how identity politics fragments and divides the people. It is an intervention to negate class unity and acts as a barrier to building of the united movements of the people. It becomes an instrument of bourgeois politics to counter class based movements and politics.

INDIAN CONTEXT

Identity politics has permeated society in India too. In a country like India where there are vast diversities based on caste, religion, language, race and community and a range of social oppressions, identity politics finds fertile ground. Caste is one identity on the basis of which identity politics flourishes. As there is caste oppression and discrimination in society, those belonging to such communities and castes who suffer the oppression are sought to be mobilised on the basis of their identity and perceived oppression. Dalit groups, OBC movements which sprang up on the question of reservations etc indulge in competitive politics for reservation, allocation of resources, against discrimination and so on. However, such groups do not take forward the struggle to change the basic social structure and class exploitation nor are they interested in combining with other oppressed groups to build a united movement.

In India we find a large number of NGOs and voluntary organisations whose outlook is based on identity politics who are working among dalits, adivasis, women and minority groups.

The spread of identity politics and its influence is seen in various political parties and formations. A striking example is that of the Bahujan Samaj Party. The other example is of the many parties which are based on the appeal to the OBC community.

This type of identity politics is also not confined to dalit and backward class organisations alone. Other dominant caste and upper caste groups also resort to identity politics. Bourgeois parties are adept at utilising identity politics to mobilise support and enhance their electoral strength. In UP for instance, all the bourgeois parties like the BJP, SP and Congress hold caste and sub-caste conferences to garner support. They pander to identity politics and strengthen the process of caste fragmentation.

The fragmentation process which takes place can be seen in the competition and conflicts which develops within the sub-categories of the scheduled castes. Like the Mala-Madiga conflict in Andhra Pradesh. The rise of new identities also can be seen as in the case of the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

Religion: Religious identity is another basis for identity politics.

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Organising minority religious groups are the main mainstay for such identity politics.

As far as the majority community is concerned, their political mobilisation assumes the garb of nationalism but it is a form of identity politics too. In fact the BJP term 'cultural nationalism' is a cover for religious identity politics. The BJP in order to maintain its overall Hindutva platform has to try and coopt dalit and other identity groups in a pan Hindu platform.

Ethnic Identity and ethno-Nationalism: The North East is a good example of how new forms of ethnic identity politics have arisen since the 1980s. Consciousness of being part of a ethnic group and asserting their identity have risen steadily. Devoid of any broader platform except their narrow ethnic identity such politics have turned into conflict with the Other. Whether they are the Dimasa or the Naga or the Bodo or the Karbi, many of them are pitted against each other in fratricidal conflicts.

Identity politics is the basis for separatism too. The demand for a separate state or secession has risen in the North East in this process. In West Bengal the Gorkhaland agitation is based on the Nepali identity and it does not embrace any wider democratic platform. It is easy for identity politics to penetrate caste, tribal and minority groups who find in it the comfort and security of being part of a collective identity and see it as the only defence against class exploitation and social oppression that they experience.

Through identity politics and the political mobilisation based on it some petty bourgeois sections from within these communities are benefitted and get coopted into the system but the system which sustains the oppression will not end.

But as pointed out in the earlier section, the consequences of identity politics is to weaken and disrupt the common movement which is necessary to be built up to fight both class exploitation and social oppression.

PARTY'S STAND AND INTERVENTION

The CPI(M) stand is based on the recognition that there is both class exploitation and social oppression in society. Given the socio-economic formation in our country, class exploitation both capitalist and semi-feudal exists along with various forms of social oppression based on caste, race and gender. The ruling classes extract surplus through class exploitation and for the maintenance of their hegemony they utilise the various forms of social oppression. Hence the struggle against both forms of exploitation and oppression should be conducted simultaneously.

That is why the Party has stressed the importance of carrying on the class struggle while alongside taking the struggle against social oppression based on caste and other aggressive practices.

We must realise that after the ascendancy of global finance capital and the onset of imperialist globalisation, the ruling classes have promoted identity politics and movements in a big way. Such movements facilitate a section of the petty bourgeois in the oppressed sections to move up on the ladder of the power structure.

The ruling classes in India are not disturbed by the diversity of identity politics and the limited movements that they spawn. They seek to engage and give concessions to such identity politics. The obverse side of this is that identity politics disrupts the unity of the working class by preventing the broader mobilisation against the system; by diverting the attention of the people from the rampant inequalities and exploitation under the neo-liberal regime. They are also prevented from seeing the operations of global finance capital and big corporate capital and its instruments like the World Bank, IMF and the WTO and the big bourgeoisie domestically who have purveyed the pattern of political activities suitable for rule of capital.

On the politics of caste identity the Party had stated in the Political Resolution of the 19th Congress as follows:

'A serious challenge is today posed by the growing political mobilisation based on caste identities. More and more bourgeois parties are banking on caste identities and trying to build caste combinations. Such caste mobilisations pose serious problems for the Party and the Left movement which seeks to build a wider movement of oppressed sections of all

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communities and to build a Left democratic platform. The Party has to concretely take up the issues of livelihood and social oppression of the people of the various backward classes and the dalits so that by taking up a combination of class issues and social questions, the pernicious effects of caste fragmentation can be countered.'

This should be the approach of the Party in taking up the question of social oppression based on caste and integrating it with the class issues.

The Party has to take up social issues directly. The 18th Congress had called for the Party to identify with the aspirations of the socially oppressed sections. These have a democratic content. The oppression and gender discrimination suffered by women, the caste discrimination suffered by dalits and backward castes and the oppression suffered by tribal people and discrimination experienced by minorities all have to be taken up by the Party and fought.

We should recognise that identity politics gets a response from those communities and sectors who face social oppression and are marginalised in society. The question of the identity of tribal communities who are facing destruction of their habitat, cultures and way of life is a case in point. That is why the Party stressed in its 18th Congress the importance of taking up these social issues.

When such issues and the struggles connected with them are integrated with the class struggle and the wider platform of the democratic movement, it will help to counter the sectarian identity politics.

As far as the NGO sector is concerned, this has become a major instrument for purveying identity politics, disrupting the development of common movements by stressing autonomous social movements and depoliticising masses by their hostility to political parties including Left parties. Huge amounts of foreign funds come to finance the activities of NGOs working among tribals, women, dalits and other oppressed sections. These NGOs use identity politics to exclude the people they organise from the common movement and who seek to use the 'separate identity' to disrupt the unity of the working people.

As the 18th Congress document 'On Certain Policy Matters' points out:

'We must also counter the efforts of some NGOs who seek to foster separate identities based on caste, ethnicity and region and seek to keep certain sections away from common movements.'

There will be occasions when in the development of broad movements we will have to take up some of the issues which are championed by groups adhering to identity politics. For instance when we take up the cause of dalits and fight against caste oppression we may have to join hands with such groups in some places where they have mobilised people. This may apply to some other groups and organisations too. But we have to be vigilant not to allow their sectarian and divisive approach on to the common platform. We should not compromise our basic approach when we are engaged in a common platform. We should also educate our Party members and followers regarding our attitude to these groups and our demarcation from them.

The Party has to guard against two wrong trends in this context.

The first is a mechanical approach which only talks of a class approach and building a class based movement without taking into account the reality of the oppression and discrimination which specific groups of people are subjected to. In the trade union movement, there is a trend of emphasizing on taking up the economic issues only on the grounds of a class approach which leads to ignoring the special problems of discrimination experienced by workers of dalit/scheduled caste origin. For instance, the fact that dalit workers get lesser wages for doing the same work is not taken up. Without taking up the social oppression and discrimination of some sections of the working class, working class unity and class struggle cannot be strengthened.

The other trend is to fully subscribe to and tail behind the identity politics indulged in by some sections of the groups and communities subject to such oppression. In the name of approaching them and winning them over, we do not demarcate and combat their wrong politics. Nor do we make any efforts to inculcate among the people of these sections, our approach of building class unity overriding all caste and social barriers of all sections of the oppressed people.

If we set up separate platforms and organizations for such sections of people keeping in view their present state of consciousness, it is to be able to reach out to them and organize and mobilize them on their

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issues and through that bring them into the common movement. If our work with these masses is effective, they should be able to rise above their narrow identity to a wider consciousness and activity as part of the broader democratic and class movements.