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# Caste-based oppression and the class struggle



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# **Part 1:** The origins and development of caste division: The emergence and development of caste

## **a) Division of Labour and Caste**

The relationship between man and nature is expressed through labour process which constantly changes their interaction with nature. The subsequent development of instruments of labour, such as the hand or the use of stone, bronze, iron, etc, or the development of the productive forces, take place naturally and also through social interactions. Formation of social grouping takes place to force a corporation between individuals to satisfy particular need of the productive method –according to which emerges certain mode of social relations. Improvements of production constantly change these social relations. Rules of these social relations is only raised to the state of laws only much later in the development, partly

also to forge a unity to maintain the surplus production. Struggle over the control of surplus leads to a class society; however it is not an automatic and mechanical process.

With the advance of the production of a surplus, sophisticated societies flourished – the village system, out of which small cities grew (partly also due to external trade). But this does not automatically produce a hierarchical, class society. The social management of labour, and the production of a surplus, existed prior to class society (Semaq Beri, Hunter-gatherers in Malaysia). How the surplus produce of a society is controlled is altered by various factors, not just the pressure of the constant development of the productive forces, but also on the interactions between various social groups.

The social division of labour also emerges as a significant step forward in the increase of the productive power of society. This development should not be seen merely as an allocation of different jobs to different people in the production process in a hierarchical manner. The organisation of production requires that social labour is divided into tasks which can then be taken up by labourers who do not necessarily have to be organised hierarchically. The division of labour can have various degrees of complexity, and changes from society to society and period to period.

In ancient South Asia, production was organised through each labourer having clearly assigned tasks. This had several advantages for the self-sufficiency of the community. The reproduction of this arrangement, from an early stage, may have

produced a hereditary occupation of particular jobs and attained 'special skills'. When "fractional work" became the "life calling of one man", the "exclusive function of one person", the productive power of labour increased and was perfected, creating a tendency to make this into a hereditary position (Marx, Capital, Vol 1).

Although this was an advantage over hunter-gatherer productive forces, it also limited human ability. Marx explained that this process restrained the "human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies". (British Rule in India, New York Daily Tribune, 25 June 1853) Nevertheless, imprisoned by the historical period with the limitations imposed by the productive tools, various forms of society with various class relations emerged. Social relations expressed through social 'rules' to enable production can ossify the division of labour into hierarchy. The hereditary division of labourers into castes became part of the 'rule' and was incorporated into the religion of that period.

The special types of production – the way different groups in the hierarchy occupied different parts of the land while maintaining the land in common – and the maintenance of skills through inheritance, etc, contributed to the rigidity of the type of division of labour that emerged in South Asia. As Marx points out, the Asiatic system is one of the most ancient and has "survived the longest and most stubbornly". In other words, the process of change in the mode of production did

not get rid of some of the ancient relationships which have been constantly re-enforced through religion. The constant reappearance of a certain type of social relation also contributed towards the rigidity of Asiatic society. The relatively small size of these groups, in terms of the area they occupied and population sizes, should also be taken into consideration.

Social hierarchy in class society is determined by factors such as how the different labourers are connected to the production process, and who controls the surplus, etc. Hierarchy maintained at the expense of the whole of society, gradually leads to differences in social position, wealth, ownership of the land, etc. These 'self-developing' social states were transformed into "never changing natural destiny", "and thus brought about brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow". (Marx, British Rule in India, 1853)

Those at the bottom end in production were often pushed back in the hierarchical order. But this is also not a straightforward or simple process. With the emergence of class emerged the struggle between classes. This struggle always existed, and some mobility among different hierarchical orders and interaction between various groups of societies continues to exist. We cannot understand caste as a system that developed to maintain the purity of a particular 'race' or 'ethnicity'. The rigidity of the caste system should not be seen as 'absolute'.

That, in effect, would be ignoring the live processes and the struggle that has taken place among the lower-ranking castes – not just for upward mobility but also for complete appropriation of production, forming a new society, etc.

## **b) Later Developments**

Some form of hierarchical caste system has existed in almost all ancient societies. This ‘caste’ is different from that of the modern version of the Sathi system that we find in the Indian subcontinent. The main features – a rigid system maintained through heredity, now generally referred to as ‘caste’ – developed later[3], along with the development of religion in the subcontinent. This was around 2,000 years ago and is often believed to be part of the clashes between indigenous and new migrating populations.

In some ancient societies (not a general rule for all societies), religion played a role of moral code provider, with religious rules, the temple and priests the equivalent of today’s constitution, court and judges. This was modified and adjusted constantly. The development of rigid systems was re-enforced by religion, such as the Varna system (Manusmriti) which outlined duties and rules for each caste. The opposition of the oppressed castes was held back with the threat of retribution by a ‘higher power’. Priests who implemented these rules found themselves at the top of society. Outsiders – captured in battle, or from

other societies, ethnicity, colour, etc – were at the bottom. Even at this stage, inter-caste mobility was not as strict – (or the rules of caste boundaries and hereditary are not strictly maintained)-, although it was controlled by religious law. It was a highly patriarchal society, and women of all castes were considered as the low end of the social structure. In accordance with the constantly changing productive methods and social relations, caste hierarchy also underwent changes. This was cut across by the advent of new, fundamental challenges: outside invaders, new religions, the demand for the religious reformation, etc. It should be noted that discussion and research into the origin and development of the caste system is often shadowed by political and religious motives. This is due partly to the domination of the oppressing caste. The oppressing caste is also, predominantly, an oppressing class still occupying the leading positions in the state, education and all higher status professions in India. But this is beginning to change. Recent cutting-edge genetic research has also helped further scientific understanding, including by the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard (<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v461/n7263/abs/nature08365.html><http://www.broadinstitute.org/>). Their research revealed that the initial signs of the caste system emerged around 2,000 years ago. Most importantly, their research destroyed the myth that the exclusivity of castes has always been maintained by the religious elites. A certain level of rigidity began to settle down much later in history. This was also due to the



vicious Hindu revival movements which took place against other religions which further re-enforced the caste system. There were notable fight-backs against the Hindu religion. Buddhism has its origins in the struggle against oppressive Hindu practices, particularly the caste system. When the kingdom that used Buddhism as its ruling religion fell, Hinduism re-emerged with the new kingdom (around 300-400 CE) – with more vicious reaction against its enemies and the much more forceful implementation of religious codes (Brahmanims). The Saivite Bhakti movement (1,000-1,300 CE) began in Bengal and spread further south slowly. By 1,500 CE, all variations of Buddhism in India had been wiped out – often through massacres and the brutal enforcement of Saivite rules, the majority of which are still present in the continent. This also created Buddhist antagonism against Saivism in Sri Lanka. This later turned into antagonism against Tamils in general.

Similar interpretations of early Vedic literature are maintained to this day. Though many practices have gone through changes, a real challenge to feudal practice did not take place. In the west at the early stage of development of capitalism, Christianity went through reformation –adopting itself to modern capitalist relations. But this was not the case with other religions such as Hinduism which dominates the Indian sub-continent. Neo colonial relations and curtailing of development of industrialisations, democratic rights etc

helped towards not real challenges emerging against old feudal relations. However it will be wrong to argue that no change at all took place in social relations. Some scholars ignore this history and try to prove that the caste system of today has been 'preserved' from the old times, has always existed, and has always been as rigid. This is completely mistaken.

Shocks to the caste system also took place in the colonial period, particularly under British rule. Marx, and others who studied the development of capital and how society changes, predicted that India may get rid of its feudal relations with the introduction of industry under capitalism.

The British empire was indeed forced to introduce a certain amount of industry, and the improvement of the transport infrastructure, etc, to enable trade. The railway system did run through the feudal divides, initially. At the early stage of the British rule, the oppressed castes had their first opportunity, after centuries of oppression, to improve their conditions, even though they were forced into hard labour. For the first time, missionaries also found it easy to recruit, build churches and schools in areas where the oppressed castes lived. But this process was short-lived. The British rulers soon worked out that the existing Indian system could be exploited to their advantage.

The British empire was faced with increasing labour costs in the early 1800s. Slogans for equality emerged in the French revolution in 1789, echoed across the colonies and inspired the slave revolt in Saint Dominique (Haiti) in 1791. The struggle

to abolish slavery gathered momentum quickly. While losing a huge number of soldiers in the battle against France, the British empire faced increasing opposition at home. More than 150,000 workers participated in protests in England in 1795. Following this, the initial legislation against slavery came in 1807, and was beginning to be implemented from 1808, although it was not fully implemented until 1833.

During this time, in the far colonies of the empire, the British tried to consolidate their power. They finally brought the whole of Sri Lanka under their control in 1815, and soon started tea production in the hills – tea was an important commodity at that time. Faced with a labour shortage, and with the abolition of slavery preventing them from using slaves legally, they saw the caste system in India as the useful substitute. To this day we can see that the tea estate workers' lines – horrendous little tent-like holes lined up as houses – are divided along caste lines.

The British soon devised a special system (zamindar) to enable easy tax collection by local, often 'upper' caste landlords, leaving most oppressed landless castes to the mercy of the landowners. British rulers systematically applied these divides to the hard labour on the railways, etc. When their rule was challenged they even considered dividing territories along caste lines (Bengal).

The system they used in India and Sri Lanka had many common features but were not identical. British rule at an early stage did impact on the caste system in Sri Lanka. The oppressed castes had opportunities for education, to make money, and to

buy land, etc. The British used the 'high-caste' Tamils in their administration. These castes, while they maintained prestige, privilege and domination, were not usually directly involved in emerging businesses such as fishing, the selling of alcohol, etc. Those involved in emerging business had more income and were able to challenge for certain privileges. In addition, in 1832, the British brought in new rules banning all those who worked in administration from taking part in business.

In the south, the Govigama caste dominating the British administration began to lose out to the Karava caste economically. The Karava caste in the south (different from Karayar caste in the north and east) was involved in fishing traditionally and built their economic strength quickly (Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of Colonial Bourgeois in Sri Lanka*). But the rapid growth of capital only came after the tea trade started to dominate. By then the Karava caste and others had established some strength. This did push back the caste system. However, the effect was strikingly different in the Sinhala and Tamil communities. Buddhism, traditionally opposed the caste system and did not have strict religious codes preventing inter-caste marriage, etc. Soon, the developing capital domination had begun to dictate relations among Sinhalese. This was not the case among Hindu dominant Tamils. (This is another reason for the large religious conversions among Tamils – to Islam, Christianity and Buddhism.) Despite its wealth, the Karayar caste was discriminated against

by the dominant Vellalar caste. Unlike Karava/karayar caste the most oppressed sections, however, were not able to compete at all in the developing society. Getting a job in the British administration or engaging in any sort of business was not possible for them. Unlike in India, the most oppressed caste did not have population weight in Sri Lanka, constituting around 3% of the Tamil population. The dominant Vellalar caste constituted around 50% of the population – Karayar, 9%.

The connection between the Hindu revival and caste system can also be noted during the independence struggle in India that emerged against British rule. The initial opposition to British rule came at that time when sections of the 'upper' caste/class demanded privileges. The Hindu reform movement that emerged spearheaded the demand for independence. It was the religious opposition that provided the mass mobilisation capacity to the early leaders who opposed British rule. Aurobindo in India to Dharmapala in the south of Sri Lanka and Arumugam Pillai in the north, schooled by missionaries, adapted their own religion to oppose the British. Arumugam Pillai revived or re-enforced some Saivite traditions, particularly caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka. He famously said that the 'three Ps' were all born to be beaten: the Parai drum (in particular, when used by oppressed castes); pen (women); and the Panchama (the most oppressed caste). Pillai also vehemently opposed the admission of oppressed caste and women into schools. Christina missionaries' actions had various impact in the colonies, one positive aspect was that the education was made possible to

the most oppressed sections (caste and class) -often exclusively permitted for those who converted only. While mercenaries indirectly helped to mobilise the religious opposition of the oppressing caste against British rule, they created certain illusions and hope among some sections of most oppressed caste.

The most oppressed caste only had limited opportunities under the Srimavo Bandaranaya government when it undertook a process of major nationalisations. Transforming how small businesses are conducted, restored some dignity and provided a regular income to those at the lower end of society. For the first time, significant sections of the oppressed castes were able to free themselves from the caste ties, interact with government bodies, and receive a small income. Subsequent war and refugee movements, and the banning of certain caste practices by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in areas under their control, also had some impact in pushing back some caste practices later. However, voluntary inter-caste marriages never took place.

Though the caste system was pushed back at times it never went away. The fundamentals that maintained feudal relations have not been altered enough to defeat the caste system. The so-called developments with British rule were limited to facilitating imports, and no industrial development as such took place. While British rulers absorbed the resources of the colonies, they also acted as a barrier against the development of local capitalists and the emergence of industry. This phenomenon is explained by Leon Trotsky when he analysed the revolutions in

Russia. The law of combined and uneven development prevented the completeness of the democratic tasks in the colonial countries. Trotsky noted that, without a strong working-class movement emerging to defeat the rule of capital and install a planned economy, the imperialist grip on the resources of the colonies cannot be broken. Despite the varying degrees of development in the colonial (and later neo-colonial) countries, capitalism is incapable of completely freeing the workers, peasants and poor from the feudal relations. Instead, caste divisions continue to be used by the indigenous capitalists. Some land relations are now beginning to change in Sri Lanka as a layer of landless oppressed castes have been able to acquire land from the money sent back from workers in Europe. However, this is taking place on a small scale. Most of the oppressed castes have not been able to flee the country due to the terrible economic conditions they lived in. They continued to suffer during the near 30-year war and now face increasing caste oppression. Ever since the so-called 'end of war' in 2009, caste discrimination is on the increase. It is vital now that we have a serious discussion about how this rotten system can be defeated and what perspective and tactics masses should rally behind in order to do this.

## Part 2 : Caste-based oppression and the class struggle

The caste system in South Asia is one of the cruellest forms of oppression that exists today. Cold-blooded murder, sexual violence, untouchability, bonded slavery and other feudal forms of horrific discrimination are used against people from the most oppressed caste. Challenges against this oppression are faced with brutal violence, including being driven from traditional lands or the burning of whole villages.

More than half-a-billion people in India are subjected to discrimination based on their caste, which is determined by heredity. Among them are more than 200 million who are on the bottom of this exclusive hierarchical system, and who face the most severe forms of discrimination.

Caste oppression is also present in other parts of the world where south Asians live, including Britain. Caste oppression has travelled with the migrations of South Asian populations over time. From Malaysia to Europe, caste is maintained. At least half-a-million people of South Asian descent face caste-based discrimination in Britain.

In April 2013, parliament debated the issue of caste discrimination in Britain. True to their class interests the Con-



Dems tried to place obstacles in the way of outlawing caste discrimination in the workplace. The Commons and Lords played ping-pong with the issue. Eventually, the government was forced to amend the Equality Act 2010 by adding that caste is an 'aspect of race', although the Tories, working with the Hindu elite, have kicked the issue into the long grass. A final drafting of the legislation has been postponed to the summer of 2015 - after the general election.

Looking at the different ways opposition to the caste system emerged in India and Sri Lanka can help shine a light on what strategy we should adopt today. The 'left' has in general opposed all forms of caste discrimination. However, the leaders of some of the mass left organisations failed to develop adequate perspectives and strategy, eventually leaving the wider population who faced severe caste-based discrimination with no organisational weapon with which to fight back.

## Opposition to caste in India and Sri Lanka

Caste discrimination was present among the majority Sinhala population, among all religions, though not at the same level as among the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka, but was prominent wherever poverty existed. Those who are most oppressed by caste discrimination are also kept in less privileged economic conditions. In Sri Lanka they were also minorities in terms of population, within each ethnic group, and had various barriers to enter the struggle to fight back to improve their conditions. But the relative economic improvement which took place among the Karava (Sinhala) and Karayar (Tamil) castes due to their involvement in businesses such as fishing, the sale of alcohol, etc, created a certain confidence and enabled them to challenge the domination of the 'upper' Kovigama (Sinhala) or Vellalar (Tamil) castes. These oppressing castes/classes did not involve themselves in these businesses initially as they saw them as 'lower-caste activities'. This also contributed to the emergence of organised opposition to class oppression. The Karava caste dominated the leadership of the first political party to be formed in Sri Lanka (in 1935), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which immediately took on an anti-capitalist character opposing all sorts of oppression, including caste-based discrimination. The Karava or Karayar dominated the leaderships of almost all the resistance groups

to emerge in Sri Lanka - not just the LSSP, but also the JVP (People's Liberation Front, founded in 1965), the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, 1976) and even a section of the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party, 1951).

In Sri Lanka all the left parties and formations consistently opposed caste-based discrimination, at times leading the struggle of the oppressed castes. Whenever they organised on a class basis, they were able to pull the oppressed masses behind them. For this reason the left organisations had become the first port of call for the oppressed castes to fight back. The LSSP in particular played a formidable role in its early stages. However, its early success among the super-exploited workers in the tea plantations of the hill country, where there was massive opposition by the oppressed caste against class exploitation, led them to assume wrongly that this could be a generalised mood among Tamils. At that time, the Tamil elite from the North and East, where most Tamils lived, were almost exclusively from the most dominant Vellalar caste. The LSSP was correct in predicting that there would be a revolt of the most oppressed caste against Vellalar dominance. However, they were wrong in assuming that it would be an automatic process.

Caste-based frustration and mobilisation does not automatically travel towards a class-conscious position. A socialist and workers' party that understands caste and opposes all oppression and exploitation can help speed up this

understanding. The oppressed caste masses' frustration can find its expression in a number of ways, including through religion. At the same time, due to their extreme deprivation oppressed caste workers may not participate in the struggle, initially at least. Without a conscious intervention, making an appeal to the wider working class, mobilising their opposition is not possible. There was a need, therefore, to draw a parallel and link the caste and class anger in a mobilisation against the Tamil capitalist and petit-bourgeois elite. The LSSP failed to do this.

At the same time, class opposition can be built through seriously taking up the fight against caste/race/sex discrimination. A section of the Communist Party in Sri Lanka broke away and formed a Maoist-influenced pro-Beijing wing, establishing significant influence among the Tamil workers and poor in the north and in hill countries through its participation in the struggle of the oppressed caste. However, its failure to understand the developing national question, and the caste/class composition of the Tamil community, led to the situation where the Tamil elite was able to sideline the left. Though every armed Tamil group formally stood for 'socialism' - without a deep-going understanding of what that meant - they were not able to link up with existing left organisations, such as the LSSP, as the LSSP had by then abandoned a consistent struggle against capitalism. Indeed, later on the LSSP mistakenly formed a coalition with the capitalist and Sinhala nationalist parties. These were the

parties the radicalised Tamil youth saw as their enemy and oppressor. Oppressed caste Tamil youth who instinctively looked towards the left, flooded the ranks of the armed guerrilla organisations.

With the influence of Stalinism, maintaining an independent class position was abandoned by the communist parties in India - the Communist Party India, and the Communist Party India (Marxist) – that adopted a popular front policy of submerging themselves with capitalist parties. Their stagist approach – arguing that firstly, a stage of capitalist economic development was required before a second stage of socialist revolution (at some indefinite future time) was possible - led them to give in to ‘Hindu nationalism’. They gave up on internationalism. Unlike in Sri Lanka, the oppressed masses could not turn to a left party to express their anger.

These wrong ideas and approach cut these parties off from those suffering caste-based misery and led to the emergence of various experiments in resistance, including “low-caste” people changing their religion en masse, forming caste-based parties, etc. The Communist parties in India, despite having a mass base -were never able to wage a class opposition in such a way that would also express caste anger, due to their continuous collaboration with the oppressing caste/class. The limited land reforms made under Communist party rule in Bengal or

Kerala did impact on caste relations, but were limited in many ways as the majority of oppressed-caste people remained landless.

What took place in the late 1960s and in the 1970s in Sri Lanka, with the mass left parties abandoning the struggle against capitalism, had existed in India since post-independence. Those who were outside the Congress Party and communist parties began to play a significant role in mobilising the most oppressed. Like the leaders of the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s, these leaders - like Ambedkar and Periyar - were often forced to draw the conclusion that a fundamental change of the economic system was needed to fight the caste system. However, they often came into confrontation with the Communist parties. In the Stalinist sectarian tradition, the Communist parties dismissed other forms of struggle which emerged, and also operated without democratic discussions within and outside the party.

At the time of the initial emergence of caste-based groups, the Communist parties began to change but not to the extent of leading the struggle. They started to talk about 'equal rights', and making inequality 'punishable by law', etc - as in the CPI programme (1951), and the CPI-M programme (1969). They believed that the 'agrarian revolution' would remove the caste relations and, as a second stage, the development of industrialisation and the working class would see revolution emerge. They never explained how they hoped to achieve this

without the involvement of the working class or how this could be achieved in alliance with the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois forces, as their programme outlined.

Only after the caste-based parties were fully formed and became a challenge to the Communist parties in the 1980s and 1990s, did they begin to search for a new 'theory' to justify their failure to organise the oppressed caste. One of their publications even argued that "caste consciousness proves to be antithetical to class consciousness, and stymies the growth of proletarian class solidarity". But what existed was the antagonism against the left in general of the caste-based leaders who had begun to milk the system for their own benefit.

What emerged as the movement against the caste system became an opportunity for relatively wealthy leaders from each caste to establish their family's grip on their respective caste. Winning elections gave them political authority which they abused to control the economic affairs of the community, and through that they further enriched themselves. Money allocated for development projects had to go through the pockets of these individuals, and got slimmer and slimmer by the time it reached those in need - if it reached them at all. Within each caste based politics class discrimination dominates. Anger against this controlled within caste borders by the caste based leaders which only serve the system that maintain the caste discrimination.

Caste-based exclusivity in India continued to help the capitalist ruling elite to control the population. This exclusivity and protectionism created a type of 'caste industry', similar to that of race industry promoted by the ruling elite in Britain. This helped Indian capitalists to integrate the most oppressed sections within their system and to use this as a weapon against the growth of the left in general. These 'integrated' caste-based leaders and self-promoting intellectuals resist the development of any form of class unity between the castes. They have also developed a conscious attack on the left, in order to draw their caste supporters away from seeking a different form of struggle. This has become increasingly important to them as the corruption and political bankruptcy of these leaders have been more and more exposed.

The early movements of the most oppressed Dalit caste failed to achieve what they aimed for at the early stage. The initial trust and illusions created by some of the caste-based leaders now stand exposed, due to their corruption and submission to neo-liberal policies. Their future depends on how far they can maintain the exclusivity. Due to the fear and the friction that exist between the castes, the masses do not have any other alternative, at present, other than rallying behind their caste leaders. But this will not last for ever. There is already a thirst for a new alternative.



## Building the fight back

Marxists oppose all forms of oppression and understand that there is a connection between them. Divisions and the various complex relations in society, including forms of discrimination, are linked to the productive method that dominates.

Throughout history we have witnessed how change in the productive forces has changed social relations. Hence fighting to change the current capitalist system is key to getting rid of the various forms of discrimination that are maintained within it. However, fighting against oppression cannot wait until we get rid of the system as a whole. Instead, we must intervene in the fight against whatever repression emerges, and try to bring together these struggles, winning victories for those fighting oppression and advancing from there to end the very system that produces these menaces.

Despite the fact that there was once a mass Trotskyist force in Sri Lanka, and the conditions won by the workers were more far-reaching than their Indian counterparts, the communists in India were not able to debate the correct strategy and tactics in their parties. They did not have access, for example, to Leon Trotsky's analysis of the revolutions in Russia. Trotsky explained the law of combined and uneven development, which prevented the completion of the democratic tasks in the colonial countries. Even if some developments take place, old feudal relations are not necessarily challenged under continuing neo colonial relations. Trotsky noted that, without

a strong working-class movement emerging to defeat the rule of capital and install a planned economy, the imperialist grip on the resources of the colonies could not be broken. Despite the varying degrees of development in the colonial (later, neo-colonial) countries, capitalism is incapable of completely freeing the workers, peasants and poor from feudal relations. Caste divisions continue to be used by the 'indigenous' capitalists, foreign investors, etc.

What can break this status quo is the independent mass organisation of the working class. This is a vital lesson that the past experiences in Sri Lanka and India clearly point to. Any collaboration with organisations or formations which exploit/oppress in one form or other will only weaken mass opposition. Independent mass organisations led by the working class can mobilise movements that could emerge against all sorts of oppression. For example, if a strong working-class can be built in India today - bringing together the movements against corruption, women's oppression, nuclear plants, caste discrimination, the plundering of the hills, massacres of tribal peoples, the poverty of peasants imposed by the cutting of subsidies, etc - it could become a powerful force to break the system maintaining all this oppression.

Though legislation can give confidence and a certain protection to those who are victims of caste discrimination, a legal ban within the limitations of capitalism will not, in and of

itself, be enough to end the oppression once and for all. Child poverty, joblessness, inadequate housing, etc, are rife among South Asians living in Britain, a majority of whom are on low incomes. Without addressing these issues, real change cannot be achieved. Events to gain the confidence to fight back and participate in the struggle, and improvements in the economic conditions, are vital. Poverty does not directly result in a fight-back. The caste system in Britain can never be properly defeated without real changes taking place in South Asia.

Revolutionary land reform, investment in education and housing, decent jobs for all, a living wage, and free health and education services are important demands that need to be taken up by the movement to bring forward real changes in South Asia. Powerful trade unions in these countries need to intervene actively. They need to follow a zero-tolerance approach to caste discrimination among their members and in workplaces. Trade unions can play a big role in educating workers about caste discrimination and to take up the fight for decent wages for all. They should come forward to organise not just the urban workers, but also the unemployed rural poor. Special funds and resources should be allocated to bring together peasants and the urban workers. Combative trade union leadership is vital. Members should fight to remove leaders who are not preparing to fight back. Unions and activists, the most oppressed caste and their organisations, should come together to form a mass alternative party that will fight for the demands above and layout an uncompromising

strategy to win. Trade unions in India, organising millions of workers, are a major potential powerhouse, which has never been used properly to strike a blow at the heart of the establishment and start winning the rights of the oppressed masses. A mass struggle by the working class would reveal it as the most powerful social force and help those suffering caste oppression to understand how society can be changed in their favour.

Caste is a remnant of an old Asian feudal system, and can be defeated. The development of the capitalist system challenged many feudal relations. However capitalism also maintains some of this for its benefit - to divide and rule, particularly under neo colonial relations. Those who are serious about fighting the caste system need to link that struggle to the fight for the socialist transformation of society and the establishment of a democratic, socialist planned society.

## **Caste discrimination in Britain**

MPs from the three main parties often visit temples and mosques during election campaigns to persuade religious leaders to mobilise the vote for them. For these MPs 'communities' from different ethnic backgrounds represent blocks of votes. In reality these are population groups like any other, riven with division, especially due to class and caste oppression. We use the word 'community' here in the absence of a suitable alternative.

The majority of Hindu temples in Britain practise caste hierarchy in one form or other. The temples are big business ventures, controlled by the Hindu elite. Oppressive caste-based Hindu organisations work with these temples and with different capitalist parties very closely, one of the reasons why the capitalist and Hindu elites are united in preserving age-old feudal practices.

Black and Asian ‘representatives’, like David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham, north London, represent everything that capitalist politicians stand for. They use their links to the black community to create vote banks for the capitalist parties. This has been facilitated by the way that ethnic communities often live en bloc - partly to provide much-needed support networks, but largely due to the lack of investment and opportunity in housing, jobs and services. In these conditions old feudal, oppressive relations have been maintained in almost all South Asian communities. From child marriage, caste discrimination, domestic violence to ‘honour killings’, brutal forms of discrimination continue, and are indirectly or directly tolerated by so-called ‘community leaders’, who maintain their position through caste/tribal/clan/class/religious/political authority. While helping to preserve the rotten practices in their communities, these individuals often give legitimacy to austerity and other attacks on the wider working class through the capitalist parties they represent. This further deteriorates the relationships between working class people from different backgrounds.

Many of the previous Labour government-led initiatives actually alienated the most deprived sections. Wealthy businessmen and the religious elite in each ethnicity-based 'community' have been promoted as leaders, undemocratically appointed to be the voice of those they themselves often exploit and oppress. Through this method, often in the name of so-called 'multiculturalism', the capitalists and the ruling elite found a way to control these deprived communities effectively.

The Hindu Council UK, Hindu Forum Britain and other organisations controlled by oppressive caste/class Hindus, vehemently oppose the idea of caste being included in legislation, or that anything is done regarding caste discrimination. The Tory MP, Alok Sharma, who promotes privatisation, university tuition fees and austerity, and opposes gay rights, also works closely with the Hindu Council to oppose the illegalisation of caste discrimination. His long speech in parliament opposing caste legislation sounded like a Hindu Council statement. Right-wing MPs supported the argument that 'there is not enough evidence of caste discrimination' in the UK. They ignore the evidence published by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). There have even been murders related to mixed caste marriages in the past, and mixed couples who want to marry still receive death threats. Yet the government refuses to act, arguing that those who oppose caste discrimination are confusing class with caste.

Alok Sharma asked rhetorically whether the “government should legislate to protect people from every conceivable form of discrimination?” For him it is fair that class discrimination and other discriminations such as caste discrimination exist and the state doesn’t intervene. The Hindu Council says: “there are record levels of homeless people in the UK, who are analogous with the outcastes of Indian society”.

They argue that nothing is done against class discrimination so there should not be anything done against caste discrimination. The Hindu elite across South Asia frequently come out with such arguments to defend their social privileges.

These same leaders perpetrate severe class exploitation in the businesses they own. They argue this to defend their caste position and to continue their domination among people from the same ethnic background. They also defend ‘untouchability’ with similarly crude arguments, by claiming that “British menial workers seldom interact socially with those of the higher echelons”. They compare the use of gloves in hospitals and kitchen to the form of untouchability practiced by the caste system. They claim that Brahmins developed untouchability as protection from diseases.

They also say that ‘lies’ told by oppressed caste people cause the problem sometimes, citing the example of a worker who was sacked because he lied initially about his caste - and not because of his caste.-

Arjun Vakaria, who represented the Hindu Forum Britain in the Newsnight programme on 15 April 2013, accused the ('low caste') Dalit who gave an emotional account of his experience of 'lying'. The request to maintain 'respect' for 'priests' - like Christians respecting pastors and Muslims respecting Imams - is a particularly cunning argument because, in Hinduism, the very 'respect' for Brahmins (the priest caste) is what defines caste discrimination.

In sections of academia, in the name of 'post-colonial research', some wrongly generalise the brutality which took place during the colonial period as the fault of the whole western population, rather than as the means by which the colonial rulers kept control. Apparently to counter this, they 'reinvent' ancient ideologues and feudal practices. The attempt to 'purify' Hinduism and rediscovering Gandhi is part of this phenomenon. Some argue that the discussion on caste discrimination in Britain is a western Christian agenda. They cite the examples of some Christian organisations holding meetings with MPs to lobby for outlawing caste discrimination. Of course, not all those who oppose caste discrimination clearly see the need to oppose working-class exploitation, and some collaborate with right-wing politicians and religious organisations.

These ideas have gained strength in the last few decades, particularly in India following the introduction of the full 'free-market' economy in the 1990s. With a relative growth



in the economy, the Hindu establishment gained further strength, and along with it emerged the academic/intellectual justification of the Hindu nationalist base. Among other reasons this also helped in the significant victory for Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, and the significant growth of fascistic RSS. The section of Indian academia attached to this establishment constantly promotes these reactionary ideas.

The lack of a mass working class-based party in Britain and in India is decisive. It means workers and the most oppressed caste have no way to collectively express their anger and opposition and no way to organise their fightback. The absence of such a mass organisation, armed with a real understanding of caste oppression and how to fight it, has allowed reactionary ideas continue to have an echo, even among those who are oppressed and those who genuinely want to oppose caste discrimination.