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*Q: Your tour on behalf of the APCLC is obviously because of the urgency of the human rights situation in Andhra Pradesh. So we would like to know your assessment of the present human rights situation. How has it changed, become worse over the past decade or so?*

A: It has become quite bad, I think, not only in Andhra Pradesh, but all over the country. The capacity of the Indian State to be democratic has been decreasing very rapidly, not only in terms of direct police repression, but also culturally, ideologically. In every sense the Indian state is resorting to much more undemocratic means of dealing with the people and people's movements. So, I think the situation is deteriorating very rapidly and requires very urgent action by the Civil Liberties groups.

*Q: Do you think that there are special reasons for the erosion of legitimacy of the Indian State, of late?*

A: I do not know whether I would use the word legitimacy. But in a way I think there are special- not special- but there definitely are reasons for the degeneration of the Indian State into a very authoritarian regime. I think for the first two decades or so , the Indian State was in some kind of a position to at least create certain hopes among the people that their aspirations would be satisfied, if not immediately, then, at least in the future. The Indian State was also able to give some satisfaction to various sections of the elite that their internal conflicts could be resolved peacefully. I think in both these aspects there has been a deterioration of the situation. The elite, the various sections of the elite, the ruling classes are quarrelling very severely among themselves and also they are no longer able to create much hope among the people and the reason why this is happened is a very complex reason which is part of the economic and social politics followed by them and so on; but ultimate consequence is that there is a total failure of what the Indian State likes to call patriotism ; where as practically nobody in this country is patriotic in the sense in which the Indian State wants them to be patriotic, that is, nobody has any sense of identificational loyalty with the system. In that situation the state seems to have only one option-that is to become more repressive and more authoritarian.

*Q: Would you also say that the recent challenges – well not so recent, but they have become more articulate recently- coming from say, Punjab, Assam and Kashmir have also led to this increased authoritarianism?*

A: Well, the challenge is partly one of the manifestations of these situations and the crises I have described and the very fact that these manifestations in certain parts have been very militant and successful to some extent, has also led to the –I won't say making the State more authoritarian- but it has led to a situation where the State becomes more decisive. It has decided that it is no longer going to tolerate militant political dissent; of course, the particular forms which have been used by these movements may also be partly responsible. But I think, more than that, the very fact of a strong political dissent coming forward and succeeding in making itself felt, in making its impact, that, I think has contributed a lot.

*Q: This being the situation, can human rights activity in any part of the country be politically neutral, in other words how does one understand the violation of human rights in any particular situation like, for instance, the Assam Rifles in Manipur. One cannot just talk about certain kinds of violation without addressing the larger political issues in it?*

A: You see, human rights concept is political. But it is political in a very specific sense. It is political in the sense that the Human Rights movement or the Civil Liberties movement – whatever one wants to call it – takes a stand for the oppressed against the oppressors; for the citizens against the State; for the less equal against the more equal and so on. This is one level of politics. But there is a finer level of politics which involves programmes and strategies and tactics, goals and ideologies. In that sense it is better for the civil liberties movement not to be political. That is a distinction that we have always been making. So when we say that a human rights movement is politically neutral, what we are saying is it is neutral in the sense that the finer details of political strategies and ideologies – as far as they are concerned – we try to be neutral; we have to be neutral, otherwise we cannot have broad based human rights, civil liberties, democratic rights movement. But in the very basic sense of taking a stand for those who are suppressed, in that sense definitely the movement is political, it has to be political.

*Question: Would you say, then, that the Human Rights movement can be seen as a sort of catalyst to bring these other larger political issues into focus?*

Answer: That is perhaps a very ambitious way of putting it, but definitely I think the Human Rights Movement has been able to focus on the central question of oppression without allowing it or without letting it get obfuscated by finer political differences and details.

*Question: Now, I would like to move on to something else: Apart from your work of APCLC, you have also been writing on a variety of subjects, especially when the whole debate about Mandal came up, you wrote a very long and interesting article for the Economic and Political*

*Weekly. I want to ask you a few questions based on that. One thing is that one of the most common criticisms of the Mandal Commission is that it will empower the already powerful landed OBC's. This will result in further oppression of the Dalits and so on and so forth. Now how would you respond to this kind of a criticism?*

A: Firstly, I think, very basically, we should see caste oppression as a separate category, quite apart from the question of land, the question of economic relations and so on. So, for instance, say the landless poor in Bihar-where some of the backward castes have some sections who are landlords-definitely when it comes to fighting for land they will fight the landlords who belong to the backward castes. But in the context of caste, as a caste, as backward caste these people continue to be deprived, especially in the spheres of culture, education, employment and so on. To put it much more concretely, I would say that the fight of a landless labourer against a Kurmi landlord in Bihar would definitely be justified. One would not say he should not struggle because the man is a Kurmi, but if the same Kurmi landlord's son desires to become an IAS officer along with Brahmins and so on then it is a legitimate demand which has to be defended. This is the point which has, I think been completely ignored by many people who have forward this argument. Secondly it is not really true that among the backward castes all over the country there is a very sizeable landlord section. In Andhra practically there are very few backward caste landlords excepting in the North coastal districts. I think it is a peculiarity of Bihar and Eastern U.P which has been unnecessarily generalized to all over the country. It is in that part that there are a few Backward caste landlords. I don't know about Tamil Nadu , but definitely it is not true of Andhra and Karnataka, for example , with which I am a little familiar.

*Q: If it is not landlords, then , the argument runs, that, already for instance, in Tamil Nadu the reservations have been in force for so many decades and the children of OBC's- the first generation of the learners- are already in positions where they can get to be on their own and so on and so forth. And also today they say that the Dravidian parties have put the OBC's in leadership positions in the administration and so on, so why give them more leverage in the political system. How would you respond to this?*

A: In this context, I think one argument that has come forward is that those who have had reservations for one generation or two generations should be denied and so on. I think when this argument comes from the poor people among those communities, it is an honest argument. And secondly, barring a few communities-I am going to talk about the Andhra experience- barring a few of the backward communities, among the others, the reality today is that even the existing quota is not being filled. If you have five seats you find that only three or four people are able to come and occupy them. In that case the question of the

rich among the community depriving the poor does not arise. It arises, only when five seats are –I mean when ten people come and whom do you give it to-when it arises. So I would say that at the present historical juncture it is too hasty to take a stand that it should not be given to those who have already enjoyed it for one generation or two and secondly it becomes an honest argument only when it comes from the poor among these classes and when it comes from the forward classes.

*Q: I want to return to something which you said a little while ago, that caste oppression is something which has to be seen on its own. In this context I want to know how you see the OBC-Dalit contradiction. You have already answered this in some sense but I want you to respond to this in detail. There are some sections, for instance, especially the upper caste press in Tamil Nadu which insists on viewing it as a primary problem in the whole gamut of class-caste relations. So how would you relate this to the larger question of the caste system to the power of Brahmins, to Brahminism and so on?*

A: The thing is when one considers caste as a separate question what is very important is that those who are oppressed in the caste sense, in that sense, the Dalits- I would use it to include also the Backward castes, because all of them are also oppressed in the caste hierarchy – a unity of all those communities is very essential. Otherwise Brahminism in whatever form can not be fought and, therefore, to the extent that there is a contradiction between the Backward castes, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, I think the effort should be to see it, recognize it and try to remedy it and work for unity. And I think that the Dalit movement which earlier used to be Scheduled Caste movements are today realizing the necessity –at least in Andhra Pradesh the major Dalit organizations are making conscious efforts to reach out to the Backward castes. And though the Mandal Commission was basically concerned directly only about the Backward castes, it was the Dalit organizations, consisting almost exclusively of Scheduled castes, who are really took it up and made it a major issue in Andhra. And the Bahujan Samaj Party for example, apart from the totality of its political understanding which may have faults, but conceptually its idea that it should unite the Scheduled castes and the Backward castes against Brahminism and forward caste domination has been a positive development. In that same direction it should work.

And secondly, again talking of the Andhra experience, the contradiction between Backward castes and Scheduled Castes has not been very severe in Andhra. There the contradiction has been between the so called Sat Shudra Castes- That is between the Reddys and the Kammas, the dominant non-Brahmin forward castes and the Dalits. Once again, I think

the whole argument of the Backward Castes versus the Dalit being very important, is an unjustified extrapolation from Bihar and Eastern U.P. That is as far as I understand.

*Q: Now in Tamil Nadu, for instance, the recent political changes especially the rout of the DMK in the recent elections and so on has created two kinds of problems. One is there has been a revival of a very virulent kind of Brahminism. On the other hand there have also been responses like "The DK movement and the DMK never really represented a sizeable section of the OBC's and even the Dalits. They only cater to the elite among the so called Backward Castes and so on and so forth" Now in the context of this phenomenon how is it going to be easy to forge a unity among the Dalits and the Backward Castes?*

A: Actually, obviously you see I do not really know about what the DK did in Tamil Nadu in the past, but if that is true then what is required is not merely to expect the DK to complete its job but other new organizations and new forces can come up. Well, for example, here at least in Tamil Nadu you had genuine non-Brahmin movement in the form of DK. In Andhra we had a justice party which was not really even a genuine non-Brahmin movement. It was just an elite Reddy and Kamma organization consisting of Zamindars. So nobody today says that Justice Party must continue the struggle for unity and , in fact, new organizations have come up and they have come up from the Dalits-from the Scheduled castes side-other than even from the Backward Castes. It is a good thing. Whatever is the past, to say that because they have not completed the job, the job can not be completed is a ridiculous answer.

*Q: You had earlier noted that class struggle and caste struggle are co-terminus. I would like you to elaborate on this a little more in terms of concrete details?*

A: One of the major failures of Marxist understandings in the past has been that it has always regarded caste as part of the superstructure. I think only now people are understanding that historically caste has always been part of the base. It was a production relation. It has been very significantly a production relation. A very important ideological weapon- weapon of oppression, weapon of exploitation. In that sense especially when one goes back into Indian history, it is impossible to talk of class without talking of caste. And it is impossible to talk of caste without talking of class. Both would be equally wrong. Even today for example, if you take any person living in a village and in terms of Marxist concept of production relations, what are the means of production, the instruments of material life available to a person? Invariably one has to note which is the caste of the person. Otherwise you can not answer the question. If you are born as a Dhobi the instrument of production available to you is the Dhobi ghat, that is the tools of production available to you. If you

are born in a Barber's community the tools available to you are the Barber's knife and to acquire other tools you will have to put up a fight collectively or individually or try through reservations to get into college, get into a job. It has to be a fight. What is normally, naturally available is definitely linked to the caste. So even today caste continues to be – to a significant extent an economic relation, a production relation. So in that sense it is impossible to separate the two. And even if class is understood-as many people unfortunately do – in purely economical, monetary terms-rich, middle class, and poor-even in that sense of class there is a very strong correlation between-even in that vulgar sense of class-there is a very strong correlation between class and caste. And there are also many other dimensions. For example we talk of trying to create a consciousness of being workers, of being producers, those who produce wealth. Now the people themselves have the consciousness of being a Barber, a Dhobi, a Mala, a Madiga and so on. These are not contradictory. Because consciousness of being a barber is also, in its own way, consciousness of being a person who produces a certain service which contributes to social wealth and for a long time Marxists have been unnecessarily hesitant about using that consciousness of a Barber, of a Dhobi, of a Potter pr something else, using it to build a working class consciousness. I think it is very possible, though when it creates certain contradictions between those castes one has to consciously work against it. But still it is very much possible and after this rise of the Dalit Movement, which has been a non-Marxist movement to begin with, I think, we have realized these possibilities, that it is a very major, very easy way of mobilizing to create working class consciousness, whereas, if you talk abstractly of worker or producer, it becomes more difficult to organize people. I think there is a lot of potential here.

*Q: Also one significant strategy in anti-caste struggles has to be the ways we combat Brahminism. Now how do you see the changing roles of the Brahminism and Brahminism in our current socio-political system?*

A: I think I could link this to the first question you asked me and the first answer I gave. The increasingly authoritarian mode of functioning of the Indian state includes not only the police repression and military repression but also cultural authoritarianism, cultural reaction, cultural conservatism and I think Brahminism is becoming a very important weapon both as a social relation and as an ideology; it has become a very important weapon being used by the state. You can see it in the Jayalalitha phenomenon here; you can see it in the BJP and the kind of acceptance it is getting all over the country which ten years ago was not there. Ten years ago the BJP was not a really respectable party among the secular middle-class. Today it is a respectable party. So I think Brahminism as a social relation and



as an ideology has become very important. They are consciously spreading it through Doordarshan. For example, take the Chanakya serial – I have just seen a few episodes but it is so explicitly Brahminical and directly linked to the present concern for national unity or integrity; i.e , Brahminism as an ideological force and a social relation, the force for national unity, integrity against Punjab, against Kashmir, against Assam, against Naxalites, against LTTE, that is a very major phenomena. I think the struggle is therefore not a struggle against Brahmins or Brahminism, but part of a total struggle for democracy.

*Q: Now, One thing is that in Tamil Nadu, unlike, say in Maharashtra or even West Bengal, Brahmins have been notoriously unself-critical. They have not displayed any kind of criticism about their own role in the hierarchy of caste. So this being the case it has led to a certain kind of polarization in progressive Non-Brahmin movements. You have certain kinds of movements which say we cannot admit Brahmins of whatever opinion, political opinion or political shade, to belong to the party. Now do you see this kind of phenomenon anywhere else, in Andhra say, Brahmins who claim that they have decastified themselves. Where will they fit into these progressive movements?*

A: I think this debate has always been there. When you struggle against Brahminism does a Brahmin have a right to struggle against Brahminism?. Now since I myself am a Brahmin by birth, definitely I do believe that – otherwise I would have no social role for myself and definitely I think it is unfair also, to reject the right to fight against a culture, rarely because you are born in a particular caste. It is perpetuating caste in reverse. And secondly, elsewhere also this debate is there. But at least in Andhra Pradesh maybe because of the long Communist history it has not become a serious problem. Occasionally we do have these discussions. For example, the Dalit Maha Sabha meetings to begin with – sometime ago they would not allow anyone who is Brahmin by birth to speak at the meeting. But subsequently they have been allowing and asking many of our Civil liberties people who happen to be Brahmins by birth to address their meetings and we have been addressing. So I think here ultimately the main responsibility lies on the Brahmins, that is those Brahmins who would like to be democratic, those who would like to join the masses, they have to demonstrate that it is not merely a question of declaring that they have given up their caste. It has to be proved. It has to be accepted by other people. It is not enough if you declare. The way you deal with people, the way you work, the kind of political activity you indulge in, the stands you take, have to be such. It is the same thing anywhere. Say for example if a man has to be accepted by feminists, by women who are conscious of their rights, it is not enough if he declares that I also accept women as equals. He should be able to prove it in his behavior. So the burden of all these cases lies on all those who are heirs to historical, say,

positions and situations of dominance. The burden of proof is on them and they have to prove it.

*Q: One other related question. In Tamil Nadu, Ramasamy Periyar was instrumental in yoking the Gender and caste questions together. He very clearly saw that women were the bearers of tradition in most instances and that caste hierarchy is kept in place by women in the domestic space. Now how do you see the linking of the womens struggle and the caste question?*

A: The linking comes very naturally, especially because apart from sexual subordination, the subordination of womens labor to the needs of men is a veay major aspect. As far as the labor part of it goes there is no difference between that and the subordination of the labor of the Shudras and the Panchamas to the interests of the forward castes. The linking is conceptually quite easy. Socially, politically it has yet to become very significant, because the womens movement still has to go such deeper. Just as the Dalit movement the non-Brahmins movement, once stated with the upper caste non-Brahmins, and has become a significant movement among the Dalits. Similarly the women's movement as a womens movement must become a significant force among the poor and the laboring class of women. Till now – it is not meant as a criticism but as an historical evaluation – it is still confined to the middle-class. Definitely it is good. It is good in the sense that they are educated persons and they are becoming conscious and talking about it. But when it takes the next step and goes into the laboring classes and if the laboring women become conscious not only as laborers but also as women, they I think the unity will become mush more easy. So I think it is a historical step rather than a conceptual difficulty right now.

*Q: This new understanding about Caste and Gender, how do you see ti reflected in the left movement in Andhra Pradesh, for instance?*

A: As far as issues are concerned the left, especially I am talking about the CPML groups, have been responding quite well. The Dalit movement especially has a very good relation with the ML groups and ML groups with them. Though naturally as in all organizations there are many ego problems and other kinds of irrelevant dissonance. But conceptually, I am yet to come across any serious Marxist analysis by any CPML groups – theoretical analysis – which shows how to integrate the caste question or the gender question within the new democratic revolution they believe in. Issuewise they are responding. They are fighting. Some of the CPML groups have very good women's organizations for talking up the question of rape, not only rape by policemen, but rape by any man, as a major political issue. I think it is an incomplete political process as of now.



*Q: I want to move to something else. It seems to many of us that one of the most pressing issues of our times has to do with the nationalities question. And I would like your opinion on the nationalities question as it exists in India today, especially your opinion on the various militant groups as they are operating in Punjab, Assam and Kashmir and also how do you see the future of such struggles?*

A: My own opinion of the nationalities question has always been a little idiosyncratic. So I'll just explain it. I think among the various nationalities which populate this country – I would conceptually divide them into the mainstream nationalities and the peripheral nationalities. Today there is nationality consciousness both among the mainstream nationalities, and the peripheral nationalities. Peripheral nationalities, I would say, are those which have never been historically, socially, culturally part of India but have been included for various accidental reasons unconnected with their will or desire, like Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, even Kashmir. Now their struggles, I think are just struggles to undo what was artificially done; to go back to go out of the country. And one should give unconditional support to those movements, the Eastern Indian Tribal struggles as well as Kashmir. As far as the mainstream Andhra or Tamil or Kerala or Marathi, Hindi and so on, here I think one should be very conscious of the social, political nature of the nationality movements.

In Punjab, my own belief is that is a very reactionary, politically very reactionary movement. So there one has to be very clear about which political outlook in leading the nationalists movement. See, when we accept the nationalities question as a basic question when we accept the necessity – if it comes to that – of each nationality becoming separate, we are not delinking it from the political nature of the forces which are speaking in the name of that nationality. And one has to be very conscious about that when it comes to the mainstream nationalities. Whereas with the historically peripheral nationalities, I think that in Kashmir, among the Muslims of Kashmir, there is nobody who is not a separatist today and that is because they were artificially dragged into this country. They wanted to escape Pakistan's oppression and joined India, whereas their own desire was always for an independent Kashmir.

*Q: I want to discuss this whole thing of mainstream nationalities in some detail. Though, in some sense, the nationalities you mentioned like Andhras, Tamils, Punjabis, and so on are apart of a composite culture, till a hundred years ago, politically they have never been part of any greater Indian State, of any greater Indian nationalism; especially, Tamil Nadu which has always remained peripheral to all the empires that were formed in the Gangesic Plains. So maybe there are even within mainstream nationalities, mainstream in the sense they*

*belong to a composite culture, degrees of alienation from this greater India that we have today?*

A: That is correct. I am not denying the degrees of alienation but only questioning who is speaking in the name of that alienation. This is a very vital question because apart from culturally and socially having some amount of integration, there is also the question that during the British period and subsequently, these mainstream nationalities have participated in the domination of the country.

Tamils, Telugus, Marathis and Punjabis have all jointly – the upper sections of these nationalities – have all jointly ruled this country. They have collaborated with the Britishers in ruling this country together and they continue to rule this country together; in the Bureaucracy; among the Capitalists, among the land - lord class, in the military and so on. This is also a fact which has to be taken into account. Not only the past cultural homogeneity or integration. Keeping this in mind, I think that when someone says that we are speaking for Tamil nationality or Punjabi nationality or Andhra nationality one has to see whether it is N.T. Rama rao or somebody else. One cannot be supported. I do not think it should be supported, that is the argument.

*Q: coming back to Tamil Nadu. Here the question of Tamil nationality was first articulated by the Dravidian movement and later on taken over by DMK though it was used for very many opportunities purposes by the DMK. But today in Tamil Nadu, you have a lot of small groups operating with small magazines, and so on , and reaching out to students sometimes, sometimes to larger communities and which are addressing the question of self determination. For instance there is the Tamil Nadu unit of the MCPI which has formed a party on its own. So this being the case do you also see that there is some kind of contradiction emerging among the mainstream nationalities which will, maybe, in the future bring to the fore certain genuine progressive elements which will champion the cause of this nationalism?*

A: very concretely, I would say that a nationality movement even within these mainstream nationalities which takes the land question as a central question and related it to other land-related and other oppression – related social relations and structure, if such a movement comes forward, I do not know about the groups in Tamil Nadu, but if it is true then definitely it will enter into a contradiction with dominant mainstream nationalism. In which case it will be a good development.

*Q: How do you view the demand for separate Asom?*

A: they are not only demanding a separate Asom. In fact nobody can demand only a separate Asom. They can demand it only along with a certain social structure. Now the Asom movement always had a very heavy tenor of upper caste Hindu, anti-Muslim ideology. When the Asom movement came up in 1980, I think, I was the first one to criticize it, and we had a long discussion and debate in Andhra also, because MI groups are supporting it. I still feel that there is a strong Hindu communal, anti-Muslim content even in ULFA, from what one sees from a distance at least. Unless one goes there, one may not be able to fully know. But that is my feeling. That is I way said in these nationalities, one has to go deep into what they represent, what they are talking about, whom they represent. Otherwise we will be only doing injustice to the country. It is my feeling.

*Q: One final question. Apart from land issues and so on which are so central to this nationality struggles it also seems that it is necessary to put forth a sort of composite kind of identity. One cannot simply demand that in Khalistan only the Sikhs will have a say in tis political affairs or in Asom it will be only upper caste Hindus?*

A: It is the part of a total ideology for example in Khalistan unlike in Kashmir. For a long time – I do not know what Hizbul Mujahideen is saying today – but for a long time Kashmir nationalism has been secular. Even the name of the Muslim Conference was consciously, deliberately changed to National Conference by Shaik Abdullah. Whereas Khalistan movement, right now, has become quite communal so that is also part of one's evaluation; part of the things one takes into consideration while evaluating. And the kind of restrictions they are putting on women, for example, which unfortunately is coming up even in Kashmir, that they should not wear certain kinds of dress and so on. All this is a part of whether the movement is going to lead to a more democratic society or not. One has to take into consideration all this when one is evaluating politically.