

**Recent Popular Struggles In Andhra Pradesh:
Some Questions For Communist Theory And Practice**

**K. Balagopal
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Andhra Pradesh is one of the few States in India known for substantial presence of Communist-led movements. It shares this distinction with West Bengal, Kerala and Bihar. While the Parliamentary Communist parties are dominant in the first two States, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar are known for the strong extra-Parliamentary armed Communist movements.

The Communist parties, whether Parliamentary or armed, believe that it is their duty to take under their wing all movements for the redressal of popular grievances. They believe that they possess a theory that can help locate each popular grievance in its appropriate place in the social system, and thereby indicate its objective significance as distinct from (but subsuming) its subjective significance for the carriers of the grievance. And that they have the requisite organisational theory to build a movement for its' redressal that will make it part of the wider movement for social transformation i.e., the building of a society free of exploitation. Popular movements that do not accept the leadership of the Communists are looked upon by the Communists with suspicion, and are required to prove strictly that they are not agents of the local or imperialist exploiting classes.

Nobody can deny that it is good from the long term view of social transformation--and even the immediate requirement of mutual solidarity--that popular movements that take up diverse grievances coordinate themselves and evolve a common orientation. Since oppressive social groups and the institutional instruments that aid them do form a coherent and (often) mutually reinforcing totality, though they may not be as solid a bloc as radical analysis frequently makes them appear to be, it is necessary that struggles against oppression also coordinate themselves as best as they can. The best way may not necessarily be under the leadership of a single (and that too a highly centralised) party. But nevertheless, the very necessity adds strength and legitimacy to the Communist demand that all popular movements should merge with the political movement led by, and find their place within the strategic scheme adopted by them.

But any such demand must exhibit a matching reciprocity: a theoretical intelligence and practical innovativeness that will respond quickly to popular aspirations (indeed, recognise them even while they are dormant and awaken them) and will organise the

people in such a way that the satisfaction of the grievance is attempted as part of a wider transformative process, but at the same time the people who carry the grievance do not feel that their aspirations are being 'used' for a strategy whose goal is either too abstract and far off for them to identify with, or whose link with the professed goal is not self-evident.

That the Communist parties in India have lacked the practical innovativeness to attract a large variety of movements into their fold is a known fact. This is not peculiar to India, though it can perhaps be said that Indian Communists have exhibited, on the whole, less than normal innovativeness. Perhaps the highly centralised nature of the Bolshevik model that has become the norm of Communist organisation is itself a hindrance to innovativeness, while it may certainly have virtues of a military nature. But does the Communist movement have even the necessary theory, or at least the requisite capability for developing the necessary theory, for undertaking the task of attracting all the grievances of oppressed or exploited people in society to itself?

The prospects of the Communist movement in India await an answer to this question. A look at the recent popular movements and political trends that have surfaced in Andhra Pradesh, by-passing all the Communist formations from the mildest to the most violent, should indicate some answers.

What immediately strikes the eye is that ever since the birth of the Dalit movement in 1985, most of the social and political movements that have come forth in Andhra Pradesh have been outside the Communist fold. The two exceptions are the prisoners' struggle of 1994 which was initiated and led by the Naxalite (principally Peoples War) undertrials, and the mass campaign against armed landlord factions in Rayalaseema which was taken up by the CPI-ML¹ (Janashakthi). Being anti-State or anti-landlord struggles, there was no theoretical obstacle to the taking up of these causes. What is remarkable is that all the other movements that have come up in this period were initiated by parties/organisations/persons other than the Communists, and all of them were either wholly or partly of a nature other than anti-State, anti-landlord and anti-capitalist, though none of them was pro any of these oppressive forces. The question is whether this indicates merely lack of theoretical innovativeness and practical creativity, or some deeper lack.

None of these non-Communist struggles has actually adopted an anti-Communist stand, though many of them have been critical of Communist theory and practice. The

¹ Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist

Communists, for their part, have exhibited a range of responses to these movements: initial surprise that they did not know what was in the offing; followed by sometimes hostile and sometimes mild criticism of the movements' theory and practice and unsolicited advice about the same from the proclaimed vantage point of scientific social theory; not infrequent participation in solidarity struggles; and perpetual warning to beware of cooptation by the ruling classes. In addition, the Communists, and the Naxalites in particular, never tire of claiming credit for being the first in the State to legitimise radical questioning, and thereby paving the way for other forms of radical questioning and activity. The claim is not without substance, but it is understandably found oppressive by the later protest movements, for their legitimacy is simultaneously belittled with charges of deviation, collaboration and cooptation.

Let us try to look at the reason why these later protest movements erupted outside the Communist fold. The most talked about of these movements is the anti-arrack² struggle of rural women. Communist parties are parties of men, to a much greater extent than they are parties of the non-Dalit castes. For men, discussion about drink turns around the notions of habit/morality/ practicality of prohibition/power of the liquor business in the polity. Those who defend drinking describe it as an age-old personal habit; opposition to it is castigated as old-fashioned morality. The opposition is justified by their critics in the name of the popular expectation that Communists should oppose a culture of self-indulgence, whether ancient or otherwise. And in any case (the argument finally ends) banning drink is impractical, since it has not been successful anywhere in the world. The growing importance of liquor business and arrack contractors in Andhra Pradesh politics was quickly noted, condemned, and its social and political consequences analysed, by the CPI-ML parties as well as Marxist intellectuals (including myself). All the Communist parties have the rural labouring population as their main stay, and all Marxist intellectuals have the interests of the labouring (in particular the rural) population at heart, without consideration of caste or sex, but yet it took an independent upsurge of women from the very same rural classes to alter the terms of discussion and focus on the violence and deprivation that the male addiction to drink entails for the women and the children they rear.

The CPI and CPI (M) showed little interest in even opposing the growth of corruption and violence in the wake of the increasing importance of arrack business and arrack businessmen in the State's politics. The CPI because quite a few of its own leaders are arrack businessmen, and the CPI(M) because of its very close links with the Telugu

² Arrack is an alcoholic beverage distilled mainly from fermented palm sap, grain, fruit, molasses and sugarcane. Is considered a very strong form of liquor

Desam Party, which is much more than a mere electoral ally of the Parliamentary Left in the State, and which is as congenial a political habitat for liquor businessmen as the Congress. But the CPI-ML parties did take up a fight against what they understood as the plunder of the workers by the arrack contractors. The argument was that the contractor was robbing the poor worker and taking away much of his income by selling him drink. But the victim was often not very enthusiastic about the struggle, and therefore the struggle in which the male drink-addicted worker was seen as the victim was either forced into dormancy, or else it had to be taken up by terrorist means as the Peoples War did: individual armed militants would physically threaten or attack the arrack businessmen, burn down or blow up the shops, etc. It took a movement of the wives of these contrived victims to show who the true victims were. The worker presumably had a merry time getting drunk, even if that ate into his salary or wages and rendered him that much poorer. But it was the women at home who suffered the deprivation as well as the violence that the drunken worker inflicted upon them, as well as the added burden of putting up with the man's irresponsible attitude towards the management of the household. To his wife, he probably looked less like a victim and more like an accomplice of the liquor businessman in the violence and deprivation that she suffered.

The relevant question here is this: can a theoretical outlook which is accustomed to identifying the 'working class' with the totality of the (mostly male) workers who work outside the home, each of whom is taken to homogeneously represent his family, arrive at this view point without denting its theory? The CPI-ML parties, in a sense, have even less justification than the Parliamentary Communists for this blindness, for their mainstay has been the class of landless agricultural workers, many of whom are women, but then their Rytu Coolie Sanghams³ are practically all-male organisations for all that, and therefore their political sense has not been substantially affected by the fact that their mainstay is the class of landless labourers of whom (even if one counts only those who are visible in the fields) very many are women.

The way the CPI-ML parties perceived the problem had a curious consequence. Since it was the drink-addicted worker who was seen as the victim of the liquor business, and the appropriation of his income by the arrack businessman was seen as the issue to be fought, the parties first fought for lowering the price of arrack. This rather ridiculous demand made their intellectual sympathisers vaguely uncomfortable. But it angered the women a lot. For it often meant that the man drank more and troubled the women at home more with his violence and his drink-induced irresponsibility, even if he spent less in the aggregate upon drink. The parties realised the foolishness of their struggle after a couple

³ Farmers and labourers associations

of years, even if they did not comprehend the theoretical lack that had impeded their view. In consequence, the struggle for total prohibition that they later undertook was ineffective where it was nonviolent, and an affair of individual hit-and-run terror where it was effective. It took a self-conscious movement of the rural women to set the perspective right. The question is: could it have been otherwise? For that would have meant broadening the notion of working class to include the shadowy figures of the wage workers' family hiding behind them, and more importantly, accepting the existence of serious conflicts of interest within the family. The theoretical resistance to this is exemplified by the haste with which such a proposal calls up the discussion whether the conflict of interest between men and women within patriarchy is irreconcilable or merely a 'friendly' contradiction.

Two other movements may be examined here to make a few more observations. One is the organised Dalit movement, which is in fact the first of the recent popular movements that have bypassed the Communist parties. Individual Ambedkarites and small Ambedkarite groups have existed in the State for a long time, but it was the birth of the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha in 1985 that signalled the birth of a mass Dalit movement in the State. It began with a bang, inspiring thousands of Dalits into activism in the coastal Andhra districts. Today, the Dalit Mahasabha is split and somewhat demoralised, but Dalit activism and consciousness are alive as ever. And they remain by and large outside the Communist stream. Even among the CPI-ML parties, the Janashakthi alone has tried to incorporate the Dalit viewpoint to some extent in its world view and thereby create space for Dalit activism within its movement. But it is now facing many problems in effecting this incorporation.

Why is the Dalit movement outside the Communist stream? After all, it is not a movement based on urban middle class Dalits, but a mass movement of Dalits with a firm foothold in the segregated settlements of the rural untouchables. These Dalit masses are of the landless worker or (at best) poor peasant classes, which classes are the main support base of the Communists, in particular the CPI-ML parties. Nor has the Dalit movement in A.P adopted a hostile attitude towards the Backward Caste labourers who share the same class position as the Dalits (though the Backward Castes themselves may have exhibited misgivings about the organised self-assertion of the untouchables). And yet, the Dalit movement has remained at best an uncomfortable friend of even the CPI-ML parties, and at worst an unwelcome intruder suspected of consciously diverting the class struggles of the poor. Why is this so? And did it have to be so?

It was in the coastal Andhra districts that the mass Dalit movement of today started. Its rise has revealed the presence of a ferment--whose fundamentals were not absent in Telangana and Rayalaseema too--in those districts. It is evident now that a call for Dalit self-assertion based on a Dalit identity would have evoked response in those districts. It is a commonplace that it was not so evident to the Communist parties and to Marxist intellectuals (including myself) until the Karamchedu massacre took place and gave birth to a mass Dalit movement in whose formation a few perceptive Dalit intellectuals played a central role. But what is the reason? The CPI and CPI (M) have a significant presence in the coastal Andhra districts, but while much of their following is among the rural poor, it is mostly a passive 'support base' mobilised for voting at election time, and for exhibition at conference time. The local leadership of these parties, however, is mostly in the hands of the upper caste middle or rich farmers, whose sincerity in espousing the economic interests of the poor need not be doubted (though these days even this is doubted by the poor), but whose understanding or tolerance of Dalit self-assertion is extremely suspect. The CPI-ML parties have never had much mass base among the people in the coastal Andhra districts. Whatever the organisational reasons for this, their view of mass struggles certainly militated against it. Theirs is a framework of militant class struggle against feudal oppression and extreme economic exploitation. They could not expect to get a foothold in the coastal districts where feudal domination of the Telangana type is non-existent, and while poverty is a reality, there is little destitution. Work is available, and wages are not inconsiderable. A movement for social respect and dignity, and for upward mobility within the existing economy and polity, breaking the barriers of caste, would have been possible. Since the respect and dignity were denied, and the opportunities blocked, primarily on grounds of caste, the movement would have to be based on the Dalit identity and not the Communist notion of working class. This shift in perception was necessary before any popular movement of the oppressed masses could breakout in the coastal districts.

Would such a shift have been possible for the Communists, within Communist theory? A movement for self-respect and dignity, considered as a 'superstructural' though important question, and limited mainly to the question of untouchability, would have been possible, but it would have to be an adjunct to a 'basic' class movement. Considered by itself, it would not have been perceived as an issue which could constitute the principal focus of political struggle, though varying degrees of importance could be given to the 'superstructural' question of untouchability, even while it remained 'superstructural', depending on the sensitivity of the leadership. For it cannot be denied that Communists have led anti-untouchability struggles at various points of time. But there is a whole world's difference between taking up the issue of Dalit self-respect and dignity in the

form of only an anti-untouchability campaign, and that too as an adjunct to 'class struggle', and taking it up as a basic issue of social revolution or democratisation. The difference becomes even clearer when we move to the second aspect of the contemporary Dalit movement. That is, the struggle of Dalits to break the caste barriers for their upward mobility within the existing economy and polity. This does not by any means preclude a critical attitude towards the existing economic and political relations, but the engagement with this particular struggle, whether along with or independent of a struggle against the dominant economic and political systems, is a necessary and legitimate chapter in the struggle for social transformation. But here Communist theory meets with a basic difficulty. There is little room in that theory for any respect for the desire to move up in the Capitalist economy and the bourgeois-democratic political system. Such a desire is delegitimised as inherently individualist, because it is not possible for every one, and if it finds expression within the working class, it is dubbed a petty-bourgeois illusion or weakness. While it may be tolerated in an individual, a whole political movement that emphasises this goal (whether exclusively or along with other goals) would not be allowed transformative legitimacy, much less engendered by Communists. Communist theory treats the economy as the fundamental fact of social life, and the political system as its principal superstructural agent and protector. A movement that has as one of its main goals the desire of helping a section of the toiling masses (that is what the Dalits are, for the working class view point) to move up in these spheres is incurably reformist, illusory and petty-bourgeois. A cautious and tactful (or tactical) silence may be maintained towards such movements if the situation demands, for the Communist movement is not without its sense of realism in politics, but the theoretical tension remains. Nothing short of giving a 'basic' status to caste, at least on par with economic relations, can resolve the problem, and then the theoretical difficulty arises as to how one is to reconcile two 'basic' relations sitting side by side and interacting with each other, within the base-superstructure model of Communist theory. What this means is that there are fundamental theoretical reasons why the Communist movement could not have been the progenitor of the Dalit movement. Of course, this does not explain why the Communist leadership could not see this theoretical difficulty and try to come to terms with it. The reason for that is undoubtedly that much of the Communist leadership, and much more so the Marxist intelligentsia, till now has been from the upper or at least the 'Savarna'⁴ castes, and therefore has had no personal experience of humiliation of untouchability and the social handicap of being a Dalit.

The Distinction

⁴ Communities that belong to one of the four Varnas in the Hindu Varna system – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vyshyas and Sudras. Dalits and Scheduled Tribes do not belong to the Varna system and are considered Avarna

Class-in-itself and class-for-itself is familiar to Marxist theory. It is accepted that it is not sufficient that the working class is constituted objectively as a class (by the relations of production). It must feel, think and respond subjectively as a class. From 'they' it must become 'we'. What is the reason for making this distinction? The liberation of the working class from exploitation can only take place after the self-discovery of the working class. It must be preceded by the workers' discovery of their own identity, and the dignity, strength and value that proceed there-from.

The assertion of identities - of Dalits, tribals and women - should be seen to possess tremendous value from this point of view. Unfortunately, the Communists have in practice been more concerned about safeguarding the objective unity of the working class - to which the politics of caste, tribe and gender is seen as a hindrance - than in engendering a subjective sense of worth and dignity in the oppressed. Within the caste system and within patriarchal family relations, the toiling and oppressed people are not oppressed as 'workers' in the abstract, but as potters, dhobis or barbers, and as women. The rediscovery of their own worth and dignity takes place most naturally therefore through these identities.

The women's movement, the Dalit movement and the subsequent emergence of forums of individual toiling ('backward') communities, can be seen and appreciated from this angle. For the first time - and after many decades of honest and dedicated Communist organisation - each section of the oppressed people is discovering for itself what it is and what it can be. If Communist theory were not obsessed with the objective category of class under which all self-assertion of the oppressed must be instantly subsumed, and if it gave significance to the more important process of self-discovery of the oppressed, it would have learnt to see this assertion as a valuable advance. Instead, obsessed with the theoretical category of class, these assertions are seen to be dominated by a micro-elite of the petty-bourgeoisie of those communities, ready to be co-opted into ruling class politics. Of course, the question must be posed: will this assertion eventually lead to a politics of liberation for all people from all forms of oppression? Within Marxist theory, this question is rephrased as: will this assertion eventually lead to the formation of working class consciousness? It is this rephrasing that gives rise to the perpetual unease that afflicts Communists about the possibility of the cooptation of the 'elites' (such as they are) of these communities by the ruling classes. But if alternative modes of realisation of the goal of liberation from oppression can be conceived, the unease loses its seeming objectivity. And yet critiques of the possible limitations of this politics will be available.

Even in the advanced Capitalist countries, the differentiation wrought by modern day Capitalism within the working class, as well as the categories of gender and ethnicity that are not reducible to class, have made the primacy of class a questionable assumption. In Third World countries, and especially in India which has a well entrenched system of social stratification based upon caste, capitalism is unlikely to take as comprehensive a form as in the West, and therefore class is never likely to become even as important a mode of being as in the West.

Two final examples will serve to illustrate the points made above.

The Madiga⁵ movement for categorisation of SC reservations has thrown up a question equally for the Communists and the Dalit organisations. Neither of them could have perceived the genuine grievances of the Madigas even if they knew of the existence of the disparity. For that would mean dividing a seemingly united force (the rural landless labourers in the case of the Communists, and the Dalits in the case of the Dalit movement) whose united strength was the base from which an assault on the dominant structures was to be led. It therefore required the self-assertion of the Madigas to make the movement possible. But at the end, what one finds is not only that a genuine (sectional) demand has been realised, but that the 'section' in question is now more conscious, more assertive, and more aware of its own dignity and worth. This should actually be an asset for any transformative movement, but the notion of a single and solidly united force from which an assault upon the system is to be launched seems to be contradicted by this development.

It is true on the one hand, that total fragmentation of rebel movements into mutually hostile or indifferent efforts would dampen the overall transformative potential of popular movements. It is nobody's wish that it should be so. What seems to be required is 'localised' (both spatially and socially) movements that are specific enough to bring out the full potential and engender the full self-realisation of various oppressed groups, subsequently federated into a wider movement that can (in a free and democratic way) channel the aroused energies into a broad movement. This is quite different from the Leninist notion of a single vanguard party that will centre all knowledge in itself and direct (top down) the struggles of the suppressed masses. In such an effort, the suppressed masses will not be even half awakened to their potential. Even if such a party claims that it learns from the people, and even if it honestly tries to do so, the very strategy leaves a lack. If there can at all be a single 'party' which will lead a movement for social transformation, it can only be a federally structured organisation, whose free and equal

⁵ Dalit caste found mainly in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra

units will be the basic political units, centred on the self-directed struggles of various sections of the deprived. But as long as capture of (or smashing of) State power, and the solid unity of the social base that it requires, is the strategic driving force of party organisation, the federated structure that can fully release the energies of the people cannot be realised. This contradiction is insurmountable only to the extent that 'State power' is central to the task of social transformation. If its importance is downgraded from the present centrality it has in Marxist thought, and shown a lower but appropriate place, the contradiction can be overcome.

The final example is the recent tribal struggle in West Godavari district. All the Communist parties without exception have following among tribals in Andhra Pradesh. All of them have led some struggles for the benefit of the tribals. A large quantity of forest land is being enjoyed by the tribals of the State with Communist - especially Naxalite - help. And yet, the first major struggle against occupation of tribal land by non-tribals has come under a totally independent leadership. Indeed, if one leaves out the initial inspiration given by the voluntary organisation 'Shakthi', it may be said that the recent tribal struggle for strict implementation of the Land Transfer Regulation Act⁶ is a struggle of, for and by the tribals.

The tenacity of the struggle has taken all the Communist parties by surprise. And it has given rise to the question why the parties never succeeded in conducting an equally tenacious struggle for protecting tribal land from encroachment by non-tribals in their own tribal strongholds. Much of the Communist-led tribal struggle has been an anti-State struggle, aimed at asserting the right of cultivation in State-owned forest land. This is fully in keeping with Communist strategy centred on political struggle against the State. It was also perhaps felt by the Communists that taking up a struggle against non-tribal encroachers on a major scale would pit the tribals against the non-tribal poor, which would be prejudicial to the requirement of unity of the toiling classes. The independent tribal struggle has not been aimed at the non-tribal poor. The tribals are quite sympathetic towards them. Yet that has not precluded a determined struggle for restoration of land alienated from the tribals. The guarantees to the non-tribal poor would come at the end and not at the beginning, as with a strategy of unity of the toiling masses conceived as the solid base for an assault on the State.

But the practical upshot has been a tremendous self-assertion of the tribals; the growth of a sense of dignity and worth; the development of leaders from within the tribe, both

⁶ A Regulation intended to regulate the transfers of land in the Fifth Scheduled Areas of AP. It contains express provisions which state that tribal land cannot be alienated to non-tribals

among the men and women; a greater awareness of their own culture, language and history; and the growth of the confidence that they can do anything. Of course, this is not absent in Communist-led struggles of tribals for forest land, for the change in consciousness wrought by Communist-led struggles is a legend by itself. But the feeling that they are masters of their own destiny which a self-directed movement of the oppressed brings about is all that and something more. The gap that soon develops, in movements organised as part of a bigger political strategy, between the movement and the masses, puts a limit to the self-development of the masses. With the Naxalites, whose accent is on violent militancy, the gap develops even faster, for militancy is always the attribute of a minority.