

Conception of Caste in Marx* : A Reconstruction

B. R. Bapuji**

This paper makes an attempt at a reconstruction of conception of caste in Marx based on certain specific observations he made in several of his works including the last and important work *Capital*. It derives the conception of caste from a set of relevant economic categories such as use value, exchange value, mental labour, manual labour, labour power, etc. It explains as to how castes rest on a particular kind of division of labour.

The paper makes relevant observations with regard to the 'freedom' of lower castes to choose the occupation of their choice. It proposes a proletarian revolutionary program aimed at the elimination of caste system. Further, it tries to explain the political context that gave rise to non-proletarian movements that claim to be anti-caste in nature.

Keywords: Caste, Karl Marx, Proletarian revolutionary program, Non-proletarian movements.

* I am thankful to the editor and the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.

** Professor, University of Hyderabad, brbapuji@yahoo.com

Introduction

Non-Marxists (including Anti-Marxists), both in the academic and non-academic circles put forward two kinds of arguments against Marx's theory of society. The first kind of argument is that Marx's writings are relevant to the nineteenth century Europe only and they do not apply to the present day world including India. The second kind of argument is that Marx may or may not be relevant to the contemporary capitalist world; but he is totally irrelevant to India because of the deep rooted caste system. There is considerable number of Marxist works that convincingly demonstrate the continued relevance of Marx to the contemporary capitalism. However, there has been little or no attempt at explaining the relevance of Marx's conception of caste to the Indian situation.¹⁾

This paper, therefore, makes an attempt at a reconstruction of conception of caste in Marx based on certain specific observations he made in several of his works including the last and important work 'Capital'. It derives the conception of caste from a set of relevant economic categories such as use value, exchange value, mental labour, manual labour, labour power, etc. It explains as to how castes rest on a particular kind of division of labour.

1) This does not mean that we have ignored brilliant work done by great scholars like D.D. Kosambi (1956,1964), Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (1959) and some others. What we would like to emphasise here is that there has been little or no attention on what Marx had said specifically on caste. The anonymous Referee 2 has suggested to discuss the merits and limitations of previous Marxist studies on the Indian caste. While appreciating the suggestion, we would like to point out that the main aim of this paper is to reconstruct the conception of caste in Marx rather than reviewing earlier studies on caste from a Marxist perspective. Yet we may mention two important Marxist scholars who referred to Marx while discussing the caste system in India. R. S. Sharma and Irfan Habib. However we have not attempted to review their works on caste since they do not aim specifically at a reconstruction of conception of caste in Marx.

The paper makes relevant observations with regard to the freedom of lower castes to choose the occupation of their choice. It proposes a proletarian revolutionary program aimed at the elimination of caste system. Further, it tries to explain the political context that gave rise to non-proletarian movements that claim to be anti-caste in nature.

Marx's observations on 'Caste system'

Though there is no special treatise of Marx on caste, his observations on caste are consistent and are backed by sound conceptual categories.

Chronologically speaking, Marx, along with Engels, for the first time made observations on caste system in *The German Ideology* (1845-46). The last reference to caste was made in *Capital*, volume 1(1867).²⁾

While criticising the inconsistency of the Idealist conception of history in general and of German post-Hegelian philosophy in particular, Marx and Engels (1845-46: 63) observed that the crude form of the division of labour found among the Indians called forth the caste system in their state and religion. They criticised the idealist belief that the caste system produced the crude form of division of labour.³⁾ Thus, for Marx (1846: 158), the caste regime was also a particular division of labour.⁴⁾ In other words, “the division

2) We have not cited Marx's observations in the main text of the article since we thought it would occupy more space. However Referee 2 suggested direct quotations of Marx (and Engels) on Indian caste. Hence we have incorporated direct quotations in footnotes at appropriate places.

3) “When the crude form of the division of labour which is to be found among the Indians, and Egyptians calls forth the caste-system in their state and religion, the historian believes that the caste-system is the power which has produced this crude social form.” (*The German Ideology*, Moscow edition 176, p. 63).

4) “But was not the caste regime also a particular division of labour? Was not the regime of the corporations another division of labour? And is not the division of labour un-

of labour created castes” (Marx 1846-47: 114). However, that division of labour is ‘hereditary’ in nature (Marx 1853b: 497).⁵⁾

According to Marx (1867: 321), the tendency of earlier societies was to make trades hereditary either to ‘petrify’ them into castes (as in India) or to ‘ossify’ them into exclusive guilds (as in Egypt).⁶⁾ Marx (1846-47: 118) observes that the division of labour under the caste system was according to ‘fixed rules’. These rules were not ‘established’ by a legislator. He further observes that these rules were originally born of the conditions of material production and were raised to the status of laws only much later.⁷⁾ Legislation allocates labour as a hereditary privilege and consolidates it into a caste system (Marx 1859: 201).⁸⁾ The heredity of castes, according to Marx

der the system of manufacture, which in England begins about the middle of the seventeenth century and comes to an end in the last part of the eighteenth, also totally different from the division of labour in large-scale modern industry?” (*Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 158, Moscow 1966).

- 5) “the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes” (*The Future Results of British Rule in India*)
- 6) “Manufacture, in fact, produces the skill of the detail labourer, by reproducing, and systematically driving to an extreme within the workshop, the naturally developed differentiation of trades which it found ready to hand in society at large. On the other hand, the conversion of fractional work into the life-calling of one man, corresponds to the tendency shown by earlier societies, to make trades hereditary; either to petrify them into castes, or whenever definite historical conditions beget in the individual a tendency to vary in a manner incompatible with the nature of castes, to ossify them into guilds.” (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 321. Moscow edition 1974).
- 7) “Under the patriarchal system, under the caste system, under the feudal and corporative system, there was division of labor in the whole of society according to fixed rules. Were these rules established by a legislator? No. Originally born of the conditions of material production; they were raised to the status of laws only much later. In this way these different forms of the division of labour became so many bases of social organization.” (*Poverty of Philosophy*, Moscow edition, p. 118).
- 8) “Or, legislation may perpetuate land ownership in certain families, or allocate labour as a hereditary privilege, thus consolidating it into a caste system.” (*A contribution to*

(1867: 321), is ordained as a law of society only when a certain degree of development has been reached.⁹⁾

Marx (1853a: 492) observed that the caste distinctions ‘contaminated’ the Indian society by standing as ‘decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power’. Marx (1853b: 497) viewed that the ‘modern industry, resulting from the railway system will dissolve the hereditary division of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes’. However, Marx was not unaware that the railways introduced in India by the British capitalism were meant exclusively for extracting cheaply the cotton and other raw materials.

Some relevant conceptual categories

Before we proceed with the reconstruction of Marx’s conception of caste, let us explain the meanings of some economic categories that are relevant to our discussion.¹⁰⁾

the critique of Political Economy, Moscow edition 1970, p. 201)

9) “Castes and guilds arise from the action of the same natural law that regulates the differentiation of plants and animals into species and varieties, except that when a certain degree of development has been reached, the heredity of castes and exclusiveness of guilds are ordained as a law of society.” (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 321. Moscow edition 1974). Here it may be added that we do not have any evidence as to why and how did heredity of castes become a law of society. We are not able to find any text that can explain why a particular kind of division of labour had become hereditary only in India and not elsewhere. Hence, we have to leave it to speculation. Following Marx’s general theory of society, we may argue that the incipient ruling class of the post-Vedic period, in accordance with its class interests, must have ordained hereditary division of labour (castes) as a ‘law’. The Encyclopaedia Britannica observes that the caste system must have been a “self-serving invention by the system’s top-ranking priestly castes.”

10) The explanation of Marx’s economic categories given here is based on our earlier works (1993a, 1993b). The basis for our understanding is our reading of Marx’s

1. **Society** does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another.

2. **Labour** is a process in which human beings and nature participate and in which human beings of their own accord start, regulate and control the material reactions between themselves and nature.

3. **Division of Labour** refers to the coexistence of different kinds of labour which are represented in different kinds of products or rather commodities. In other words, division of labour is a situation wherein some people are engaged in one kind of labour while others in other kinds of labour.

4. **A commodity** is a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another; and an embodiment of human labour because of which it is exchanged with another commodity.

5. **Use value** is the utility of a commodity.

6. **Exchange value** is the total labour spent on the production of a commodity.

7. **Labour power** is the sum total of capacities of a person who uses either manual or mental abilities in order to perform a particular labour.

8. **Value of labour power** is the socially necessary labour time required for the production/reproduction of labour power. There are at least four elements that constitute the value of labour power. (i) physical maintenance of the labourer (food, shelter and clothing), (ii) the specific nature of the labour performed by the labourer (training, etc.), (iii) the cultural level (art, literature), and (iv) reproduction of the labourer (new generation of labourers).

9. **Mental labour** is performed largely by means of mental faculties (e.g. teaching, writing, etc.)

Capital. Referee 2 has suggested to indicate the relevant pages of Marx's work on "Clean Work vs. Unclean Work" which we mentioned in this section. It is necessary to clarify that Marx did not use these terms. We, however, used these terms based Marx's discussion of Division of Labour and by relating it to the Indian situation as depicted in Ghurye (1932) and Parry (1985). Also see foot note 15.

10. **Manual labour** is performed largely by means of physical capacities (e.g., weaving, tanning, etc.).

11. **Skilled labour** involves special training and can be acquired after a considerable period of practice. It may be either mental or manual.

12. **Unskilled labour** does not involve any special training and can be acquired within a short period of practice. It may be either mental or manual.

13. **Clean work** is largely free from dirt, impurity and pollution. (e.g., teaching). It may be mental or manual; skilled or unskilled.

14. **Unclean work** refers to a process of production or activity which requires dirty, impure and polluted raw materials and auxiliary materials and which results in dirt, impurity and pollution (e.g., disposal of dead bodies, leather work, scavenging, shaving and hair-cutting, washing of clothes, etc.). Unclean work is not mental and does not involve any skill in its real sense.

15. **Labourers** perform some labour or the other and produce surplus product, i.e. more than what they consume in the form of means of subsistence. (food, clothing, shelter, etc.).

16. **Non-labourers** are appropriators of surplus product newly created by labourers. These non-labourers, however, own/control means of production.

A reconstruction of concept of Caste in Marx

Based on Marx's observations on the caste system and linking those observations with other relevant conceptual categories, we may arrive at a reconstruction of concept of caste in Marx.

We would like to present our reconstruction by way of a figure (see the appended sheet) as well as by way of certain conceptual premises and propositions as follows.

1) Human individuals always engage in the production of social existence,

which may be physical, intellectual, material, non-material, concrete, abstract, etc.

2) The social existence encompasses various spheres of activity: economy (base) and politics, law, philosophy, art, religion, ideology, etc. (superstructure).

3) Production of social existence is carried out by means of social labour. The manner in which social labour is organised is called 'division of labour' and this originally (i.e., even before the emergence of exchange. For e.g. Primitive Indian communities) existed in the form of 'naturally developed differentiation of trades'/occupations.

4) Labour carried on in human society may be divided into such binaries as: Mental/Manual, Skilled/Unskilled, Supervisory/Non-supervisory, Clean/Unclean, Coercive/Non-coercive (involving physical force/violence), Base-related activities/Superstructure-related activities, Genuine/Faulty (e.g. war-related) social production of existence.

5) Different kinds of labour result in broadly two kinds of use value: physical and intellectual.

6) Different kinds of labour possess different levels of exchange value (i.e., value of labour power = income or means of subsistence) depending upon their specific nature. (e.g. mental, supervisory, skilled, clean kinds of labour have more exchange value than manual, non-supervisory, unskilled, unclean kinds of labour).

7) The historically known forms of division of labour are 'hereditary' (ordained by custom and law) and non-hereditary forms of division of labour.

8) The hereditary forms of division of labour gave rise to 'caste system' in societies like India, and 'exclusive guild system' in societies like Egypt while the non-hereditary forms of division of labour gave rise to non-caste systems and non-exclusive guild systems.¹¹⁾

9) The naturally developed differentiation of trades/ occupations, when a

certain degree of development has been reached, would petrify into ‘heredity of castes’.

10) The heredity of castes shackles individuals/generations of each particular caste to a particular kind or kinds of division of labour and thereby restricts to a particular marriage system (endogamy).¹²⁾

11) The social laws, that regulate a given division of labour in the form of caste system, are ordained by those social classes or groups which control material and mental means of production.¹³⁾

12.) The section/ sections of the population that perform a particular kind/kinds of labour which possess ‘higher’exchange value constitute ‘upper’

11) With reference to Egypt, Marx gives the following account in the first volume of *Capital* by way of a foot note. “The arts also have ... in Egypt reached the requisite degree of perfection. For it is the only country where artificer may not in any way meddle with the affairs of another class of citizens, but must follow that calling alone which by law is hereditary in their clan ... In other countries it is found that tradesmen divide their attention between too many objects. At one time they try agriculture, at another they take to commerce, at another they busy themselves with two or three occupations at once. In free countries, they mostly frequent the assemblies of the people ... In Egypt, on the contrary, even artificer is severely punished if he meddles with affairs of State, or carries on several trades at once. Thus there is nothing to disturb their application to their calling ... Moreover, since, they inherit from their forefathers numerous rules, they are eager to discover fresh advantages.” (pp. 321-22). For similar propositions, see Nesfield 1855 and Petrie 1923 (as cited in Ghurye 1932:114&142). Wilson (1855-75:370) dates this development from second century BC.

12) According to Nesfield (1855, as cited in Cox 1948: 97) ‘the restrictions of marriage imposed by rules of caste did not begin to exist until at least a thousand years after the Aryans had come into the country and by this time the Aryan blood had been absorbed beyond recovery into the indigenous’. Nesfield dates it from Manu, i.e., about 200 BC.

13) According to ‘Gautama Dharma Sutra’ (as cited in Ghurye 1932:76), it was the duty of the king to see that the laws are observed by all persons and punish them if they violate.

castes, while those who perform labour with 'low' exchange value constitute 'low' castes; and others constitute 'Intermediary' castes.¹⁴⁾

13) The distinction between clean work and unclean work (including the distinction between 'less unclean' work and 'more/ most unclean' work) gives rise to the phenomenon of 'untouchability'.¹⁵⁾

14) The Indian castes, based on the hereditary division of labour, have been the 'decisive impediments of Indian progress'.

15) Modern Industry, resulting from the railway system introduced by the British capitalism, weakened, if not dissolved, the caste system in India to some extent.

16) As a consequence of 'modern industry' (i.e., elements of capitalist mode of production), there are no social laws that ordain the population of various castes to strictly follow their hereditary occupations.

17) The caste system will be overthrown through a 'great social revolution' (i.e., radical transformation of existing unequal/hereditary division of labour).

Proletarian revolutionary program for dissolution of castes

While discussing the 'future results of British rule in India', Marx (1853b)

14) Margaret and James Stutley (1977) observe that 'crafts and occupations were graded according to the degree of skill involved or according to supply and demand.' These observations have to be examined in the light of Marx's concept of value of labour power.

15) Alberuni of A.D.1020 (as cited in Ghurye 1932: 313) states that 'chandalas' were occupied with dirty work like the cleansing of the villages and other services'. Ghurye (1932: 307) himself attributes 'untouchability' to 'the ideas of purity whether occupational or ceremonial'. Parry (1985) puts forward very interesting argument satirically thus: "the pure can only maintain their purity if there are impure castes to remove the pollution they inevitably incur by their involvement in the natural world".

hinted at the possibility of dissolution of castes due to modern industry resulting from the railway system. He, however, was aware of the fact that the introduction of railways was subject to the interests of the British bourgeoisie. Yet, Marx thought that Indians would not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered by the Bourgeoisie unless and until proletarian revolution takes place in Britain; or unless and until Indians themselves throw off the colonial yoke altogether. He concluded that ‘great social revolution’ and ‘common control’ of the modern industry by the people would lead to ‘human progress’.

It is obvious that India has neither witnessed any social revolution nor gained ‘common control’ of the modern industry as yet. However, Marx’s critique of political economy (*Capital*) along with his other writings provides us with a proletarian revolutionary program for dissolution of castes.

Since castes came into existence due to the crude and hereditary form of division of labour, castes will be dissolved only when such a division of labour is radically transformed. True, that hereditary division of labour does not exist today in its classical form (as ordained by ‘Manu Smriti’ etc.). Even the semi-feudal and semi-capitalist constitution of India does not allow ‘untouchability’ in principle and provides some legal protection for the scheduled castes/depressed classes/dalit castes. There has been some evidence of ‘occupational diversification’ or ‘moving away from traditional occupations’. Yet, there are ‘significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation’ (Dube 1996: 2-3, Panini 1996: 31). The members of the lower castes, especially former untouchables, find it difficult to move away from their traditional occupations (Karath 1996: 91). Hence, all the lower castes are graded very low. For example, the first and foremost criterion for grading certain lower castes is, as Zarina Bhatti observed in the case of non-Ashraf castes, the degree of impurity or pollution implicit in the nature of their occupation. Zarina Bhatti’s (1996: 250) observations, on some lower castes among Kausali Muslims, are totally applicable to all the occupations

which are at the lowest rungs in the caste hierarchy. As Zarina rightly analysed, “Things are not only impure or pure, but some things are more impure than others. In the course of practising their traditional occupation, castes which habitually handle very impure things are lower in status than those which handle things which are not so impure”(e.g., occupations associated with human secretions, dead animals, animals eating filth (pigs), etc.).

Hence, the proletarian revolutionary program should and would include the radical transformation of existing exploitative and unequal division of labour which imposes ‘unclean’ occupations on some sections of the population either hereditarily or non-hereditarily.

The proletarian revolutionary program consists of the following steps that ultimately lead to the dissolution of castes by transforming radically the existing unequal division of labour.¹⁶⁾

(1) Overthrowing the existing semi-feudal and semi-capitalist (i.e., exploitative) state power.

(2) Compelling the hitherto non-labouring population (i.e., the class of appropriators of surplus product) to perform some labour or the other.

(3) Transforming the existing division of labour in such a manner that each person (male or female irrespective of their caste origins in the past society) performs both mental and manual labour, skilled and unskilled labour, clean and unclean work, and less unclean work and more unclean work.

(4) Involving the entire male population too in all the hitherto-so-called female work both at home and outside.

16) The following steps have been formulated by Ranganayakamma (1999) in chapter 9 of part 2 in volume 3 of *An Introduction to Marx's Capital*.

The present political vacuum

A proletarian revolutionary programme can be implemented only by the political organisations of the proletariat. But, the communist organisations in India which claim themselves to be the vanguard of the working classes do not hold Marx's conception of caste. Nor do they have a programme that aims at a radical transformation of existing division of labour due to which caste distinctions stand as impediments to the progress of Indian working classes. In spite of seventy years of organisational experience, in spite of unimaginable sacrifices of thousands of cadres and in spite of political sympathy of millions of working masses, the communist organisations could not evolve a comprehensive revolutionary programme due to lack of acquaintance with Marx's critique of political economy. This may sound 'academic arrogance' or 'petty-bourgeois intellectual arrogance'. Yet, this is a glaring fact of life.¹⁷⁾

The present state of communist organisations reminds us of Engels' (1874: 170) advice to the leaders of the German working class movement about 130 years ago. 'This demands redoubled efforts in every field of struggle and agitation. In particular, it will be the duty of the leaders to gain an ever *clearer insight into all theoretical questions*, to free themselves more and more from the influence of traditional phrases inherited from the old world outlook and constantly to keep in mind that socialism, since it has become a science, demands that it *be pursued as a science*, that is, *that it be studied*' (emphasis added).¹⁸⁾

17) This observation is based on our reading of various published documents (mainly party programs) of different Communist organisations in India.

18) Referee 1 felt the need for some more concrete suggestions, apart from Engels' advice, considering the Indian political situation. It may, however, be noted that the scope of this article does not permit us to discuss all those aspects here. It requires altogether a separate attempt. One can see such an attempt in Ranganayakamma (2000)

The lack of acquaintance with Marx's conception of caste and the absence of a proletarian revolutionary programme among the so-called communist organisations created a political vacuum, especially with reference to the 'caste question'. Owing to this situation, many caste-based parties, groups, lobbies and pressure groups have come into existence. Similarly, some cadres of some of the 'revolutionary' communist (Naxalite) groups also joined the so-called 'dalit movement'. Besides Bahujan Samajvadi Party (BSP), and Samajvadi Party (SP) in North India,¹⁹ we have in Andhra Pradesh many tiny 'dalit' groups such as 'Maala Mahaanaadu' (representing a particular section of the Scheduled Castes), 'Maadiga Dandooraa' (representing another particular section of the SCs), Satyashoodhak Samaaj (a small group of Other Backward Class intellectuals), and Bahujan Republican Party (a breakaway group of BSP). However, none of these 'dalit' groups could not fill the political vacuum. They do not propose any programme for a radical transformation of the existing division of labour leading to the dissolution of castes. They do not even include bourgeois-democratic demands like "Land to the Tiller!" and "Confiscate the imperialist capital". They are obsessed with either forming at least a coalition government even with so-called Brahminical/Manuvaad parties, or win few assembly or parliament seats, or grab more educational/employment opportunities than the other allied castes

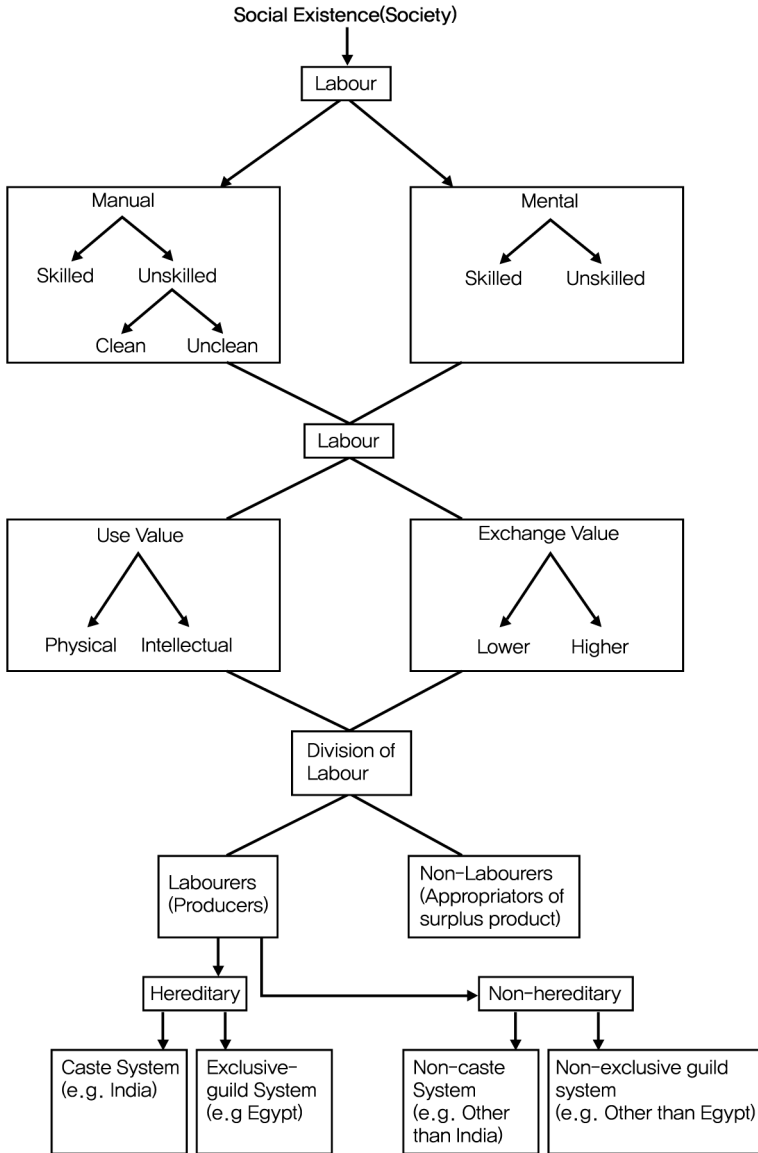
in her critical analysis of Ambedkar who is well known for his work against caste system/discrimination in India.

19) Referee 1 has made an observation that SP is a party of Shudras and not of Dalits. In our view it is merely an outward appearance since SP originally rallied the support of Dalits along with the so-called Shudra castes, more particularly, OBCs (Other Backward Classes). We may further make an observation that BSP, though originally declared itself as the representative of both OBCs (Bahujans) and Dalits, it did not exclude the so-called upper castes in electoral politics. Furthermore, in our view, both SP and BSP are representatives of the exploiting classes in India, while articulating the bourgeois democratic demands of the lower castes now and then for their political survival.

and so on. They are, however, unanimous in declaring in astounding neo-radical terms that Marx is irrelevant (or inadequate) to India and Marxism has 'failed' to offer a solution to the 'problem of caste'. Hence, in this political context, it is all the more important and urgent for us to attempt at a reconstruction of Marx's conception of caste.

(Received 26 September 2009,
Revised 1 October 2009, Accepted 15 October 2009)

Caste as a hereditary form of division of Labour



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□ 국문초록

마르크스 카스트 개념의 재구성

B. R. 바푸지

본 논문은 마르크스가 자신의 후기저작과 『자본』과 같은 주요 저작에서 행한 특정한 관찰에 기대어 ‘카스트’ 개념의 재구성을 목적으로 한다. 본 논문은 카스트 개념을 사용가치, 교환가치, 정신노동, 육체노동, 노동력 등과 같은 경제 관련 범주들의 틀 속에서 도출하였다. 이러한 논의를 통해서 본 논문은 카스트 개념이 어떻게 노동의 특정한 분할에 근거해있는지를 설명한다. 본 논문에서 고찰하는 것은 어떻게 더 낮은 카스트 계급의 직업을 선택 하는 ‘자유’가 대두되었는가를 밝히고 있다. 본 논문은 카스트제도 폐지를 목표하는 혁명적 프롤레타리아 프로그램을 주장하고 있다. 더 나아가, 본 논문은 본질적으로 반-카스트를 주장하는 비-프롤레타리아 운동의 부상(rise)을 정치적 맥락에서 해명했다.

주요 용어: 카스트, 마르크스, 혁명적 프롤레타리아 프로그램, 비-프롤레타리아 운동.