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Class in India*

In his speech on the 'tryst with destiny' delivered on 14 August 1947 with which the last essay began, Jawaharlal Nehru talked not just about freedom from British rule, but also about his grand vision of independent India.f Nehru was particularly determined to remove the barriers of class stratification and their far-reaching effects on inequality and deprivation in economic, political and social spheres. It was a thrilling image that could rival Alfred Tennyson's eloquence: ᵛFor I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see, / Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.' It was good for free India to be told, at the defining moment of its birth, about the possibility of ʷall the wonder that would be'.[1]

Nehru's vision was not fulfilled during his own lifetime. There is nothing surprising in that, since the vision was ambitious. What is, however, more distressing is the slowness of our progress in the direction to which Jawaharlal Nehru so firmly pointed. But that is not all. There is disturbing evidence that the battle against class divisions has very substantially weakened in India. In fact, there are clear indications that at different levels of economic, social and political policy, the debilitating role of class inequality now receives remarkably little attention. Furthermore, support for consolidation of class barriers comes not only from old vested interests, but also from new sources of privilege, and this makes the task much harder.

*This essay is based on my Nehru Lecture, given in New Delhi on i} Nov. 1001.

fjawaharlal Nehru's speech, delivered at the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, is included *\n]awaharlal Nehru: Art Anthology,* ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Diverse Disparities

This is a difficult subject to deal with, for two distinct reasons. First, class is not the only source of inequality, and interest in class as a source of disparity has to be placed within a bigger picture that includes other divisive influences: gender, caste, region, community and so on. For example, inequality between women and men is also a ₘₐjor contributor to inequity. This source of inequality used to be fairly comprehensively neglected in India even a few decades ago, and in this neglect the single-minded concern with class did play a role. Indeed, about three decades ago, in the early 19705, when I first tried to work on gender inequality in India, I was struck by the fact that even those who were extremely sympathetic to the plight of the underdogs of society were reluctant to take a serious interest in the evil of gender discrimination. This was to a great extent because of the firmly established tradition of concentrating almost entirely on class divisions as a source of inequality. That single-mindedness is no longer dominant, and there is increasing recognition of the importance of causes of disparity other than class divisions, including inequality between women and men. Even though gender and other contributors to inequality still require, I would argue, more systematic attention, nevertheless there has been a considerable enrichment of the versatility and reach of public discussion in India.

There is, however, an interesting issue that goes beyond the 'whether' question to the 'how' question. Should these different sources of inequality be seen as primarily "additive' to each other ('there is class and then there is also gender, and furthermore, caste, and so on'), or should they instead be treated together, making more explicit room for their extensive interdependences? These different sources of vulnerability are each significant, but no less importantly, we must see that they can strengthen the impact of each other because oftheircomplementarity.

Class, in particular, has a very special role in the establishment and reach of social inequality, and it can make the influence of other sources of disparity (such as gender inequality) much sharper. The intellectual gain in broadening our comprehension of other types of inequity has to

be followed with a more integrated understanding of the functioning of class in alliance with other causes of injustice. Or, to put it differently class is not only important on its own, it can also magnify the impact of other contributors to inequality, enlarging the penalties imposed by them. The integration of class in a consolidated understanding of injustice is of paramount importance given the need to address, simultaneously, different sources of inequality, related to class, gender community, caste and so on, and given the overwhelming role of class in the working of each of the other contributors to inequality.

A second source of complexity lies in the fact that some of the new social barriers reinforcing rather than weakening the hold of class divisions come - as it were - from the 'friendly' side of the dividing line; they can, in fact, be rooted in institutional devices that are intended to be among the remedial features against class division. For example, public programmes of intervention can protect vulnerable interests and thus serve as a good instrument in the battle against class-based inequality. However, they can also have regressive consequences if the battle lines are wrongly drawn, or if the remedies are wrongly devised.

In fact, what the armed forces call 'friendly fire' - whereby an army is hit by its own firing rather than by enemy shelling - is a concept that may have relevance not just in the military spheres but in social fields as well. The actual impact of supportive public institutions and public policies has to be constantly scrutinized. The operative impact of institutions and programmes that have been instituted as anti-inequality devices requires probing investigation in an open-minded - rather than in a fixed, formulaic - way.

I shall take up these two issues in turn: first, the need for an integrated understanding of the contribution of class in the combined impact of diverse sources of inequality; and second, the possibility of 'friendly fire', which requires us to rethink the old battle lines against inequality. In particular, the relevance of new barriers strongly suggests the need to re-examine the ways and means of confronting class inequality.

In this essay, I shall try to identify two specific issues to examine in trying to understand the far-reaching relevance of class in India: first, the 'integration issue' (to see the influence of class as not merely

additive but also as transformational), and second, the 'institutional issu ,' in particular the role of institutional features - new and old - in reinforcing and even strengthening class barriers.

Class, Gender, Caste and Community

The significant presence of non-class sources of inequality is an important recognition that can be combined with the acknowledgement that thereis hardly any aspect of our lives that stays quite untouched by our place in the class stratification. Class does not act alone in creating and reinforcing inequality, and yet no other source of inequality is fully independent of class.[1]

Consider gender. South Asian countries have a terrible record in gender inequality, which is manifest in the unusual morbidity and mortality rates of women, compared with what is seen in regions that do not neglect women's health care and nutrition so badly. At the same time, women from the upper classes are often more prominent in South Asia than elsewhere. Indeed, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have all had, or currently have, women Prime Ministers - something that the United States (along with France, Italy, Germany and Japan) has never had and does not seem poised to have in the near future (if I am any judge).

Belonging to a privileged class can help women to overcome barriers that obstruct women from less thriving classes. Gender is certainly an additional contributor to societal inequality, but it does not act independently of class. Indeed, a congruence of class deprivation and gender discrimination can blight the lives of poorer women very severely indeed. It is the interactive presence of these two features of deprivation - being low class and being female - that can massively impoverish women from the less privileged classes.

Similarly, turning to caste, even though being lower caste is undoubtedly a separate cause of disparity, its impact is all the greater when the lower-caste families also happen to be very poor. The blighting of the lives of Dalits or people from other disadvantaged castes, or of members of the Scheduled Tribes, is particularly severe when the caste or tribal adversities are further magnified by abject penury. Even

the violence associated with caste-related conflicts tends to involve a great deal more than just caste.

For example, the Ranveer Sena in Bihar may be a private army that draws its sustenance from the upper (in this case, Bhumihar and Rajput) castes, and the victims of brutality may typically be low-caste Dalits, yet the predicament of the potential victims cannot be adequately grasped if we do not take note of the poverty and landlessness of Dalits, or place the conflicts in a broad social and economic background. This recognition does not suggest that caste is unimportant (quite the contrary), but it does make it necessary to place caste-related violence in a broader context in which class, *inter alia*, belongs. The basic issue is complementarity and interrelation rather than the independent functioning of different disparities that work in seclusion (like ships passing at night). Given the wide reach and generic relevance of class, related to poverty and wealth, ownership and indigence, work and employment, and so on, it is not surprising that it tends to rear its ugly head in a great many conflicts that have other identifications and correlates.

In fact, there is also considerable evidence that affirmative action in favour of lower castes has tended to do much more for the economically less strained members of those castes than for those who are weighed down by the combined burden of extreme poverty and lowness of caste. For example, 'reserved' posts often go to relatively affluent members of disadvantaged castes. No policy of affirmative action aimed at caste disadvantage can be adequately effective without taking account of the class background of members of the lower castes. The impact of caste, like that of gender, is substantially swayed by class.

Or consider the deprivation that is generated by communal violence. Members of a minority community can indeed have reason for fear even when they come from a prosperous class. Yet the raw danger to which targeted communities are exposed is immensely magnified when the persons involved not only belong to those communities, but also come from poorer and less privileged families. This is brought out by the class distribution of victims of Hindu–Muslim riots around the time of independence and the partition of India. The easiest to kill among the members of a targeted community are those of that group who have to go out unprotected to work, who live in

slums, and who lead, in one way or another, a thoroughly vulnerable life. Not surprisingly, they provide the overwhelming proportion of the victims in communal riots.

My own first exposure to murder, at the age of n, occurred when I encountered a profusely bleeding Muslim daily labourer, Kader Mia, who had been knifed by Hindu assassins just outside our home in Dhaka (he died in the hospital to which my father took him). Almost his last words to me were that he knew he was taking a heavy risk in coming to a largely Hindu region of the city, but he had to do it in the hope of earning a little money from some work (he was on his way there when he was knifed). Kader Mia died as a victimized Muslim, but he also died as an unemployed labourer, looking desperately for a bit of work and money.

This was in 1944. The riots today are not any different in this respect. In the Hindu-Muslim riots in the 19405, Hindu thugs killed the unprotected Muslims, while Muslim thugs assassinated the impoverished Hindu victims. Even though the community identity of the exterminated preys was quite different (Hindu and Muslim, respectively), their class identities were often extremely similar. The class dimension of sectarian violence tends to receive inadequate attention, even in newspaper accounts, because of unifocal reporting that concentrates on the divisive communal identity of the victims rather than on their unified class identity.

This remark would apply also to the recent communal killings and victimizations in India, for example the anti-Sikh riots that were organized in Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination, the anti-Muslim brutalities that accompanied the terrible days that followed the demolition of the Babri masjid, and so on. Class is an ever-present feature of communal and sectarian violence.

What we need, therefore, is some kind of a dual recognition of the role and reach of class that takes into account its non-uniqueness as well as its transformational function. We have to recognize, simultaneously, that

(i) there are many sources of disparity other than class: we must avoid the presumption that class encompasses all sources of disadvantage and handicap; and

(2.) nevertheless, class disparities are not only important on their own, but they also tend to intensify the disadvantages related to the other forms of disparity.

Class is neither the only concern, nor an adequate proxy for other forms of inequality, and yet we do need class analysis to see the work ing and reach of other forms of inequality and differentiation.

Inequality, Concurrence and the Underdogs

Aside from the variety of factors that contribute to inequality, there is also the important issue of the form that inequality may take. Here it may be thought, class speaks in many voices, with much discordance There is truth in this recognition, but once again this may not weaken the overwhelming relevance of pre-eminent class divisions in understanding the plight of the underdogs of society. We have to see simultaneously the distinctions as well as the interconnections.

There are many different forms of deprivation: economic poverty, illiteracy, political disempowerment, absence of health care, and so on. These distinct dimensions of inequality are not entirely congruent in their incidence. Indeed, they can yield very different social rankings.[3] The tendency to see deprivation simply in terms of income poverty is often strong and can be quite misleading. And yet there are also powerfully uniting features in the manifestation of severe deprivation. This is partly because different types of handicap reinforce each other, but also because they often tend to go together at the extreme ends, dividing the general 'haves' from the comprehensive 'have-nots'. The absence of a conceptual congruence between different types of deprivation does not preclude their empirical proximity along a big dividing line, which is a central feature of classical class analysis.

Some Indians are rich; most are not. Some are very well educated; others are illiterate. Some lead easy lives of luxury; others toil hard for little reward. Some are politically powerful; others cannot influence anything. Some have great opportunities for advancement in life; others lack them altogether. Some are treated with respect by the police; others are treated like dirt. These are different kinds of

inequality, and each of them requires serious attention. Yet often enough – and this is the central issue in the centrality of class analysis – the same people are poor in income and wealth, suffer from illiteracy, work hard for little remuneration, are uninfluential in politics, lack social and economic opportunities, and are treated with brutal callousness by the police. The dividing line of 'haves' and 'have-nots' is not just a rhetorical cliché, but also an important part of diagnostic analysis, pointing us towards a pre-eminent division that can deeply inform our social, economic and political understanding. This concurrence of deprivation adds to the overarching relevance of class as a source of inequality and disparity.

When I come to discuss the issue of what I called 'friendly fire', the role of such manifest concurrence in the lives of the extreme underdogs of society will become particularly relevant. Many of the distributional institutions that exist in India and elsewhere are designed to defend the interests of groups with some deprivation (or some vulnerability) but who are not by any means the absolute underdogs of society. There is an understandable rationale for seeing them as 'friendly' institutions in the battle against class divisions. Yet if they also have the effect of worsening the deal that the real underdogs get, at the bottom layers of society, the overall impact may be to strengthen class divisions rather than weaken them. This is the sense in which their effects can be seen as 'friendly fire', and I am afraid there is a great deal of this phenomenon in Indian public policy as it stands.

It is extremely important to study the issue of 'friendly fire', though not because it is the largest contributor to class divisions in India: traditional factors, such as massive inequality of wealth and assets, immense gaps in education and other social opportunities and so on, remain central to our understanding of the brute force of class divisions. Yet these traditional features are now supplemented by new barriers, some of which were created precisely to overcome the influence of class, but end up having the opposite effect.

I can illustrate the point with a great many examples. I shall, however, concentrate in this essay on exactly two paradigmatic illustrations, dealing respectively with food policy and elementary schooling, both of which have a major bearing on the lives of the most deprived among the Indian people, that is, the hungry and the illiterate.