

| LONGFORM |

It is by now widely recognised that with the 1980s came a new tide of political movements and struggles around questions of community identity, globally as well as in South Asia. On the international level, the real break from earlier kinds of politics—what can be referred to as modernist politics—came with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The disintegration of both of these socialist states, which formally recognised no official identity other than that of the citizen, was soon followed by an explosion of xenophobic nationalisms and identity wars. Conflicts between the Russians and Chechens, Serbians and Croats, Serbians and Bosnians and so on soon engulfed the territories where these states once stood.

Within the United States, UK and Europe, this was likewise a period of major challenge to the ideals of liberal democracy and its non-recognition of community rights. Former colonial people, now living in these countries, gradually created pressures for multicultural citizenship. The matter is not as simple as it may seem, however, for by recognising the rights of these communities to their own cultural practices, the host countries were forced to put their own concepts of secularism and citizenship in jeopardy. So, for example, what eventually shook the foundations of the French republic was not 'Islamic terrorism' but the picture of three young girls going to school in headscarves. The debate over the 'display of religious symbols' in public has only intensified since that first incident, in 1989.

In India, the beginning of the 1980s was marked by the rise of the 'anti-foreigners' trend in Assam and the Khalistan movement in Punjab, to name just two of the most well-known identity-led agitations. The former also had a wider resonance for the Southasian region as a whole, as the claim being made was that 'outsiders' from Bangladesh were illegally migrating into Assam and threatening the distinctiveness of 'Assamese culture'.

Indeed, the 1980s have been generally recognised by political theorists as the period of the global rise of 'identity politics'.

This signalled the global winding-down of the several 'emancipatory' political approaches that had come

about during the modern age, including liberal democracy and socialism. Identity politics have, therefore, been the subject of much scholarly writing in recent years. But during that time, identity politics has also come to be something of a pejorative term, with many referring to this idea as merely 'symbolic', with no material basis. This has led to widespread suggestions: that identity politics can only be divisive and sectarian, rather than

unifying; and also that identity-based approaches overwhelm 'unmarked' secular identities, such as class. So, for example, critics of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati claim that she indulges in merely symbolic politics—expressed, for instance, in the installation of statues of Dr B R Ambedkar around the state.

A little reflection shows that the term identity politics itself is quite inappropriate in such circumstances, as it assumes that there are at least some kinds of politics that are not related to identity. Most often



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

IDENTITY ILLUSIONS, UNCLASSIFIED CATEGORIES

ADITYA NIGAM

the term is used as a counterpoint to something that is 'structural' and 'material'—for example, class politics. Yet it can be argued that, in an important sense, all politics are ultimately identity politics. Even 'class' becomes a political subject only when it becomes an identity, when a worker begins to see himself or herself as a worker, for instance, rather than as a Hindu or a Muslim, white or black, a man or a woman, an 'upper caste' or a Dalit.

What often goes in the name of class analysis (as opposed to an identity-based one) is best illustrated in the wide range of

writings that were published in the wake of the Gujarat 2002 carnage. Several scholars, including sociologist Jan Breman and professor and anti-communal activist Ram Puniyani (to name just two), offered the following explanation: Ahmedabad's textile mills, it was claimed, had been closing down for some time before the massacres, rendering over a lakh workers unemployed (many of whom happened to be Hindu), who then became prey to communal mobilisation. But such an understanding begs the question as to why these workers could never act together as workers. A similar explanation was given for why

A little reflection shows that the term identity politics itself is quite inappropriate in such circumstances, as it assumes that there are at least some kinds of politics that are not related to identity. Most often the term is used as a counterpoint to something that is 'structural' and 'material'—for example, class politics.

Continued to page 7

| LONGFORM |

IDENTITY ILLUSIONS, UNCLASSIFIED CATEGORIES

After page 6

Adivasi workers turned against their Muslim peers during the same massacres. Most moneylenders in the area, we were simply told, were Muslims, and the Adivasis had a conflictive relationship with them.

Why they did not turn their wrath against the Hindu moneylenders is, again, left unexplained.

The very use of the term identity politics is meant to suggest that, as opposed to structural (that is, class) issues, identity is about non-structural, even 'unreal' questions. You cannot create an explanation that seeks to understand sectarian conflict in cultural terms, as that is supposed to be non-class or at least non-material. That is why all of these explanations try to 'uncover' some 'hidden truth' behind such violence. As a matter of fact, issues of identity, culture, class and power are all enmeshed with one another; there is no issue that is a pure question of identity, just as there is no pure class issue.

Class is identity

Many intellectuals and activists on the left believe that the emergence of the politics of identity effectively displaces the 'class' politics of the earlier era, one in which struggles were essentially over resources, jobs, income and welfare questions, classically represented by trade unions. At a very fundamental level, the struggles over property and resources have been reduced in such understandings to 'class' struggles. However, regarding property as merely a synonym for class precludes a nuanced understanding of the complexities of access to land and other resources.

What if questions of redistribution—of property and resources—were already questions of identity? What if one were to suggest that class and identity were not such neatly separable categories? What if the division between the propertied and the propertyless is not always one between the bourgeois and the proletariat, but also simultaneously a division between the white and the black, between the upper caste and the Dalit, between man and woman? Also, many contemporary struggles about 'identity' are, in fact, equally about redistribution and inequality in property ownership.

For instance, the women's movement has placed the question of property ownership within the family right at the top of its political agenda. Similarly, the question of land and capital for Dalits began to be identified as a top priority, as happened during the momentous conclave of Dalits in early 2002 under what came to be referred to as the Bhopal Conference. The ecological struggles of recent decades in India have been as centrally concerned with questions of customary rights over land and forests, as they have with issues of Adivasi identity and way of life. In each of these cases, the question of property and resources is inseparable from that of identity.

One could extend the question of redistribution to the domain of power



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

What if questions of redistribution—of property and resources—were already questions of identity? What if one were to suggest that class and identity were not such neatly separable categories?

relations more generally. Scholars such as Ashis Nandy, for instance, have for some time argued that the rise of the Hindu right in contemporary India is not simply about the rise of irrational and backward-looking forces of reaction, but rather a consequence of the deepening of democracy and the entry of larger numbers of the 'untutored masses' into the democratic political space. One could also say, along with political theorist Partha Chatterjee, that as a consequence of this there is a conflict today between modernity and democracy—where democracy has become the arena of challenges by 'commoners' towards the Westernised elite's control over power and modern institutions. More than a decade ago, another political theorist, Sudipta Kaviraj, suggested that it was actually the English-speaking elite's control of Nehruvian India that was the primary cause for the exclusion of the emerging vernacular middle classes—thus eventually making them available for the counter-mobilisations around Hindutva and other identity-based platforms.

Looking to another continent, how questions of class, power and identity can be inseparably interlocked is brought out starkly in the example of a general strike in Nigeria in 1945. The strike was called by some 17 unions, representing workers in government departments, to protest the failure of the colonial government to grant cost-of-living wage increases. Surely, we would imagine, there cannot be anything 'ethnic' about such a strike. Nevertheless, says political scientist Donald Horowitz, who has studied numerous 'ethnic' riots across the world, "the unrepresentative ethnic composition of the striking unions produced ethnic resentments." The strike was inspired by an ethnic Ibo leader, and was seen by Hausa northerners as a southern Ibo business that was causing them immense hardship, including shortages of essential goods. The situation subsequently created the conditions that led to the eruption of an anti-Ibo riot three months later. This example, which starkly demonstrates that class and ethnicity are often inextricably intermingled, has many parallels in India.

Throughout the course of India's anti-colonial agitation, there were instances of how trade-union struggles met with an ambivalent, if not hostile reaction from Dalit workers. After all, despite the fact that they were the most adversely affected in any strike, Dalits almost never had any voice in deciding on the affairs of the unions and the larger struggles. During the historic textile strike of 1928 in Bombay, Dr Ambedkar expressed deep concern over the fact that not only were Dalit workers toiling in the lowest-paid jobs, but that this was leading to their being virtually excluded from leadership in the unions. He reported telling union members during the course of the strike that "if they did not recognise the right of the depressed classes to work in all the departments, I would rather dissuade them from taking part in the strike."

In strikes at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras, in 1921, there had actually been clashes because the Dalit (adi-dravida) workers had refused to join with the rest of the strikers. They were accused of being "blacklegs". M C Rajah, an important Dalit leader, attempted to justify their non-participation by arguing that the Dalit workers "had acted in their best interests". Rajah claimed that "previous experience has taught the Adi-Dravida that participation in strikes proved detrimental to their interests," and that in the past they had been forced to sell their property and mortgage their jewels during strike periods.

Imagined worlds

It must be remembered, however, that marginalisation such as that of the Adi-Dravida is generally not simply an oversight. Rather, it is structurally embedded in the situation. Unfortunately, no union has the courage to take on this question in any seriousness, for this would mean the alienation of the majority of the workers—mostly upper- and middle-caste Hindus. This, of course, is reflected not just in relation to the Dalits but also in relation to Muslims.

A classic case comes across powerfully in Thomas Blom Hansen's account of Muslim workers in post-colonial Bombay. In the Bombay mills, the threading of large looms was normally done by ansaris, traditional Muslim weavers. This activity required that they wet the cotton threads with their mouths, and Hindu workers subsequently regarded the cloth as polluted, refusing to touch it. The management, wanting to avoid such problems, simply got rid of the Muslim workers. The unions, for their part, made no protest. According to a Muslim unionist who recounted the story, even those who felt uncomfortable with these communal sentiments decided that they should keep quiet in the interests of unity.

It is evident then that class unity comes at a steep price, however: surrender before the dominant tradition, which in this case was upper-caste and Hindu. It should also be evident that class unity is a mere illusion, anyway, for it ultimately remains the unity of workers of the majority community. The instances recounted here highlight the ways in which questions of identity and class, of economic and power relations, of the division of labour, all overlap and are impacted by one another.

What this means in terms of social and political analysis is that we cannot understand the world solely through categories and classifications put in place by the social sciences. Equally, we need to take onboard the lived world of people, as well as the ways in which individuals construe their own worlds. For, in the end, this is what motivates each person to act in the ways that he or she does. People do not act out their lives in accordance with some objective, scientific categories: even when they act as a 'class', it is always imbued with the 'impurity' of identity.

Aditya Nigam is with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi. Reprinted from Himal South Asia.