

**Castes Cannot be Annihilated by Dalits Alone:  
Review Essay on Anand Teltumbde's *Anti-Imperialism and  
Annihilation of Castes*, Ramai Prakashan, Thane, 2005**

Appeared in *Mainstream* Vol XLIV No. 22, May 20, 2006, pp. 31-33.

Balmurli Natrajan

In the spirit of Marx's praxis which requires us to understand the world in order to change it, Dr. Teltumbde highlights the major reason to study caste and imperialism – nothing less than the eradication of both! Ambitious in scope, yet moving easily between the desirable and the possible, this book indeed provides both intellectuals and activists with a roadmap (albeit a rough one) for what such a task entails.

It starts by interrogating a problem – the lack of a strong and widespread anti-imperialist consciousness in India. The answer advanced is that this is largely due to the acceptance of the caste system which makes the social consciousness of the average Indian his or her caste consciousness (87). Yet this is not simply to be a question of false consciousness of Indians. Instead Teltumbde offers a complex argument for how caste is an imperialist institution working *internally* in India and sharing similarities with the more conventionally accepted *external* imperialism of the multinational corporations working through comprador elites in political, economic and social lives of India. Consequently, he argues for viewing the anti-caste consciousness expressed by Dalit proletarians as an expression of anti-imperialist consciousness.

In the latter third of the book (chapter 8 – 10), Teltumbde speaks about the need for the annihilation of caste as an integral (not secondary) part of the anti-imperialist struggle. This means most importantly that the anti-imperialist struggle, which is the struggle for democracy and freedom of all people, must be worked through addressing the problem of caste in India – intellectually (to gain understanding of the context for imperialism in India) and organizationally (to unite all victims of imperialism in the struggle against it). Annihilation of caste means struggle against economic structure and sociocultural superstructure (205). Caste atrocity, caste discrimination and caste deprivation are three major manifestations of caste that need to be focused on for annihilating caste.

If we are to take Teltumbde's argument seriously, caste becomes not simply another issue for the Left, but rather the *primary contradiction* in society. In other words, for Teltumbde caste is "the issue" for the Left. Such a book will provoke knee-jerk dismissals by both the Left and mainstream Dalit organizations which will accuse this book as based neither on an understanding of imperialism nor on caste, thus avoiding genuine engagement with the ideas in the book. Indeed, anticipating such a reaction, neither the organized and ideologically dominant Left in India, nor the mainstream Dalit movement emerge unscathed under Teltumbde's critical lens. Yet, even as he shows how both forces made historical errors in understanding Indian history, economy and society, Teltumbde is able to foreground the need for a convergence – between a

Left movement and a Dalit movement, both being against imperialism (external and internal to the nation).

This is a carefully analytic work. For example, Teltumbde does not simply view castes as mere vestiges of feudalism as Eurocentric Left analyses commonly make it out to be. Instead, he argues for an understanding of caste in its shaping role within Indian feudalism. Here he echoes many other recent Marxist writers who argue that castes are a self-regulating exploitative system which operate as part of both, the base (infrastructure) and superstructure of society (40). Further, he shows how castes do change but still continue to organize production and politics in India today (chps. 1 and 8). Noteworthy is also Teltumbde's ability to show throughout how the economy is *embedded* within society, a path that has a tradition in the scholarly literature deriving from Karl Polanyi in economic sociology and anthropology. This understanding is important to get away from an economistic reading of class in India. Arguing that India is primarily a semi-feudal and semi-colonial economy with different classes being positioned in different (and mixed) modes of production, Teltumbde asks us to view Dalit struggles against the caste system as indeed class struggles corresponding to the pre-capitalist modes (107).

The brief discussion on reservations is very sharp and usefully identifies the flaw in the anti-reservation argument that bases itself on "economic needs." Instead, as Teltumbde painfully points out, reservations are primarily a countervailing measure against *social disability or socially-produced disability*, and not any intrinsic Dalit disability. This is a salutary move that prevents a naturalization of the social on the Dalit body. It is because if casteism that caste based reservations are needed. It is also clear on how caste-based humiliation, discrimination does not go away with class mobility for Dalits (242).

In the rest of this review I have selected four major points that call for further interrogation.

Teltumbde is brilliant and most provocative when he argues that the primary caste contradiction is between Dalits and savarnas (111), and how one needs to perform a class analysis to show contradictions between castes (215). For example in chps. 9 and 10 he boldly poses the question of Dalit and OBC class contradictions and what this means for the various analyses and political positions that claim Dalit-Bahujan consciousness? Such an analysis also complicates the all-India equation of upper classes with upper castes (e.g., 203). Thus, so-called lower castes (especially OBC in south Indian states) emerge as new economically powerful classes in the countryside, and largely in charge of state machinery in urban centers (as bureaucrats and politicians). However, lest one concludes glibly that upper castes somehow do not appear on the side of the powerful, we need theories that show how forms of alliance and collusion are built between intermediary powerful castes and upper castes who are now increasingly in charge of more urban, private and modern machinery of coercion, capital and ideology.

Second and perhaps the most disappointing for a book that seriously engages with the question of annihilation of caste is an engagement with the question of caste-based identities. The book is silent on how caste identities, which have acquired a real basis in Indian politics and social struggles, get annihilated? The three material manifestations of caste identified for annihilation in the book – caste atrocities, caste discrimination, caste deprivation – are obviously the most visible and strong manifestations of caste and need to be tackled head-on. However, caste also

exists in non-dramatic ways – in marriage alliance formation, in celebrations of cultural difference, in creations of social or network capital (e.g., old boys network based on caste affinities). We are not told how this will happen and if it will happen. Significantly, all of these are key in reproducing *caste as patriarchy* because arranged marriage means control over women's sexuality, cultural displays is always via control over women's bodies and actions which are supposed to maintain traditions, and networks means women's exclusion. Here Teltumbde's insistence on keeping caste distinct from other non-class forces while salutary for caste does not do justice to the growing literature on how gender and patriarchy are at the heart of caste.

This silence also extends to posing the question of the possibility of inter-caste marriages as at least one factor that could contribute (only via the constant vigilance of those who enter such marriages) to annihilating caste consciousness (cultural realm). Is this not seen anymore as a powerful ally of anti-caste struggle? It also raises the question: can there be castes (social groups of identity, i.e., communities) without casteism (atrocities, discrimination, deprivation)? It seems to me not possible. Caste identity (cultural) therefore also needs to be annihilated *in addition to* caste discrimination and atrocities (sociopolitical) and deprivation (economic). Stating the problem this way will however surely produce the most vitriolic objections from *all castes* and their so-called leadership – all of whom are invested in continuation of caste as identity-marker (in hierarchical and non-hierarchical ways). It remains unclear how to best address this issue since community consciousness is also used by those fighting oppression.

Finally, the Indian state is rightly characterized in this book as aiding the comprador classes who represent imperialism in India, especially since 1980s. However, the question of the Indian state is a little more complicated in terms of caste. An anti-state struggle (which is a mark of the anti-imperialist class struggle) may not quite be possible for the anti-caste struggle which still looks to the state for "protection" from atrocities, social disabilities, and market ravages (in terms of a modicum of welfare). Is this not a problem for convergence of anti-imperialist and anti-caste struggles? In fact, Teltumbde suggests that the state needs to promote inter-caste relationships and social osmosis (206). This will, quite correctly, not be possible to expect with respect to classes, at least for any Leftist.

Teltumbde must be thanked for writing a thought-provoking book that needs to be defended by all progressives. I especially like the statement that "...castes cannot be annihilated by Dalits alone" and requires the active participation of all castes, especially upper castes (213). In this context, the critique of Dange (and the problems of the social consciousness, more than the social origins) of upper castes in the anti-imperialist/anti-caste struggles is very useful to foreground for progressive Left anti-imperialists. The phrase "annihilation of caste" has gone out of fashion nowadays, either being suspected of being an upper-caste response to caste (seeking to wish it away rather than address its roots which lie in the economy as much as in the sociocultural relations of everyday life) or of being an impossibility (presumably by those who know what is possible and what is not). This book's title therefore drew me immediately, knowing that it arose from a conscious Left perspective that not only admitted that caste exists as a reality of exploitation, but also that it was indeed "the" issue for anti-imperialism. I know that to speak of the annihilation of race in the USA is viewed as not-progressive, since the current consciousness and political-economy has made it possible to fight against racism but not against

racial identity. This possibility (to annihilate caste) still exists however in India in my belief. This book does show how to think of annihilation without making familiar mistakes. Every once in a while we are able to receive a work of intellectual power that pushes debates forward with clarity and courage. This is surely a book that fits this bill.