

INFLUENCE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Indian scripture finds no mention of caste. The society was divided by Manu.(Ancient Indian Religious, Social and Political thinker) into four Varna's. Brahmin was top in hierarchy followed by Kshatriya, Vaish and Shudras. However there was a chance of vertical movement from one ladder to another upper ladder as this division was based on occupation. We do find that a Rajrishi Vishwamitru could become a Brahmishi. However the society degenerated with time and varna was replaced by caste. Today there are more than 3700 castes and sub-castes. This system of caste influences all aspects of our life particularly social and political life. It was hoped that with growing education and technology along with the mobility of mankind, the caste with system will die its own death. But unfortunately it has consolidated its position. Honor killing could be seen in any part of India. Worst, it influences politics. Right from the distribution of tickets to formation of ministries and even policies decisions of the government is influenced by caste. In this paper, I propose to understand the meaning of caste and its impact on politics in Indian context.

INTRODUCTION

Caste system in Indian context was primarily prevalent in Hindu society but it has spread its wing to Muslim community also. Sikhs are also not untouched. The common impression that Indian society is a caste infected society is Infact very true. It was assured that after independence this evil will be finished. Article 17 of the Constitution abolishes the practice of untouchability. Untouchability was based on caste and violated the dignity and very existence of a human being. Practice of untouchability is an offence and any one doing so is punishable by law.

Unfortunately, democratic process of India consolidated Caste system. Caste based reservation first for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe and later on for backward classes strengthened the caste

system and caste got importance and share in political decision making process. It influenced the political life from panchayat level to national level.

This paper tries to verify and illustrate the premier hypothesis that caste influences the indian politics in a significant way.

MEANING OF CASTE

The term 'Caste' has been defined by various scholars in different ways. Cooley in his book writes, "When a class is somewhat hereditary, we call it caste."

Rishley writes, "A caste may be defined as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human

or divine professing to follow the same professional calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming single and homogenous community.”ⁱⁱ

I may point out here that sir Herbert hope Rishley was a colonial administrator and he worked extensively on tribes and caste. He was in-charge of 1901 census and it is important to note that he is the one who formally applied the caste system to the entire Hindu population of British India. However, after the independence, with the rise of Science and Technology, urbanization and due to reservation policy there was change in the profession of different caste and thus changed the administrative as well economic position of different caste. However with the change, incidentally the feeling of caste strengthened itself and social behavior reflect that an officer or a business of particular caste considers it to be his pious duty to help his caste fellow.

Another study was made extensively on Caste was by E.A.H.Blunt who worked mostly in the United province. His area of study was particularly Agra and Oudh. Again Blunt was a British Civil Servant. He wrote, “ A caste is an endogamous group or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary imposing on its members certain restriction in the matter of social intercourse claiming a common origin and generally regarding as forming a single homogenous community.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But an analysis would suggest that the question of endogamy is no more important as far as the caste structure is concerned. Marriages between different castes are taking place amongst the educated classes. Even the religious line is not strong today. However when it comes to rural or uneducated masses, tensions could be seen between two families or between two communities. However, judiciary have played very important role. It provides security to the couple and severely punishes those who create problem for them.

Prof. M.N.Srinivas writes, “A sociologist would define caste as a hereditary endogamous,

usually localized group having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of Caste. Relations between castes are governed among other things, by the concepts Of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs within caste.”^{iv}

Though I have differences on the point of endogamy with the development of science and technology, it must be agreed that the caste consciousness has strengthened with such development as it is easy now to keep in touch with the people of the same caste irrespective of distance he is living.

However, if the definition of Prof.Srinivas is added with the observation of Robert Maciver, the definition may be complete to a great extent. Maciver observes “when the status is wholly pre-determined, so that men are born to their lot without any hope of change in it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste.”^v

CASTE AND POLITICS

After independence, the entire population was given the right to vote at one go (Universal Adult Franchise) to establish an egalitarian society based on equality and justice. First general election proved a simple theory. Those who fought for independence will rule the country. That was the mandate.

But by 1957, two things came to fore-planning to introduce the panchayat raj system on one hand and lohia’s theory of share in power in accordance with the strength of caste. (here strength implied the population).

These two factors, instead of degenerating the caste system, strengthened it. Also the election from local level to national level gave a tool in the hands of oppressed caste to oppose the oppressor and elect their own leader who could further their hopes, expectations and aspirations. Srinivas says that “this was quite expectable consequence of universal suffrage. People vote for the men with whom they identify and the fundamental unit of identification was and still is caste. But this is at odds

with the aims of country's political leaders who seek to establish a casteless society."^{vi} Ironically, "Caste is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those who are most vocal in condemning it, that is everywhere the unit of social action."^{vii}

Now let us take example of few states from all corner of the nation to prove that the caste plays a very dominant role in politics.

Beginning from Rajasthan we find that Swatantra Party was dominated by Rajputs, wealthy classes, landlords and other dominant section of the society. This party had maximum 2 to 4 MLA's in Bihar also (In different assembly elections) and they were the big zamindars and forward class business magnets.

At local level, discussing about panchayat raj election, Ghurye observes, "on the village level, in panchayat raj elections, the toughest struggle was alleged in jodhpur division where one of the candidate was chosen for opposing the alleged Jat oppression, the other pleaded for a combined Jat-Ahir-Gujar-Mina combination construable against the Rajput's. In Gujrat patridars may be with one party and Baniyas with other."^{viii}

It does not need Astro-Physics to analyse Kerala politics to see caste combination in elections. It may be pointed out here that Kerala is the most literate state of India but Nayar and Izhavas influence political life of the state and have their well organised associations and organisations.

Similarly Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayastha have different path and role in elections, trying to beat each other and get the office of influence.

In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the story is similar. The caste aspiration gives birth to regional political parties.

In Bihar, once Bhumihars dominated the state politics and they maintained their dominance till 1962-63. After that due to lohia's movement, dominant backward castes entered into political arena and spread its wing. It may be noted here that in each caste leaders of a particular caste are facing cut throat competition from other caste but when

they are provided an umbrella, they accept the dominant leader. For example:- say backward castes accepted lal Yadav as their leader but when Nitish Kumar consolidated his own position, there was revolt and now Lal Yadav and Nitish Kumar are two most formidable leaders of Backward caste people. The scheduled caste accepted Ram Vilas Paswan as their leader. Caste consolidated their leaders and in turn they emboldened their own caste and followers.

Similarly, once Mulayam Singh Yadav represented entire anti-forward caste communities but with Kashi Ram entering political field, scheduled caste moved away from him and now his mental has fallen on Mayawati, who is uncrowned queen of Uttar Pradesh scheduled Caste. Such is the case of Charan Singh's family in western Uttar Pradesh due to Jat dominance.

Similar case is in Madhya Pradesh. For a long time Rajputs dominated the state politics but growth of backward caste saw Shuv RajSingh on "Raj Singhasan."

It will be naïve to think that caste dominates politics in North India only. But South India has faced anti-brahmanical movement and caste has impacted South Indian politics also. One of the worst examples of caste-politics inter-relationship was socio-economic feuds between the Maravan and Shanar which took a political turn in 1957. Schedule Castes supported Indian National Congress instead of Maravan, though Marvans were expecting their support.

Ghurye writes, "The feud took the turn of riots which took place between July 4 and September 10, 1957. It is alleged that 2830 houses were burnt, 25 persons were killed and 130 villages saw the burning of schedule caste's houses."^{ix} Ghurye further observes, "The genesis of this holocaust is very instructive as revealing the explosive nature of caste situation lending itself in every field for exploitation for political purposes."^x

In Jharkhand, we find that tribal people were suffering from exploiters of North-Bihar who had dominated the economy of the state. (Earlier it

was a part of Bihar). The outsiders are called “Diku” and sufferings forced themselves to organise a political party, known as “Jharkhand Party” under the capable leadership of Jaipal Singh. Later Sibhu Soren, a Santhal tribal leader emerged as the most powerful leader of Jharkhand movement and ultimately a new state Jharkhand was formed.

Kammas and Reddy’s two dominant caste of Andhra Pradesh play opposite part in Andhra Politics. While Kammas generally supported opposition (Communists mainly), the Reddy favoured Indian National Congress. To consolidate its position in the state, congress was able to attract few Kammas dominant leader to its fold. Here the castes have mixed religion with politics. According to Prof. Srinivas, “The regional claims in Andhra Pradesh are often only a disguise few caste claim.”^{xi}

Prof. Harrison analyzing Andhra Politics opines as, “As an example of Hindu caste discipline in political motion, the post war decades in Andhra merits special attention. Caste has played so fundamental role during this period that this examination becomes, in effect, a case history on the impact of the caste on India’s representative institution.”^{xii}

Such is the case of other states. You cannot think of politics in Maharashtra without Maratha and Mahars. Though Brahmins do not have majority but they too influence the Maharashtrian politics dominantly. In Haryana, Jat play dominant part as they are not only in majority population wise, they dominate socio-economic arena of the state. The examples in every state are more and less the same.

In the capital, now banyas, Jat and Gujjar have influential presence as well as hold on economy. However, now migrants from other states (mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) popularly known as ‘Purvanchali’ influence the politics. Though ‘Purvanchali is not a caste but they do support the leaders having their base in their respective state. Political parties of all shades oblige them while distributing tickets for assembly or corporation elections.

Having analysed the politics of the different states, let us see the reasons for its consolidation.

FACTORS FOR ITS CONSOLIDATION

Though our Constitution makers had a dream of casteless nation based on equality, freedom, Justice and fraternity, the politics has taken an opposite route and caste instead of degenerating has consolidated its hold on politics and elections. The analysis suggests that there are certain factors which encourage it. Let us see the different factors as

A. Creation of Panchayati Raj:

- a. The Panchayati raj system was first adopted by the state of Rajasthan on 2nd October 1959. After this other states passed laws regarding this and adopted accordingly. 73rd amendment act 1992 came into force in 1993, inserted part IX in the Constitution of India and accorded Panchayat a Constitutional status as institutions of local self-governance for rural India.
- b. Now two things must be pointed out:
 - B. The moment Panchayat was given constitutional status, its power and scope for work in the village for its development increased many fold.
 - C. It is the lowest and smallest constituency for election purpose.
 - a. As I have said, now Panchayat has acquired considerable position and authority. Since development requires a lot of funds and funds have been provided, every caste wants someone from its own caste to become Mukhiya or Sarpanch. By electing their own caste people, they enjoy considerable influence and booty. Secondly, because it is

the smallest unit of governance, the castes play a role in influencing the voters. The reality is that every caste has a local leader and candidate who successfully gets their support, gets the entire votes of the community. Exceptions may be found here and there.

D. Privileges:

- a. Lower caste people have been getting certain privileges from the government. Schedule caste and Schedule Tribe have reservation in educational institutions and jobs. Even they have reserved parliamentary constituency from which only people of SC/ST (as seats are marked reserved for SC or ST) castes can fight. Now after the implementation of Mandal Commission report, OBC people have also been given reservation in educational institutions and government jobs. Therefore, the segment of population enjoying this privilege does not want to give up this. Any attempt to change it is vehemently opposed. It is pertinent to note here that RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat in one of his speeches said that reservation policy should be reviewed by the government. The elections were being held at that time in Bihar and the mere fear that BJP might write off reservation defeated BJP. Therefore, instead of degenerating caste system, it is being consolidated.
- b. A typical example from Karnataka will illustrate this point. On the basis of facts and figures, Mysore backward classes committee report 1961 the so called backward caste of lingayats as were placed in

forward caste. This shift would have denied them the benefits of reservation. This community put tremendous pressure on the day of the government and this community was brought back to backward community.

- c. Agitations have been carried out by Jats in Haryana and Gujjar in Rajasthan to be brought in the category backward caste unimaginable, But for the privileges granted to reserved category of castes.
- d. Concluding we can say that privileges improves the living standards and life of the category people, any attempt to review and revise even for the sake of improvement is resisted with full might of all beneficiary castes and caste instead of degenerating consolidates itself.

E. Politicisation of Caste:

- a. "Villages leaders favour their own caste leaders and the ministers in turn need the help of village leaders during elections. Many, if not most, ministers at the state level are also leaders of their own caste, and through this of their region also."^{xiii}
- b. Prof. Rajni Kothari writes, "The process of politics is one of the manipulating and identifying existing structure in order to mobilise support and consolidate positions, when the caste structure provides one of the most important organizational clusters in which population is found to live, politics must strive to organise through such a structure. The alleged casteism in politics is thus

no less than Politicisation of caste.”^{xiv}

- c. Hence safely it could be said that not only caste influences politics vice-versa is also true. Prof. Kothari emphasis that, “It is not politics that gets caste ridden; it is also the caste that gets politicized. Dialectical as it might sound, it is precisely because the operation of competitive politics has drawn out of its political context and given it a new status and identity hitherto unknown has begun to disintegrate.”^{xv}

F. Muscle Power Provider: The election commission of India and its state machinery tries to conduct the assembly or Parliamentary election and for that matter even Panchayat elections in free and fair manner, muscle and money power plays very important role. The candidates filling the account of expenses after the election is over, in 99% cases or more candidates submit false affidavit. Though money is provided by the leaders, though they too collect it from various sources which again is a matter of research, from where do the leaders of different political parties get the muscle power?

The answer is simple. The Maximum muscle power comes from the local leaders of their own caste. Either they are provided for money or for obtaining the pleasure of their leaders. These muscles man provide security to the candidates and their campaigner. They also create an atmosphere of fear and voters at times vote out of fear not out of their free-will.

Thus caste and politics are inter-connected with each other.

Now before concluding let us see the fusion of caste and politics as:-

Everybody knows the fact there are laws against the caste offences and every block has Harijan Thana in most of the states, neither the caste is degenerating nor it seem to come to an end in near future. There is a strong fusion between the two. Let us see how:-

- a) Every political party distributes tickets on the basis of strength of caste in a given constituency. They term it as “winning ability chances.” No political party dare deny the caste in any constituency.
- b) It has also been witnessed that all major political parties having all India presence go for pre-poll alliances with local small parties based on Caste and championing the causes of their base caste.
- c) Every political party is trying to make the people believe that they are the champions of weaker section of society, particularly of low castes such as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Castes simply to seek their favour at the time of election and organising rallies, public meetings etc. also, it is a matter of common knowledge that these castes, cast their votes in block.
- d) If any incidence of some significance is attached to a particularly lower caste, the incident itself becomes very important. It is made an issue by media also and it is raised with wider publicity, both with in the legislature and outside it.
- e) During election days, Caste leaders of different communities are glorified and given place of pride depending on their caste strength.

Now the question is:-is the caste system going to degenerating or are the political

parties willing to help in the process of its degenerating.

To me it seems impossible. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand and Shradhanad in modern time were great social reformer. They tried their best-result-failed.

Mahatma Gandhi and or Bhim Rao Ambedkar great politician, freedom fighter and social reformer tried their best. Result failed.

In recent past:- Jaya Prakash Narayan during his movement namely Sampurna Kranti (Total Revolution) nearly 40 years back started "Janaw Todo Movement" favoring the end of casteism. Result failed.

And now when the political parties of biggest democracy seek all possible help to save their power, privileges provided in the constitution is lucrative, Political parties lack will to do away with this system, only god will help. Instead of degenerating, it will consolidate and play a pivotal role in politics.

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