Role of Caste in Indian Politics

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ABSTRACT

Indian democracy being the largest in the world, has survived from the major challenges posed by widespread illiteracy, poverty, secessionism and communalism with several problems that have felled the fledgling democratic institutions of so many post-colonial societies and since Indian society has being highly segmented along the lines of castes, religion, class etc. The caste system is a predominant aspect of the social and political structure in India. Caste is the most ancient feature of Indian social system and it is a major factor in the structures and functions of the Indian political system. Caste is a notable foundation of social stratification in India. Indian politics is caste-ridden politics. Caste determines the nature, organization, and working of political parties, interest groups, and all political structures and their functions. Indian society has been highly segmented along the lines of castes, religion, class, etc, it eventually prevents the true working of Parliamentary democracy. The aim of this article is to analyse the role of caste in Indian politics and how it becomes an obstacle to the true working of parliamentary democracy and to the national integration.

Keywords: Caste, Democratic ideals, divisive force, Indian Politics and Society.

INTRODUCTION

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group in which affiliation is largely determined by birth. This caste system became fixed and hereditary with the rise of Hinduism. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri) refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes while affirming the dominance and total impunity of upper castes. Those of the lowest caste are informed that their place in the caste hierarchy is due to their sins in their past life. Vigorous punishments of torture and death are designed for crimes like getting literacy or insulting a member of a dominant caste. Manusmitri, the most reliable text of Hindu religion legitimizes social exclusion and introduces absolute inequality as the guiding rule of social affairs. Caste still very much matters to Indian citizens even in the modern world, though one must point out that different groups of citizens have different reasons for maintaining the system of caste. The upper castes want to keep caste alive to oppress the lower castes thereby maintaining their domination.

For political purposes the castes are broadly divided into – Forward class 30.80 percent Other Backward Classes (OBC) about 41 percent, Scheduled castes about 19.7 percent, Schedules Tribes about 8.5 percent of the population. The use of caste for gaining political benefits is not a new phenomenon and Indian post-independence politics continually used caste and abused in different ways. The British Imperialist used religion as well as caste for political division of the nation. Unfortunately, even after independence India could not stop caste as a factor from influencing politics. Independent India introduced the universal adult franchise. This brought in a new socio-political transformation, in this new environment, caste got a new dimension in the politics of India. Though the Indian Constitution has outlawed caste-based discrimination, the caste system, in various forms continues to play a major role in Indian society and politics. A striking feature of the Indian democratic experiment has been the increasing use of reservations to achieve greater social justice and equality of opportunity.

The franchise system in India brought in the importance of numbers. Those who were placed in the lower ladder of social hierarchy got an opportunity to assert themselves by using their numerical strength. In many parts of India, caste associations have emerged with aim of pursuing not only social status and economic interest but political power as well. As a result of this most of the political parties have had to consider the welfare and development of lower castes. In political term, caste has a basic role in the decision-making process that even the reorganisation of Sates in India had to struggle with it so that no caste group dominates a particular territory. Although untouchability has been forbidden under the Constitution. Harijans and Adivasis have also been given legal safeguard as a positive measure. Government

made an attempt to create economic and social impartiality but these reservations have affected Indians in an unpleasant manner.

Caste factor is a component of the Indian party system. In India, there are so many caste-based political parties which try to promote and protect the interest of a particular caste. The regional political parties, in particular, stand predominantly influenced by the caste factor. DMK and AIADMK are non-Brahmin and non-Brahmin political parties from Tamil Nadu. In Bihar, almost all regional parties have their own caste-base support, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) of Ram Vilas Paswan for example. In Uttarpradesh where the Samajwadi Party is closely identified as a Yadav Party, while Bahujan Samaj Party is identified as the party of Dalits. The JD(s) of Karnataka is known to be a part of the dominant peasant community, the Vokkaligs, while the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra is identified as party mainly for Marathas. The BJP has traditionally been supported by upper caste Hindus and commercial communities. In Punjab, Akali Dal has a community identity. It stands influenced by the issue of jats vs. non-jats. All political parties in India use caste as a means for securing votes in elections. BSP banks upon the support of Scheduled Castes while the BJP largely banks upon its popularity among caste Hindu and the trading community.

The caste factor is an important determinant of electoral politics in India. While nominating their candidates from different constituencies the political parties keep in mind the cast of candidates and cast of the voters in that particular constituency. As a result of this candidate is sure to get the votes of voters of his caste. In electoral constituencies dominated by Muslims, Muslim candidates are deployed and in areas dominated by Jats, Jat candidates are deployed. Even secularist parties like Congress, Janata Dal, CPI, and CPM take into consideration caste fact in selecting their candidates.In elections, caste is the most important political party. The Candidates asked for votes in the name of caste and they raise the caste-based slogan like *"jat ki beti jat ko, jat ki vote jat ko"*. Such slogans do have an effect on voters and they cast their vote in favour of the candidate belonging to their caste.

As caste is an important characteristic of Indian society and acts as a dominant factor in various political processes, it also plays a key role in decision making. Even the issue of re-organization of State was handled with an eye upon the prevention of undue predominance of a caste group in a particular territory. The caste factor affects state government policies and decisions. The ruling party tries to use its decision-making power to win the favour of major caste groups. Congress has always tried to nurture people belonging to Scheduled Castes as its vote banks. Regional political power for furthering the interests of the caste groups which support or can support their regimes. The constitution of India provides for a single unified electorate and advocates the spirit of caste free politics and administration. However, the caste factor always acts as a determinant of people's voting behaviour, their political participation, the party structure and even of the governmental decision-making.

It is evident that the upper castes who have been controlling the affairs of the village and the community and the rural economy cannot tolerate the changes that are being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. Therefore, from the beginning of the implementation of the Panchayat system tensions, violence and killing have been taken place in order to resist the transformation. The elections to the local government bodies have been first and foremost point of attack by the casteist groups. From the very first election under the new system, the rights of the lower castes to participate in the democratic process and hold positions were questioned by upper castes. One of the basic objectives of the decentralized system is to give opportunities to the marginalised groups and thus try and bring them on par with the people from higher castes.

Crime against the historically marginalised scheduled castes and schedule tribes by the upper caste represents an extreme form of prejudice and discrimination. Similar to the hate crime in other parts of the world, these groups have remained target to the crimes and atrocities at the hands of the upper caste people mainly on account of their low caste identity in the form of rape, abuse by the police personnel, harassment, illegal land encroachments, forced evictions and so on. Caste-based violence often finds its way into politics. The traditional differences between higher and lower castes become vigorous and have turned into a violent and fierce struggle for power in society. The growing terrorization of the lower castes by the higher or even intermediary castes has been becoming a part of rural India's political reality. In states like Maharashtra, Bihar, Gujarat and U.P caste violence has raised its head even in some urban areas. However, until today most of the caste-based violence continues to characterize rural politics.

The bureaucracy also gets influenced by the caste as mostly, the postings, transfers, and appointments of public officials get influenced by the caste considerations. In these days the interest of a particular caste is kept in mind while running the administration. While constituting the council of ministers, prime minister and chief minister have to give representation to the members belonging to different castes in their state and in case they do not do so, the supporters of particular caste put pressure on the prime minister and chief minister to give representation to their caste.

To provide valuable suggestion,the following points need to be looked for neutralizing the role of caste in Politics: -

1) The basis of the reservation should be economic not caste so that all the poor section of society are benefitted to it. 2) Media should play a neutral role. 3) Caste-based violence must be eliminated through well-organized efforts. 4) The recognition of caste-based political parties should be withdrawn. The politician should rise above the politics of caste. 5) The education system should be remodelled on secular lines. 6) All schools must encourage community living by organizing community meals and all students should be included in it. 7) School textbooks should be carefully revised. The study material should teach the students that the caste system is made by man. 8) By promoting Inter-caste Marriage and by providing special offers for people whom do inter-caste marriage can bring changes in the next generation people.

CONCLUSION

Like religion some politicians use the issue of caste to divide voters. Many political parties take advantage of the caste sentiments and fracture the society in such a manner that they gain from such divisions. Caste leaders appeal to the sentiments of the voters of their respective caste groups and try to mobilise votes on that basis so as to capture and retain political power. Not only this, politicians have also managed to divert the attention of its voters from issues relating to development etc. by engaging them in caste related issues. Over the years the negative role of caste has found prominence in Indian politics and considered one of the dangerous unhealthy trends towards our democracy more important on Inclusive development. There is a close relationship between caste and politics in India and both influence each other. Casteism is the biggest challenge for Indian democracy. Democracy and casteism are opposed to each other. India has adopted the liberal democratic system, which is mainly based on equality, freedom and justice. Caste stands for inequality based on birth and maintained irrationally on the basis of certain evil traditions. Since politics has become caste-ridden and castes have got politicised. Caste groups use politics as the means of to secure their benefits. Caste is only an identity mark. It should not enjoy any undue importance in our life and relations. Faith in social, economic and justice must replace the blind love for caste and casteism.

The recognition of caste-based political parties should be withdrawn. The politician should rise above the politics of caste. The basis of reservation should be economic not caste so that all poor sections of society are benefited to it. Our education system must inculcate the values of equality and fraternal bonds among all young men and women for securing complete integration of all as equal partners in nation building. The government should ensure that operation of political practices and system are just and equal to all groups, religions and communities. The political leadership and political parties should also rise above narrow interests to face the challenges of national unity and integrity.

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