

Caste and Politics in India: An Analysis and its Implications

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ABSTRACT

Caste provided the basis for the mobilization and integration of the people with democracy. This paper focuses on the central element of Indian politics, influencing voter behavior, party strategies, and policy decisions. Caste system in India is a hereditary, endogamous group forming a single homogeneous community, shaping social and cultural dynamics. This paper also reveals the rise of caste politics in India. It is a complex interplay of regional aspirations and electoral dynamics. The relationship between caste and politics has been analyzed at two levels: one, how caste affects politics, and two, how politics affects caste.

Keywords: Caste, casteism, system, policy, politics, political, power and strength

INTRODUCTION

Caste plays an important role in Indian politics. It affects how people vote, how political parties work together, and even how some government rules are made. Caste and politics both have some positive and some negative aspects. Elections make appeals to caste sentiment to win the elections. Caste and politics in India are deeply interlinked, shaping the country's electoral dynamics, governance structures, and social policies. Caste groups incorporate neighbouring castes to become larger. Caste provided the basis for the mobilization and integration of the people with democracy. Politics in caste describes how caste groups themselves are influenced by politics.

India is often called the world's largest democracy. Ideally speaking, one would expect that such a colossal democracy would have secular determinants of politics. However, this is a mere ideal and any realistic analysis of Indian politics shows that caste is the key to much of the politics of India. Caste determines the tendency for social divisions and dictates the lines of political cleavage. This makes the system devoid of pattern and permanence and inhibitive of institution building. The number, relative strengths and arrangement of the readymade, socially moulded block determine the political lines in the country today. Its power is increasingly seen in the institutionalized patterns of political collaboration over a period of time. Casteism has been creating a steady political culture.

To be a nation state, political sovereignty is not enough for a society, especially for a pluralist one. The plural societies of our times are multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-casteistic. A nation-state has to accept not only the diversities, it also has to promote and strengthen them, it has to be a 'unity in diversity'. India presents a society which is, indeed plural in almost every aspect of the term. The challenges of a pluralist society like those in our system are numerous. They are so real that they play significant role in our social and political life, they affect our society and our politics. In turn, they are influenced by our politics and help raise certain movements of social nature. "The rise of caste-based mobilisation allowed marginalized caste groups to move past the mere consolations of legislative abolition, extending caste into the political frameworks" (Bayly, Susan 2001:24)

Caste in Politics and Politicization of Caste: The importance of caste should be realized in order to understand its impact on the political arena. Caste through a united effort of its member to assert themselves, has today intruded in both politics and administration mainly through franchise and institutions like Panchayat Raj politics is, of course, accommodative and flexible enabling caste to step in. yet while caste influences politics, politics also influences caste and shatters its solidarity. Caste solidarity is conducive to political power and strength but political power in turn tends to weaken Caste consolidates by creating internal competition leading to new alignments at times cutting across the caste barriers. "Caste-based political mobilizations carried out by regional parties, like the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, especially in agrarian settings. The objective was caste-empowerment, aimed at resisting the inequalities perpetuated by the oppression of powerful upper-caste bureaucracies and governments" (P Mines, Dianne; Lamb, Sarah 2002:172)

Caste in Indian Politics: Caste, according to Risley, is "a collection of families bearing a common name, claiming a on descent from a mythical ancestor, divine or human, and professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by

those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community” (). We may thus, describe caste as localized group having a traditional association, based on one’s birth in a caste, though at times, associated with particular occupation. The caste groups have their respective rules governing their behavior and attitudes. G.S Gharye sums up the features of the caste system as “segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions of feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disparities and social discourse, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and restrictions on marriage”().

Caste groups divided the society hierarchically into numerous segments having their own respective rules which govern their behaviour, customs and rituals. Caste group are rigid in the sense that once born in a caste a person remains in the caste throughout his life,, though women adopt the caste of their husbands. They divide the people socially; higher caste people enjoy higher status and have better entitlements than those born in lower caste. The Indian Society is a casteist society.

Since independence, caste has been playing an increasingly important role in all political activities – election, political appointments, party formations, etc. India’s political structure and processes are democratic, but its social base particularly in the vast rural areas is rather feudal, tribal, casteist and communal. This pre-democratic, sociological base affects the working of democratic politics. Democratic facilities like fundamental rights relating to free speech, expression and association, participation in electoral system, formation of parties, free media, and even legislative forum are misused for maintaining casteist identity.

This is possible because, while the form of Indian politics is secular, its style is essentially casteist. Some caste leaders play a different game , they want modernization of their own tradition, yet they would like to keep their separate caste identity intact. This helps them and their caste to become a modernized interest group. “Regional political parties tapped into frustrations of marginalization by lower-caste communities. However, the rise of caste politics has not necessarily resulted in developmental gains for those at the bottom of the caste ladder” (Karunakar, Patra 2022:22).

A class is one or two or more broad groups of individuals who are ranked by the members of the community are socially superior and inferior positions. India is vast country inhabited by people of different race, speaking different languages, having many religions that are further divided into various caste, sub-castes and sects and sub-sects. Geographically also it is of a continental size. Some of the ethnic, religious and linguistic groups have a concentration of population in certain areas which they regard as their own. They are primarily interested in the economic development of these and at the same time want to preserve their cultural identity. To protect their economic interest, they do not want outsiders to settle there. All these economic political and cultural factors have combined together giving birth to regionalism which appears in various forms.

The caste system in India presents a stratified social hierarchy which alone distinguishes us from any other society. Its history goes back to the times as far as 1200 BC. The term caste is derived from the Portuguese caste meaning breed, race or kind. We, in India, relates caste to varna, jati, jat, birdri, and samaj. The Indian caste system has its origin in the Varna System. The four basic varna, usually described are 1) the varna of Brahmas, the priestly and the learned class; 2) the varna of Kashatriyas, the ruling and the warrior; 3) the varna of Vaish, the commercial and the trading class; and 4) the varna of shudra, the class of servile labours.

Each varna is described as having been created by god and with specific function. Brahmins or priest, for example, were created from the mouth of the God and were to provide for the intellectual and spiritual needs of the community. The Kashatriyas, i.e, the rulers and warriors, were created from the arms, and their job was to rule and protect others. The Vaishs, i.e., the traders and landowners, sprang from the high and they were to take care of trade and agriculture. The Shudras, i.e., the savants and the labourers, came from the feet and their task was to perform manual labour.

The varnas are further classified into castes and sub-caste, rigidity and socially arranged in such a way that each group is a world of its own. The Indian society is a caste society, a multi-casteist society. Though, the caste system is primarily associated with Hinduism, it exist, the jains, the others religious groups as well as. Among the Muslim, the Christians, the Buddhist, the Jains , the Sikhs, caste like group exist clearly. Caste considerations are acknowledged and maintained from birth to death; hierarchical distinctions both horizontally and vertically, prevail in the Indian Society. Politically democratic India has a socially diversified base.

The caste system works both ways: it divides when one caste works against the other; it mobilizes when it unites the people belonging to the same caste. The English, in the colonial period used divisive tendencies of the Indian society and kept the India Under their rule, they had explored the diversities to their imperialistic designs, caste disintegrations including. The

traditionalists, during the era of the national liberation movement, such as Tilak, Vivekanand, and Gandhi, sought social reforms in the Indian casteist society, men like Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, regarded the caste system in India as an evil – as the main source of Indian social and moral degeneration, while like Ramaswami Nicker and Dr Ambedkar, condemned the caste system as it prevailed in the society.

The confrontation in India between the age old caste system and the parliamentary form of government based on universal suffrage vividly illustrates the manner in which caste movements and structures are inducted into the political process and come to play a determining role in Indian Politics. “In some regions of India, strategic reconstructions of the caste system have taken place. For instance, the Bahujan Samaj Party in the state of Punjab was first initiated by urban political entrepreneurs who belonged to the former lower caste groups” (Krishna, Anirudh, 2003)

It is said that politics is a competitive enterprise, its purpose is the acquisition of power for the realization of certain goals, and its purpose is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiances in order to mobilize and consolidate positions. The important thing is organization and articulation of support, and where politics is man-based, the point is to articulate support through the organizations in which the masses are to be found.

It follows that where the caste structure provides one of the principal organization clusters along with bulk of the population is found to live, politics must strive to organize through such a structure. Thus, the views that caste is the determining factor of Indian politics are no more and no less than politicization of caste and not casteism in politics. Caste has become the determinant of Indian politics because politician find in it an extremely well articulated and flexible basis for organizations than secular bases like class interests, national issues, etc. it is not that there are no secular type groups and bases of association or mobilization; politicians approach them as well. “India's colonial past has shaped caste into a flexible institution, generating a new system that has crucial influences on political mobilization” (Rao, Vijayendra, 2007)

However, there is also a view that the increasing role of caste in politics itself provides for secularization of politics. The proponents of this view state that the segmental and factional manifestations of the caste system and the consciousness and identifications to which it gives allow for secular organization and struggle from time to time. They say that when the political and social system interact, what develops through various stages is a new mode of integration. “The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strengths. The upper caste groups can then manipulate the economic and political system to transfer economic strength into political power” (Craig, Jeffrey 2002:21).

The process is described as secularization of the shift that system and it is this process that holds the key to the tremendous shift that politics has brought about into the mainstream of society. Whereas Sanskritisation brought submerged caste groups out into the mainstream of society, and Westernization drew the sanskritised caste into the framework of modernization. It is secularization of both kinds of group through their political involvement that is leading to a breakup of the old order and is gradually forging a re-integration on secular associational grounds.

During the transition, such a re-integrative process inevitably highlights parochial symbolism providing references point of identity and cohesion. But the same process also build up new mixes of universalists, particular orientations, renders the basis of secular ties inefficient in itself and often prejudicial to individual and group interests, initiates the formally untouched masses into a slow awareness of the political community and develops in them a stake in the latter.

CONCLUSION

Caste, religion and ethnicity is entrenched into Indian politics. Many theorists asserted that caste is a social phenomenon of Indian society. The Caste system is assuming new identities and associational forms. Indian society is divided into hierarchy of castes. Emergence of electoral democracy in India created a very fertile ground. Caste system is a closed system but it's still evolving. It refers to how individuals and groups from marginalized or disadvantaged castes use their caste identity for political empowerment.

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