



Role of caste in Indian politics

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ABSTRACT

The system of caste is said to have originated in India though the exact origin of caste system cannot be traced. The records of Indo Aryan Culture contains its first mention. According to Dr. Muzumdar the caste system took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India. In order to maintain their separate existence the Indo-Aryans used for certain groups and orders of people the favourite word 'Varna' and 'Colour'. Of the relation subsisting between four classes-Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vis and Sudra-Brahmin is definitely said to be superior to Kshatriya.

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Introduction

The system of caste is said to have originated in India though the exact origin of caste system cannot be traced. The records of Indo Aryan Culture contains its first mention. According to Dr. Muzumdar the caste system took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India. In order to maintain their separate existence the Indo-Aryans used for certain groups and orders of people the favourite word 'Varna' and 'Colour'. Of the relation subsisting between four classes-Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vis and Sudra-Brahmin is definitely said to be superior to Kshatriya. Infact the entire Hindu social organization is based on two fundamental notions-one regarding the natural endowment of man and other regarding his nature and upbringing. These two are called Varna Ashram Vyavastha, the organization based on differences in caste and differences in stages of life. According to Ashrama Dharma, a man has to go through four stages of life.

1. The Brahmacharya-student stage when he acquires knowledge and prepare himself of future duties.
2. Grihastha Ashram-householder stage in which he marries and brings up his family and takes up an occupation in order to fulfil his economic obligations to his family as well as to society.
3. Vanprastha Ashrama-When he gives up his house-hold duties and occupations and retires into a forest hermitage to devote time for the development of his personality; and finally the
4. Sanyasa Ashrama-when he renounces the world and devotes himself fully to the achievement of final aim of his existence-Moksha or liberation.

The other aspect of Hindu social organization consists of the concept of natural endowment that fixes the position of man in society, of natural the Varnadharma. According to which there are some people who devote themselves to the performance of sacrificial rites, study and teaching. They are Brahmins who constitute the intellectual elite. Secondly there are Kshatriyas whose duty is to protect the people. These are the rulers and warriors of the olden days and statesman and politicians of modern days. The third group is to those people who have a peculiar endowment to produce wealth and to

engage themselves trade, commerce, banking etc. Right from agriculturists to the industrialists and bankers all the people who are engaged in the task of production and distribution of wealth constitute the third group, the Vaishya. Finally, all the rest of the members of the society who are workers constitute the sudra group. The first three groups are the elite groups-the intellectual, the political and productions groups and the fourth group comprises the working class. In this way the origin of caste system can be found in the nature and quality of social work performed by the various groups of people. Those professions which were regarded as better and respectable made the persons who performed them superior to those were engaged in dirty professions.

According to the Evolutionary theory, the caste system did not come into existence all of a sudden or at particular date. It is the result of a long process of social evolution. A number of factors played their part in the development of the present caste system. Some of the important factors are as under:-

1. Hereditary occupations
2. The desire of the Brahmin to keep themselves pure.
3. The lack of rigid unitary control of the state.
4. The unwilling of rulers to enforce a uniform standard of law and customs and their readiness to recognize the varying customs of different groups as valid.
5. Beliefs in re-incarnation and the doctrine of Karma.
6. Clash of races, colour prejudices and conquest.
7. Deliberate economic and administrative policies followed by the various conquerors particularly by the British.
8. Geographical isolation of Indiana peninsula.
9. Static nature of Hindu society.
10. Foreign invasions
11. Rural social structure.

All the above factors conspired to encourage the formation of small groups based on petty distinctions from time to time which promoted the spirit of solidarity and community feeling in every group. Caste system is not a monopoly of India. It existed and still exists in many parts of the world. The feudal system of

medieval Europe was a species of caste system. Certain ethnic group such as Jews and negroes are still treated as castes in many civilized countries including the U.S.A. What is unique in Hindu Caste system is that it alone classified some groups as untouchables and unapproachable.

Caste among other groups:

Although caste is Hindu phenomenon yet there is a group of sociologists like Bailay, Harper, Barreman etc. which defines caste in structural terms and believe that it has also influenced other religious groups in India.

Caste among Christians:

Christians in Kerala live within caste framework. There is a clear cut distinction among original Christians and converts from untouchable groups. The stigma of untouchability is quit obvious within the Christian community.

Caste among Sikhs:

Although religious dogma of the Sikhs is categorically against caste system still castes among Sikhs exist in the same manner as the Hindu group e.g. Jats are mostly land owners/cultivators who prefer to marry within the Jat castes only. Khatri Sikhs avoid marrying in Jats or Ramgharia(Kohar, Tarkhans by traditional occupation)castes. Mazhabi Sikhs are the low caste groups. Converts are often placed at the bottom of social hierarchy. Upper and lower castes are clearly distinguished among the Sikhs.

Caste among Muslims:

The Muslims form the second largest religious community of India. Muslim society in Bihar is divided into numerous castes like groups and has various elements of the caste system such as endogamy, hereditary occupations, caste names and social hierarchy. Ritual purity and pollution is also present among Muslims. The pattern of interdiming is confined to one's kin group or known range within kin groups. The idea of pollution is limited to clean castes with regard to unclean. But the notion of ritual purity and pollution is quite weak among Muslims.

The role of caste in Indian Politics can be specially discussed as under:

Caste factor in political socialization and leadership recruitment

Different caste groups their loyalties behind political parties and their ideologies. Right from his birth an Indian citizen inherits a caste and grows up as a member of particular caste group. He belongs either to one of the high castes or to scheduled castes. In the process of picking up his political orientations, attitudes and beliefs, he naturally comes under the influence of caste groups and casteism. Caste values and caste interests influence his socialization and consequently his political thinking, awareness and participation. He banks upon caste solidarity for occupying and performing a leadership recruitment role. Caste influences the process of leadership recruitment. This is particularly true of caste conscious people of States like Haryana, Tamilnadu, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra Pradesh Reddys, Kammas and Valamas, provide state leaders.

Caste and party politics:

Caste factor is a constituent of Indian party system. Some of the political parties have direct caste basis while others indirectly bank upon particular caste groups. The regional political parties in particular, stand predominantly influenced by the caste factor. The DMK and AIADMK are non-Brahmin rather anti-Brahmin political parties of Tamil Nadu. 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 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.

Caste and elections:

The caste factor is an important factor of electoral politics in India. All political parties give weightage to the caste factor in selecting their candidates, in allocating constituencies to their candidates and in canvassing support for their nominees in the elections. In constituencies predominated by Muslims, Muslim candidates are fielded and in areas predominated by Jats, Jat candidates are fielded. Even secularist parties like Congress, Janata Dal, CPI and CPM take into consideration caste fact in selecting their candidates.

In the election campaigns votes are demanded in the names of caste. Caste groups are tapped for committed support N.D. Palmer has rightly observed that "Caste considerations given great weight in the selection of candidates and in the appeals to voters during election campaigns". In elections, caste as the most important political party.

Caste as divisive and cohesive force in Indian Politics:

Caste acts both as divisive and cohesive force in Indian Politics. It provides a basis for the emergence of several interest groups in the Indian Political System each of which competes with every other group in the struggle for power. At times it leads to unhealthy struggle for power and acts as a divisive force. However, it is a source of unity among the members of groups and acts as a cohesive force. In rural India, where the social universe of the rural power is limited to an area of 15 to 20 km, caste acts as a unifying forces. It is the only social group they understand. However, the existence of two or three big caste groups also leads to factionalism. Caste as such is a factor in Indian politics and it acts as cohesive as well as divisive factor.

Caste and organization of government:

Since caste is a major feature of Indian society and acts as an important factor in various processes of politics, it also plays a basic role in the decision-making process. 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. Caste factor influences the policies and decisions of the State Governments. The party in power 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. Recruitment to political offices is mostly done with due considerations for the caste of the persons. 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 behavior, their political participation, the party structure and even of the governmental decision-making.

Caste factor and panchayati raj:

The role of caste in the working of panchayati Raj and other institutions of local self-government has been recognized reality. Caste based factionalism in rural areas of India has been the most major hindering factor in the organization and effective working of Panchayati Raj.

Caste and Indian Constitution:

Though the spirit of factionalism stands clearly affirmed in the constitution, yet the constitution in a limited and indirect

way recognizes the caste system in the form of providing for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Union parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies. It also provides for the office of commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with the responsibility to investigate matters relating to the various safeguards provided by the constitution to these castes and tribes. The provision for the appointment of minister-in-charge for looking after the welfare of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes in the States of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa also reflects indirect recognition of caste factor. Article 331 and 333 provides for the reservation of seats and jobs in government offices, schools, colleges, universities and other public sector undertakings also reflects this feature. The emergence of strong pro-reservation and anti-reservation groups in India has been the direct consequences of these provisions of the constitution.

Caste and rural politics:

In the Indian rural context caste has been a plank of mobilization, of channel of communication, representation and leadership and a linkage between the electoral and the political process.

Caste violence:

Caste based violence very often finds its way into politics. The traditional differences between higher and lower castes have acquired a new vigour and have turned, at times, 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, till today most of caste based violence continues to characterize rural politics.

Conclusion:

Lastly concluding, Indian party system and electorate clearly reflect the caste divisions. The issue of Brahmins Vs. non-Brahmins in Tamilnadu and Maharashtra, Kammas Vs. Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, Jats Vs. Non-Jats in Punjab etc. reflect the dominant role of caste in Indian politics. Caste loyalties other ethnic factors and not ideological differences really divide the Indian political parties. Election campaigns are run along caste lines and poll violence is usually caste based violence. Prof. Srinivas while accounting for role of caste holds that "The power and activity of caste had increased in proportion as political power passed increasingly to the people from the rulers". Politics has become caste ridden and castes have got politicized. Caste groups use politics as the means to secure their interests. The political parties use caste divisions for nurturing their support basis in the society. The educated and illiterates, the and the poor, infact the people living in all parts of India still remain attached to their castes despite liberalization of restriction on diets, marriage and residences. The politics of reservations has also tended to give strength to the forces of caste in Indian politics. Caste has been one of the basis for determining the other backward class political parties, caste associations and caste federations, caste tensions and conflicts, caste violence, caste based leadership, caste based elections campaigns and caste based voting behavior, all lead to the conclusion that caste is and destined to remain a factor a politics in India.