Caste and Indian Politics

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Abstract

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is largely decided by birth. By the early 1990s there began a shift in caste politics. The continuation of a one party system, which was the Congress party, composed mostly of upper-caste leadership, came to an end. This was partly due to economic liberalization in India which reduced the control the state had on the economy and thus the lower casts, and partly due to an upsurge in caste based parties that made the politics of lower caste empowerment a central part of their political agenda. It should be pointed out that these new political parties emerged not on a national level but on a village and regional level, and were most dominant in North India. It is easier for the youth to maintain their status by rallying rather than remain loyal to a specific party. This also weakened the influence of caste and clientelism on Indian politics. In present paper reviewed that, the current situation of politics while concerned with the caste in India.

Keywords: Caste Leadership, Empowerment, Politics.

Introduction

Caste system continues to survive as a significant aspect of our society over the centuries. In Indian politics, caste plays a vital role as the political behavior of the mass is often influenced by caste consideration. Andre Beteille aptly said, "Caste enters much more directly in to the composition of political elites at the state level".[1] Particularly in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh caste has been a major and dominant factor in politics.

Political awareness and participation of backward communities, identities have surfaced as a strong force in contemporary Indian Politics. The situation demands for redress of the inequalities and exploitation generated by this age old system. However, a changed situation has stimulated fresh thinking in academic circles on the questions of the essence and dynamics of caste.

The origin of caste system in India cannot be ascertained. The Indo-Aryan literature is available from Vedas and Upanishads throw light on the caste system. The Rig-Veda hymn of Purushasookta contains the earliest reference to chaturvarna. According to it, the great Purusha's mouth became the Brahmin. His two arms were made into the Rajanya (Kshatriya). His thigh turned into Vaishyas and from his two feet, the Shudras were born. The Taittiraya Samhita ascribed \the origin of Chaturvarna to the limbs of the creator and interpreted it theologically. It gives divine justification for their functional division. In Gita, Lord Krishna says the fourfold order was created by him on the basis of quality and action. Thus, the Hindu Dharma Sastras take caste for granted. All Puranas assume the existence of caste and if a person commits evil acts he will be born in a low caste or even as an animal.[2]

The Caste system in India is generally related to the occupational pattern of different groups. Caste is the general form of social organisation in India and it differs from the social groups. Noted Sociologist G.S. Ghurye observes: 'Caste in India is a Brahman child of the Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganga and Yamuna and hence transferred to other parts of the country.[3]

The caste is the most salient feature of the Hindu social structure. It divides and stratifies the Hindu society into a number of sub-groups, separate and yet integrated. "In India, the caste system comprises a large number of groups whose mutual relations are of an extremely complex in nature."[4]

Buddhism was the greatest challenge to the priestly elites of Brahmanism and on the other hand it gained popularity among masses. Many kings found Buddhism more suitable and they contributed to its spread in India and abroad. There were no restrictions to join Buddhism.

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Buddha made the low caste people as saints and tried to annihilate the caste system.[5] "The caste system describes the social stratification and social restrictions in the Indian sub-continent. Social classes are defined by thousands of endogamous, hereditary groups, often termed as jatis or castes."[6]

Aim of the study

1. The aim of the study is to analyze the origin and causes of Caste System in India.
2. To explain the features of Caste System in India.
3. To find out the aspects and changes in Caste System in modern times.
4. To find out the inter relationship between Caste and politics.
5. To find and the solutions of negative effects of Caste System.

Meaning and Definitions of Caste

There are different opinions among historians and scholars with regard to the origin of caste system, though it is admitted that it was a very ancient institution. As part of a social system, the word 'caste' refers to stratification along lines of descent. In a caste-ridden society an individual is born into a given social category and remains there for life. The word 'caste' has been derived from the Portuguese term 'casta', meaning race, bread, family or lineage. "The caste system existed since when the society was composed of birth-ascribed hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct groups."[7]

G.S.Ghurye writes "this racial origin of the principal feature of the caste system is further supported by the early term 'varna' meaning colour used to specify the orders in society. Later on the word 'jati' is specialized to denote caste.[8]

According to Dr B.R.Ambedkar, "Caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers".[9]

M.N. Srinivas defines caste as heredity usually localised group, having a traditional association with an occupational and particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by concepts of pollution or purity, and generally, maximum commonality occurs with the caste.[10]

Origin of Jati and Caste

Normally, the English speaking Indians refer to their caste as their community. The word Jati, most often used, as the Hindu word for caste has several meanings. Bhargava's Standard Hindu-English Dictionary translates Jati as "Birth, Life, Race, Sex, Lineage, Parentage, State, Tribe, Caste, Sect, Genes, Species, Nature, Family, Sort, Kind, Name, Order, Nation, Section, Peoples, Clan, Community, and Breed". The anthropological term also suggests that it is a group into which one is born in which one has parents as well as linear ancestors.

The term Jati includes all the three transformations, viz. a tribe, caste and community. According to Andre Beteille, the word Jati may be used to refer to linguistic, regional and religious categories of persons, when the term Jati is used in a caste context Andre Beteille states that it might refer to a caste association. Thus, Jati, the Hindu word is used synonymously with the anthropological term

sub-caste to mean an endogamous large scale dissent group. The term caste is generally used to refer to a set of Jatis, sharing the same name, occupation and ethnic history.[11]

Role of Caste in Indian Politics

The substance of Indian politics has been largely modeled by its social, economic, religious and geographical conditions and these special conditions have further provided a clear-cut shape to Indian politics that is dominantly marked by the caste politics. Various scholars" view that Indian politics is mainly caste ridden politics as caste is long in the tooth and is a notable foundation of social stratification in India and interestingly we see some of the specific castes to be given superior place with social and economic entitlements that were denied to the lower caste of people. During Vedic period, the system of Varna became the foundation of social stratification and according to this system there were namely four Varnas like Brahmin, Kshatrya, Baishya and Sudra where each were assigned with specific role. However, with the progress of time the caste system came to the in endowment status, which got resolved by birth and as a result it has now become a divisive factor in our Indian society today.[12]

Even in the post independence period also these remain same although different measures had been seen to be taken to reduce the differences among the various existing castes, but the conclusive outcome was not so much positive as the influencing nature of caste system was seen to strongly affect the political dynamics of India from all levels and thus given a prominent disposition to the Indian politics. Like now, every political party is observed to give an alert and commanding view to the caste consideration in every candidate selections and appointment of ministers in the governance. However, not only these but also its influence has strongly affected the bureaucracy also.[13] Within this backdrop, the most recent reservation policy has given a new impetus to the role of caste in Indian politics and the role of caste in the different aspects of politics can be viewed by the given points as it is seen to influence the entire policy making of the government; example is vivid like reservation policy in favour of certain castes.

1. Caste provides an extensive basis for organization of democratic politics. In a traditional society like India caste identity and solidarities became the primary channels through which electoral and political support is mobilized with in the political system as Kothari puts it "It is not politics that gets Caste ridden, it is Caste that gets politicized."[14]
2. The effect of Caste politics is more visible in rural area than urban areas.
3. Political parties find it easier to mobilize support \directly from the members of a Caste Community by appealing to them.
4. The present political system itself encourages the use of Caste as a means of breeding followers.
5. Caste enables the illiterate and politically ignorant masses of India to participate in the modern democratic process.

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6. The Communication of ideas is strong with in a Caste and generally the members of a Caste share the same views in relation to political parties, politics and individual.
7. Caste plays a prominent role in the elections and voting behavior where as a usual phenomenon the political parties select their candidates on caste lines.
8. Caste factor naturally becomes central contemplation in all the programmes, policies and manifestoes of the political parties and even different position within political parties is seen to get distributed in terms of various caste configurations.
9. As a result this caste factor also influences in the genesis of council of ministers and making appointment to various political positions in the government.
10. Most interestingly, caste also acts as pressure group in politics where mostly political bargaining is done on these caste lines.
11. The bureaucracy i.e., the administration also gets influenced by the caste consideration as mostly, the postings, transfers and appointments of public officials get influenced by the caste considerations and even more importantly, the behavior of the public officials in carrying out the administrative duties eventually gets influenced by caste considerations.
12. The political leadership in many political parties as a matter of fact emerges and sustains in politics on the foundation of support of certain caste groups.[15] However, taking all these into considerations the increasing role of caste in politics as many political experts view it as a tendency that seem to develop a negative role[16] for the overall system which is not at all helpful for the development of democracy as regarded by scholars namely D.R. Gadgil and the famous sociologist M.N. Srinivas. Again on the contrary, some experts in the area also hold an opposite view point by saying that the role of caste is absolutely essential as it gives momentum to the political process specially in Indian context.

American political experts I. Rudolf and S.H. Rudolf[17] in their book "Modernity of Tradition" hold the view that caste politics in India has reduced the divergence among caste and has brought about political non-discrimination among the members of different castes and so it is worth to mention here that the former President of India K.R. Narayanan had rightly mentioned that, "What is obstructing the unity and emotional integration of India is not so much the large divisions into regions, languages and religions, but the atomization of our society into numerous castes, sub-castes and tribes".

Conclusion

The politics of casteism should be legally banned with strict operation. It has been observed that although the caste practice is legally banned through the constitution by Article 17 yet, these have been practiced the society and ultimately penetrate into politics. Eventually, advantages of these have been taken by the political parties and leaders. In the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal these have been more pronounced hence, the political leaders and parties easily take the chances of these. The ultimate solution lies to the attitude of the men. The people of the modern society should have modern attitude not traditional attitude.

Although, India is largest democracy in the world, yet it has to get a mature stage. All the pre-requisite of vibrant democracy in India is not available because of variety of reasons like (a) There is a lack of democratic training. (b) There is a lack of well educated society. (c) There is lack of committed political parties. (d) There is a lack of committed political leadership. (e) There is a lack of initiative for women empowerment. (f) Neglect of girls education. (g) There is lack of inter-party and intra-party democracy. (h) Passive role of civil society. (i) Believes in traditionalism. (j) Widespread poverty and many more. There is a need to establish inter-party and intra-party democracy to diminish undemocratic element in the society. There is a need to stop political corruption, mismanagement and clientalism. There is a need to eradicate extreme poverty. The strict operation of constitutional mechanism is required to mitigate different problems arising out of huge diversity in India. A great, vibrant and constructive role should be played by the civil society along with the every section of the society because this task is the collective responsibility of all citizens, politicians, educationists, teachers, students, intellectuals, businessmen and trade union leaders not of one section of the society. Proper decentralization must be materialized through the Panchayati Raj System to readdress the grievances of all the communities and regions of India. Good and positive attitude of one community to another is essential to establish religious and communal harmony and thus to intact national unity and integrity.

Even though, the government of India is committed to protect the unity and integrity of the country by following the ideals and goals of the constitution yet the unhealthy practices of democracy and the above cited problems stand on the way to national integration. Not only these but the government of India has taken certain measures like the establishment of National Integration Council (1962), organizing national integration conferences and conferences of Chief Ministers of States from time to time etc. to achieve these objectives. But, the official and procedural efforts are not adequate and many times failed. As many of the problems of national integration are political problems and has cultural and psychological dimensions. The government should ensure that the operation of political practices and system are just and equal to all groups, regions 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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Shrinkhla Ek Shodhparak Vaicharik Patrika

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