

Formation of Groups and Alliances in Indian Politics



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Abstract

In India both the elements of moral and rational behaviour among our politicians points towards a formation of groups and alliances in our society. The argument for moral economy, corresponding to the notion of the caste system and jajmani relations as the basis of authority and community in India, is opposed by the advocates of the political economy who assume the universal presence of rationality, utility-maximising individual within a given political environment. When political process does not operate by mobilising only the loyalties of caste then new associations and alliances are formed cutting across caste and it subsequently loosens the traditional structure. In a democratic system virtually any kind of social identity may be used as a basis for mobilising political support and it is difficult to deny that caste continues to play a major role in politics of India. If a leader is to keep his following he must be guided in his choice of alliances primarily by consideration of patronage. He can not afford to let his choice be limited by considerations of caste or kinship, by ideological considerations, or by personal loyalty to his allies. If he does allow himself to be so limited he may find that he has lost his followers because he could not provide them with sufficient patronage. Besides, to gain or maintain power in one political arena politicians regularly seek alliances in other distinct or more inclusive arenas. Because of this political alliances between castes and political parties tend to be rather unstable, politics becomes factional. Traditional groups which are in the same camp today may find themselves in opposite camps tomorrow. It is perhaps becoming less and less common for the same caste or subcaste to identify itself persistently with a particular political party or movement over any significant length of time.

Keywords: Groups, Alliance, Caste Politics, Factional Politics.

Introduction

Anywhere in the world, political and developmental institutions do not function in a vacuum. They tend to find bases in society either through existing organisational structures or by creating new structures cutting across the existing forms. Besides, a democratic society searches legitimacy on a wide basis and proceeds felicitating conversation between the old and the new values. A fusion is made taking both the elements of modern and the ancient value to be flexible and accommodative. In this process, elements that prove dysfunctional to the realisation of social goals and growth of national consensus are subdued and elements that are found to be pragmatic and developmental are promoted.¹

In India, everyone recognises that the traditional social system was organised around caste structures and caste identities. Rajani Kothari argues that in India who complain of 'casteism in politics' are really looking for a sort of politics which has no basis in society. They also probably lack the understanding of either the nature of politics or the nature of the caste system. Even some of them would want to throw out both politics and the caste system. But politics is a competitive enterprise, its purpose is the acquisition of power for the realisation of certain goals, and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiances in order to mobilise and consolidate positions. The important thing for politics is organisation and articulation of support. And where politics is mass based, it is necessary to articulate support through the organisations in which the masses are in numbers. In India, the caste system provides one of the principal organisational clusters where the bulk of the population is found to live. Therefore, politics must strive to organise through such a caste system. The alleged 'casteism in politics' is thus nothing but politicisation of caste. It is something in which both the forms of caste and

the forms of politics are brought together and in the process changing each other. Bringing the cast system into its web of organisation, Politics finds material for its articulation and moulds it into its own design. On the other hand in making politics their sphere of activity, caste and kin groups, get a chance to assert their identity and to strive for positions. Politicians mobilise caste groupings and identities in order to organise their power. Even though caste have been structured in terms of a status hierarchy, but it is also available for political manipulation and it has a basis in making consciousness. Therefore politicians find in caste an extremely articulated and flexible basis for group organisation. No doubt politician also approach other type of groups and basis of organisation. But just as they change the form of other organisations, they also change the form of caste as well.²

Although most scholars would agree that caste and politics are closely related in certain parts of contemporary India, their assessment of the significance of this is likely to vary. Some like Srinivas argues that the political process tends to strengthen the loyalties of caste at least in the short run: "one of the short term effects of universal adult franchise is to strengthen caste".³ Others like Gough believe that politics in the modern sense tends to be disruptive of caste.⁴

Andre Beteille thinks it proper to remember that there are everywhere in India today forces external to the political system which tend to erode the loyalties of caste. He tries to consider some of the factors which, on the one hand, weaken the diacritical and syncretic unity of caste, and, on the other, create interests based on income, occupation, education, etc. which tend increasingly to become dissociated from the structure of caste.⁵

As Status groups, castes are differentiated from one another by their tradition of distinctive styles of life. Over the last hundred years new criteria of social differentiation have been created through the introduction of western education, occupation in non-traditional sectors and so on. To the extent that the new forms of differentiation run along traditional grooves, caste loyalties tend to be reinforced. When these differentiation cut across traditional ones, castes become more and more heterogeneous in terms of income, occupation and education. New status groups based on these criteria are competing with caste for people's loyalties. Thus political process seems to have a dual effect on caste. Firstly, the loyalties of caste or sub caste are consistently exploited, the traditional structure tends to become frozen. But when political process does not operate by mobilising loyalties to caste only then new associations and alliances are formed cutting across caste, and it subsequently loosens the traditional structure.⁶

There are some who have gone even further and argued that the political process destroys irrevocably the very nature of caste. Leach raises the question, "If a caste group terms itself into a political function does it then cease to be a caste?"⁷ His clear

affirmative answer to this is based on a peculiarly personal view:

People of different castes, are, as it were, of different species- as cat and dog... But with members of different grades of the same caste, the exact opposite is the case.⁸ In Leach's view, competition for power is antithetical to the very nature of caste and consequently whenever castes act "in competition against like groups of different castes... they are acting in defiance of caste principles".⁹ In a democratic system virtually any kind of social identity may be used as a basis for mobilising political support and it is difficult to deny that caste continues to play a major role in politics of India.

Some others have drawn attention to the part played by caste in political factions. Brass has characterised Indian politics as a politics of factional bargains.¹⁰ In many ways factional politics may be contrasted with caste politics. A faction is generally mixed in its caste composition and factional loyalties cut across caste. It happens very rarely that groups which contend for power are homogeneous in their caste composition. A political unit, it is to be viable, has generally to draw its support from a number of castes and not just one. Conversely, a caste whose members enjoy social prominence is likely to be divided by rival contenders for power. But even when a caste is divided by factions support within the faction may still be partially drawn on the basis of caste. Faction leaders often choose their inner circle from among persons who enjoy some support in their respective castes. When two rival groups are similar in their caste composition it does not follow that their leaders cease to appeal to caste in their efforts to undercut each other's support.

Aim of the study :

The present study makes an attempt to know whether formation of groups and alliances in India are based on traditional caste lines or political associations are disruptive of castes.

In Indian Politics there is some instability of political alliances at certain levels of the political system. If alliances are examined in terms of the relations between leaders and followers in their role as members of castes, as patrons clients, landlords, or tenants there often seems to be considerable stability. However, when one focuses on the political elites their political choices often seem unrelated to their roles as party members, patrons or landlords, or to their positions in the caste and kinship systems, and one finds that alliances among the elites frequently are very unstable. This feature of Indian politics has been well known since Myron Weiner study of the development of India's multiparty system in the early years of Independence in which he noted the contrast between the relatively stable alliances between leaders and followers within what he called 'factions' and the unstable alliances between faction leaders.¹¹

Brass writes that in such fluid alliance systems there is no apparent connection between political alliances and such institutions as caste, class, kinship, and community. He characterised "Politics as patternless". It is not based on natural interest groups,

but instead are more factions. It is in this vein that Brass argues that "a system of factional politics", characterised by a high degree of instability of alliances within and among coalitions, may develop in any society under certain objective conditions. Three conditions have contributed to the development of the factional system of the Uttar Pradesh congress : the absence of an external threat, the presence of an internal consensus upon ideological issues, and the absence of authoritative leadership¹².

In addition to this Brass attributes the instability of alliances in the Uttar Pradesh Congress to the availability of a multiplicity of patronage sources and to the 'status motivation' of individual faction members and leaders status aspirations lead faction personnel to seek new alliances while the availability of alternative sources of patronage ensures that such changes are possible. Once one man changes his alliances the movement is communicated throughout the factional system according to the principle that 'the enemy of an enemy' is a friend. Thus, although certain objective conditions permit a factional system to develop, the motive forces behind such a development, in this view, are individual status aspirations and irrational personal antagonisms. This is what Brass means, 'personal enmity is the primary organizing principle of factional conflict'¹³.

Anthony Carter writes the instability of political alliances in India can be examined simply by reference to the elite nature of Indian politics. Carter says that Indian politics are dominated by a powerful elite recruited predominantly from a small political class and there is discontinuity in the distribution of power. Although the chairman of a district council is much more powerful than the chairman of a village panchayat, both are members of the power elite and have some influence on political decisions, as any members of the political class who have privileged access to official and unofficial positions of influence. Persons who are outside the political class have no such influence. The political system is so structured and managed that even their vote often counts for nothing. Accordingly Carter distinguishes between two kinds of political alliances, vertical and horizontal. Vertical alliances are those between elite leaders and members of the political class generally on the one hand, and their followers outside the political class, on the other. Horizontal alliances are those between one elite leader or political class member and another. Carter further argues, vertical alliances occur primarily within village arenas and are most often based on ties of economic dependence. Horizontal alliances are found in all political arenas. They are sometimes influenced by ties of caste and kinship, but purely tactical considerations are of much greater importance. Vertical alliances are relatively stable, with horizontal alliances are relatively unstable¹⁴.

Carter, further believes that the distributions of vertical and horizontal alliances results in part from the fact that politicians rarely make appeals directly to the mass of electorate. Rather they resort to the second type of alliance and appeal to village leaders, lesser members of the political elite, to deliver the support of their villages. Politicians rarely have, and

rarely attempt to have, direct relations with the electorate in villages other than their own. Most direct contact between the elite and non-elite occurs between residents of the same village. The distribution of political alliances is a function of occasion as well. Alliances between elite and non-elite occur more frequently during elections, both in villages and in more inclusive political arenas. Most of the time, however, the massing and displaying of support in any form based on vertical political alliances does not occur at all. Even in village arena politics are dominated by alliances with in the elite. The differential impact of caste and kinship on vertical and horizontal alliances is partly a function of the nature of these institutions and also of the manner in which they interest the system of political arenas¹⁵.

Although the public has little control over the political elite, members of the elite are not altogether indifferent to their followers. A leader's alliance with other members of the elite are related to his alliances with his followers through the distribution of patronage. A leader obtains and maintains a following through his ability to provide or withhold patronage. He obtains control over some sorts of patronage through his alliances with other elite leaders. In return he is able to provide his elite allies with support during elections¹⁶.

If a leader is to keep his following he must be guided in his choice of alliances primarily by consideration of patronage. He can not afford to let his choice be limited by considerations of caste or kinship, by ideological considerations, or by personal loyalty to his allies. If he does allow himself to be so limited he may find that he has lost his followers because he could not provide them with sufficient patronage. Together with the freedom from popular control which results from the use of consensus decision procedures this economic link between horizontal and vertical alliances is a factor underlying the instability of elite alliances. The costs of breaking alliances are generally low while the costs of continuing them may be very high. That is, if a leader continues to provide his followers with sufficient patronage they will not withdraw their support when he alters his horizontal alliances, but they may do so if he persists in his horizontal alliances even when they no longer provide him with access to patronage¹⁷.

Like consensus decision making procedures, the economics of political patronage contribute to the stability of elite dominance at the same time that they contribute to the instability of horizontal alliances. The political elite in a particular village may be a small minority, but it does not exercise its dominance in isolation from other villages or from more inclusive political arenas. Local dominance occurs in a regional context. Elite members in one area or at one level of political activity are able to help maintain the dominance of elite members in other areas and levels by the opportune distribution of patronage¹⁸.

Given the division between the narrow, privileged political class and the politically weak populace, reinforced by the system of indirect election and the use of consensus decision making procedures and moderated by the economics of

patronage, politicians allow themselves to be limited in their choice of allies by considerations of caste and kinship at their own risk. Within the political class horizontal alliance are formed primarily in terms of the governmental and administrative frameworks. In seeking influence in the governmental and administrative frameworks politicians are guided by a few simple rules of strategy¹⁹.

To gain or maintain power in one political arena politicians regularly seek alliances in other distinct or more inclusive arenas. Politicians who operate in the same political arenas are rarely dependable allies because there are potential grounds for competition among them. Politicians in separate or in more and less inclusive arenas are able to co-operate more easily because they do not seek the same political ends.

Secondly, politicians who are supporting members of ruling coalitions regularly break their alliances and transfer their support to an opposition party. They do so when they can give the opposition a majority in return for a leading position for themselves. Conversely, politicians who are in office regularly replace their allies before they can become a threat.

Finally, politicians who cannot win office for themselves seek to split opposing coalitions by offering their support to an opposition leader. This tactic brightens their prospects for the future while in the meantime securing them at least a minimum share of influence on the conduct of affairs²⁰.

Thus, there are various ways in which participation in organised politics tends to alter the structure of caste. Rudolph and Rudolph have drawn attention to an important change which accompanies the emergence of caste associations. A caste association is no longer a birth status group in which membership is automatically ascribed at birth: membership in a caste association has to be acquired, although the base of recruitment may be restricted to a single caste or a group of castes.²¹ Party programs also may (and increasingly do) lead to splits within a caste and to alliances across castes.

Political alliances between castes and political parties tend to be rather unstable. Traditional groups which are in the same camp today may find themselves in opposite camps tomorrow. It is perhaps becoming less and less common for the same caste or subcaste to identify itself persistently with a particular political party or movement over any significant length of time. And to the extent that a caste does not identify itself persistently with any particular party but tends to divide and subdivide and to enter into multifarious alliances across its boundaries, its very contours ultimately become blurred²².

In India politicians have learned to manipulate caste in the furtherance of their interest. But politics is a dynamic phenomenon and the politician whose only skill is caste politics is likely to become obsolete. In this context what Dahl says of ethnic politics in the U.S.A. is particularly relevant. "In order to retain their positions, politicians are forced to search for new issues, new strategies new coalitions"²³. This is in

many ways as true of caste politics in India as of ethnic politics in the U.S.A.

The disruptive effects on caste or flexible and changing political arrangements must not be exaggerated. It is true that political parties tend to cut across caste but so do functions and as Brass has rightly pointed out, factions are a feature of the traditional order.²⁴ Caste loyalties have persisted in spite of decades of factional politics and it is unlikely that party politics by itself will lead to their immediate dissolution. They are relatively persistent elements in the cultural idiom of Indian society in general and rural India in particular.

Parties, to the extent that they are responsible for the aggregation of interests, increasingly cut through the organisation of caste. Every where leaders of the dominant caste try to capture the major political parties and this is rarely if ever done on a basis of planned, mutual understanding. Parties in their turn try to create an appeal for every major group and not merely a single group. As Lipset has argued, "stable democracy requires a situation in which all the major political parties include supports from many segments of the population"²⁵.

The relevance of Lipset's argument to this study can be illustrated with a brief consideration of the changing relations between different castes and categories in Indian politics.

The local political arena and attitudes of individuals operating within it provide the empirical basis for understanding the process of change that development has produced in rural society. Social change, brought about by changes in the macro political structure which has induced new notions of citizenship, entitlement, and enfranchisement, has led to conflict over material resources and the rules of allocation of status, power & wealth. The literature on political conflict & community provides two different models of change. Thus, under the impact of the forces of change, the traditional social structure might give way and be recast in the form of competing political communities where individuals come together on the basis of rational self interest and use their collective power to promote individual interest. On the other hand, the traditional social structure might react as a whole within the framework of a moral community where the lowest social strata, which feel deprived and destitute, might rebel in order to defend their customary rights.

In India we find both the elements of moral and rational behaviour among our politicians for formation of groups and alliances in society. The argument for moral economy, corresponding to the notion of the caste system and jaimani relations as the basis of authority and community in India, is opposed by the advocates of the political economy who assume the universal presence of rationality, utility-maximising individual within a given political environment. Thus, for James Scott, most rural households in Asia share a common situation, constrained by the vagaries of weather and the claims of outsiders.²⁶ Peasant cultivators are conscious that they live near the margin of scarcity. They therefore

prefer to avoid risks that would threaten their basic subsistence. Rather than seeking to maximise the well being of themselves and their families, Scott argues, they commit themselves to a moral economy predicted on two principles that seem fairly embedded in both the social patterns and injunctions of peasant life : 'the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence'.²⁷ Scott views both the norms of reciprocity and the right to subsistence as genuine moral components of the 'little tradition', which applies to peasant culture universally, 'Reciprocity serves as a central moral formula for inter-personal conduct. The right to subsistence, in effect, defines the minimal needs that must be met for members of the community within the context of reciprocity'.²⁸ For Samuel Popkin, on the other hand, even though peasants may be poor and live close to the margin, 'there are still many occasions when peasants do have some surplus and do make risky investment'.²⁹ For him, relationships with other peoples are not decided on some general moral principle but on calculations of whether such relationship will benefit the peasant and his family. The concept of the peasant is dissolved by Popkin and is replaced by that of a universal economic man who acts within varying sets of dilemma between the moral and the rational is to be seen in studies that characterise rural conflict in terms of categories drawn from political economy such as modes of production and class formation.³⁰ The persistence of non-economic factors such as caste, tribe, ethnicity and religion in politics continues to defy such strictly economic formulations. The moral approach which uses these factors as categories of analysis has on the other hand to countenance the creation of new communal and associational bonds in response to economic interests and political opportunities.

In my study also an attempt is made to know if the local elites maintain their identity with caste, religion and other communal lines?³¹ In my study, 75 percent villagers give a positive reply to this question (i.e., SC/ST 20.5 percent, OBC 21.5 percent and general category 33 percent) while 25 percent respondents strongly refute it. Emphasis is also given, in my study to know on which particular identity the elites rely most. No doubt in Orissa politics the importance of religion and communal lines have been marginalised but the importance of caste identity has retained its validity. As I have mentioned in my study, only 16.5 percent of the villagers say the elites resort to religious identity for the formation of group and alliances in rural politics i.e., SC/ST 2.5 percent, OBC 6 percent and General 8 percent. This may be due to the entry of BJP in the coalition politics of Orissa that religious identity is strengthening its root in grassroot politics. But a majority of 58.5 percent villagers believe that their leaders resort more to caste identity i.e., SC/ST 18 percent, OBC 15.5 percent and general 25 percent in groups making. While a comparative study between respondents of lower strata and upper strata is made, a positive relationship is established between the respondents of lower strata and maintenance of caste identity by their leaders. It may be due to their numerical strength that political leaders

of SC/ST and OBC categories resort more to caste identity as a tool of capturing power in rural politics. But as the villagers of general category say their leaders also not unaware of this opportunity. In the study 25 percent villagers of general category say their leaders use caste identity to retain political power in rural social setting.

Besides, when an attempt is made to know how do the leaders like to form group and alliances in rural politics ? To this query, in spite of their caste or class differentiation, all most all the leaders agree that they identify groups and intergroups relation by caste occupation, by choosing bride from one's own community, the privileges and obligations one owes to members of his own and other caste groups.

Thus the elements of a moral economy where the popular conception of the role of government is that of a provider, of an agency which can legitimately be expected to look after the weak and vulnerable is out dated. Times have changed and people now realised that, in the new political situation of competitive politics, power is essentially instrumental and maximisation of self interest is the new governing spirit. There is every indication of action, collective as well as individual by the political leaders of both lower & upper strata of the society. Nor is the action restricted to the members of a particular caste. Political alliances and caste associations are the order of the day. It may seem a little paradoxical that political actors, driven by such 'modern' desires as the promotion of individual and sectional welfare, should fall back on such 'traditional' identities as caste. But the relationship between caste consciousness and the caste system is dialectical. Caste associations are a vehicle to promote material welfare. Their very success at generating power and resources through the pooling of numbers also challenges the exclusiveness of the isolated, traditional jati and leads to the opening up of the traditional closed, stratified, rigid social system and the formations of broader communities.

The quest for personal gain has led to the rediscovery of communal solidarity in politics of India. Community formation, in the form of the growth of caste, associations, or the use of ethnicity and communal networks as vehicles for material interests that a social group seeks to achieve by building a political alliance is very much the prevailing method of political action today. The cultural codes of behaviour have changed greatly among politicians of all categories. Politicians of all category are guided by the same desire for more material resources for rapid development. Hence they resort to more and more caste, religion and communal lines for formation of groups and alliances in the politics of development.

Endnotes

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