

Vol I Issue VIII Feb 2014

ISSN No: 2321-5488

*International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

Research Direction

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Welcome to Research Direction
ISSN No.2321-5488

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THE ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

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Abstract:

India has operated an open democratic political system based on universal adult franchise. Elections have been held at regular intervals, and political parties have competed and participated openly in electoral politics. The actual operation of the democratic process in India has brought into sharp focus the complexity of the relationship between politics and society. The framework of politics in any democratic society is characterized by the general and specific features of the interaction between politics and the social structure. The general feature of politics in all democratic societies is that it intervenes to influence society and that it also reflects the social reality. This interventionist and reflects the social reality. This interventionist and reflective character of politics cannot, however, be taken for granted. It has been empirically observed that instead of playing an activist role in society, politics become passive and reflective of social forces.

KEY WORDS:

Indian Politics , democratic political , Elections , democratic societies .

INTRODUCTION

The activist and reflective roles of politics in society can also lead to a conflict between politics and society. While keeping in mind the complexity of the relationship between politics and society, it may be stated that the politics of transitional societies reveals more complexities than the politics of polarized ones. In all transitional societies the social structure, institutions, relationships, roles and identities are in a state of flux and the new and emerging social categories and linkage are involved in a continuous struggle with established social norms and relations. The relationship between politics and society can't be neatly observed if the society has reached a stage of polarization rather than in a society where numerous levels of relationship are involved in a struggle between the old and the new. The framework of analysis applicable to Indian society has to grapple with the stage of transition and the specificities and complexities of the relationship between society and politics in the context of change.

India is attempting a reconciliation between a modern democratic political systems with a social system which has its firm foundations in ancient culture. Many ancient social structures are persisting. In one sense, the modern democratic political system has been superimposed on people who are greatly attached to their past and the dynamics of contemporary Indian society derives from a struggle or conflict between an emerging democratic politics on the one hand and the loyalties of people rooted in the Indian past on the other. Another important dimension of contemporary Indian society is that its material foundations are changing: India is building a capitalist society. The logic of growth of capitalism

In India is that the rural economy is becoming commercialized, commodities are produced for the market, surpluses are generated in the rural economy on capitalist lines, and in many regions capitalist framing has emerged. To be sure, this economic transformation in the feudal and semi-feudal rural economy has many regional variations and diversities and the levels of development are uneven, but the

THE ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

direction of development is clearly towards the building of a rural capitalist economy linked with the overall capitalist development of India. Since the capitalist development in India has been slow, many remnants of the past persist, and these make Indian society multi-structural. Pre-capitalist formations are found co-existing with capitalist social formations.

A specific feature of the development of contemporary Indian society is that all basic changes have been initiated by the Indian state. The Indian State is the agency of change in society, and for performing such a Central role the State seeks its legitimacy through the democratic verdict of the people. Politics in India is a Pre-eminent factor in societal changes, and this is what is responsible for the complexity of the interactions between politics and society. Further, large masses of the people suffer from social and economic discriminations, and they look to the State functionaries for protection and they look to the State functionaries for protection and survival while those who belong to the vulnerable strata of society seek protection from the state, the privileged and powerful seek to control state institutions and resources for protection and promotion of their material interests. The essence of the struggle in India: who can control State power through the democratic verdict of the people? Thus political parties and elections have assumed great importance in India because State power can be controlled only through democratically legitimized methods.

The social structure in India is to a large extent based on the caste-system. Due to western education, Caste bonds began to weaken India. Rapid means of transport and communication introduced by the British in India brought the people of different parts of the country into contact with each other. Later on, the British Government discovered that one caste could be played against another. Therefore, they followed the policy of divided and rule and set one caste against the other.

Though Indian Constitution abolishes Caste system but every political party tries to use caste for country, therefore the Indian National Congress decided to do away with the caste-system in India, when the Constitution was being framed. The untouchability was abolished in all shapes and forms. Separate Electorate were also abolished and the Indian Constitution was based on justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. The Constitution, however, made special reservations and safeguards for certain Castes and Classes. Though these safeguards were made for a certain period only in order to enable them to rise to a higher standard but they continued to be extended as no political party wanted to lose their support, whose numerical strength is very large. Therefore, the caste has penetrated deep into the Indian society.

In India, democracy was introduced according to the new Constitution. Soon every party began to vie with one another to get maximum votes in the election and capture power. Therefore, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribes whose status in the society hierarchy was very low became conscious of their tremendous strength. Every Party wanted to ride to power by getting their votes. Even while distributing the tickets and formation of ministries, Caste considerations were given the uppermost consideration. 2 Generally, the party ticket was given to that candidates belong to the same caste, then only the voters do not succumb to this temptation. They then vote on the basis of the party or the nearness to the candidates. This clearly shows that caste in modern India is still playing a dominant role. Therefore, Prof. Srinivas has correctly said that the caste "is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including most vocal elements in condemning it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action".

The influence of caste permeates every area and level of political and administrative life of the nation. It begins with the electoral politics. All parties including the so-called secular parties like the CPI and CPM selects their candidates for elections with an eye on the Caste composition of the constituencies concerned. Every party tries to select candidates from the numerically dominant caste in the electoral area. In electoral campaigns party leaders make open or disguised appeal to caste sentiments. It is not uncommon that the voters of a particular caste or Caste group vote en block for the candidate of their own caste.

In some caste casting one's vote is thought to be like giving away one's daughter in marriage. There is an electoral maxim in Haryana : Jat ki beti Jat Ko, Jat ki vote Jat ko (a Jat gives his daughter away in marriages to a Jat, so he gives his vote to a Jat.) Prof. Srinivas rightly observes that the caste "is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including the most vocal in condemning it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action".

It is not in the electoral politics alone that the influence of caste is visible. When a ministry is formed in a State or at the Centre, caste considerations are always kept in mind. Every chief minister tries to ensure that all dominant castes in the State are adequately represented in his council of ministers. It is considered to be obligatory that every Union or State cabinet has one or more Harijan ministries. In many States reservation in government jobs for backward classes has been provided. The various forms of assistance available under the community development schemes are distributed on caste basis.

The factors responsible for the dominance of caste in politics are many. First no party has a clear-cut ideology or a definite socio-economic programme. Every Party swears by Gandhism, democracy, socialism and secularism. But none of them is sincere to any of these ideals. In practical politics every party

THE ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

is guided only by one consideration, how to capture power. Even the communist parties which profess secularism are no exception to it. If the parties were to be organized on ideological or programmatic basis, caste and communal factors would naturally be weakened. Secondly, the Indian political system is highly competitive. In their pursuit of power parties and politicians leave no stone unturned to mobilize social groups to build up for themselves as wide a support as possible.

“The process of politics,” writes Rajani Kothari, “is one of identifying and manipulating existing structure in order to mobilize support and consolidate positions when the caste structure provides one of the most important organizational clusters in which population is found to live, politics must strive to organize through such a structure. The alleged casteism in politics is thus no less than politicization of caste.”

In simple words it means that the political leaders belonging to different castes seek to secure political and other advantages for themselves” at the expense of others and to this end they utilize the caste sentiment. Caste consciousness and caste prejudices which exist among the masses are thus turned by politicians into caste passions.

It may be noted that the impact of caste is not uniform at all levels of politics. It is most widely spread at local levels. In the panchayat raj institutions politics is exclusively dominated by the caste factor. In villages and small towns illiteracy is widespread, caste prejudices are deep-seated and the general outlook of the people is very narrow. Besides, constituencies are small. Naturally, it becomes easy for local politicians to mobilize voters on caste basis. But the role of caste at the levels of state and national politics is not so prominent. Constituencies being very large, it is not possible for candidates to win election with the exclusive support of a single caste or a single group of castes. They have to win the support of other castes also. However, it would be wrong to state that at the higher levels of politics the caste factor disappears.

Another important fact about the role of state is that it is not uniform in all States. Although no State of the Indian Union is immune to the impact of caste politics, it is more intense and widespread in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

It is difficult to evaluate the role of caste in politics. Some students of the Indian Political system hold the view that casteism is playing a progressive role in modernizing Indian society. The primary function of caste politics has been to transfer authority from the higher to the lower and middle castes. Casteism has become a means of leveling the old order of inequality and uplifting the downtrodden sections of society. It has created in them a sense of self-respect and generated the consciousness that if they unite on caste basis they can challenge the dominance of the higher castes and better their economic lot and social standing. However, this view is highly untenable. In reality, casteism is inimical to the interest of the masses belonging to all castes.

“The existence of caste consciousness, caste prejudices, discontent on the basis of caste inequalities—all these are impediments in the way of the development of the country as a whole, and therefore, of the development of 'lower' and 'backward' castes themselves. Caste separatism, therefore, hinders, rather than helps, the advancement of the 'lower' castes themselves.” (Nambudiripad)

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