

The Role Of Caste In Indian Politics

Mr. Sachin Bhagwant Lokhande

Assistant Professor

KRT Arts and Commerce College, Vani Tal. Dindori, Dist. Nashik

Abstract

The present research paper highlights Caste system is a prime feature of the social structure in India. In India caste identity and solidarities are the primary channels through which electoral and political support is mobilized within the political system. It is an inscriptive system of status and hierarchy. The present political System encourages the use of caste as a means of mustering support as well as a means to enable the illiterate and politically ignorant masses of India to participate in the modern democratic process where the caste structure provides one of the most important organizational clusters in which the population is bound to live, politics must strive to organize through such a structure. It is omnipresent and extensive and controls and defines all social, economic and political relationships for the individual. Recently, it has been argued that political competition may have similar effects on economic performance as market competition. This study empirically inspects the role of caste in Indian politics.

Key Words: Caste, Indian Politics, Social and economic

Introduction

Caste has influenced the policy-making of the government, for example the policy of reservation in favor of certain castes. The programmes, policies and declarations of political parties are made, keeping in view the caste factor. Even different positions within a political party are distributed in terms of caste configurations. Caste plays a very important role in elections and voting. Political parties select their candidates on the basis of caste composition in the constituency. The voting in elections and mobilization of political support from top to bottom moves on the caste lines. The administration has not escaped the influence of the caste in India. The postings, transfers and appointments of public officials are influenced by caste considerations.

The political leadership in many political parties emerges and survives in politics on the basis of the support of certain caste groups.

Politics finds material for its articulation by drawing the caste system into its web and molding it into its own design. Caste by making politics their sphere of activity asserts their identity. Politicians mobilize caste groupings and identities in order to organize their power. Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership decided by birth. Members of such local group are endogamous, i.e. they tend to enter into marital relationships among themselves. It was institutionalized into government organizations by British colonizers. The removal of the boundaries between “civil society” and “political society” meant that caste now

played a huge role in the political arena and also influenced other government-run institutions such as police and the judicial system. Though caste seemed to dictate one's access to such institutions, the location of that caste also played a pivotal role. If a lower caste were concentrated enough in one area, it could then translate that pocket of concentration of its caste members into political power and then challenge the hegemony of locally dominant upper caste. In the context of interactions between caste and politics Rajni Kothari has pointed out three major aspects of caste system.

Firstly, the secular dimension by which it is evident that caste as a stratified system has not received much attention. In fact caste system is predominated by factionalism and caste cleavages, patterns of alignment and realignment among the various strata and a continuous striving for social mobility.

Secondly, the integration dimension by which the caste system not only determines the individual's social status on the basis of the group to which he is born but also differentials and assigns occupational and economic roles. It thus gives a place to every individual from the highest to the lowest and makes for a high degree of identification and integration.

Thirdly, the dimension of consciousness by which as Rani Kathari puts it, "It is not politics that gets caste ridden it is caste that gets politicized."

In the study of "Caste, Class and Occupation" (1961) Ohurye have made an attempt to give his views and opinion on the history and the origin of the caste-system as it was in the early period and at the later period among the Hindus of India. As regards caste in recent and contemporary times, he has restricted the treatment to the institution as it is found among the Hindus. According to him, whatever the elements of caste happen to occur among the other communities of India are derivative, and as such do not serve to illuminate the problem of caste.

Srinivas in his study, "*Social Change in Modern India*" (1966), he systematically tries to consider the two concepts; Sanskritization and Westernization which he put forward to explain some features of religious, cultural, and social change in India. Sanskritization seems to have occurred throughout Indian history and still continues to occur. Westernization, on the other hand, refers to changes introduced into Indian society during British rule and which continue, in some cases with added momentum, in independent India

Mahar Michael's work on "*The Untouchables in Contemporary India*" (1972) is a revised edition of a collection of papers presented by different scholars in a conference at the University of Arizona along with other pertinent writings. The disciplinary perspective represented includes Law, Anthropology, History, Economics, Sociology, Political Science and Religion. A number of common topics such as; the repercussions of government policy within village communities, the administrative and legal problems posed by such changes, and the plight of the individual caught up in a period of rapid transition from one of the world's most ancient ways of life to an uncertain future etc are treated from various perspectives throughout the collection.

A study on "*Harijan Elite*" (1977) conducted by Sachchidananda in which he seeks to examine two hundred cases of Harijan elite drawn from five scheduled caste groups in Bihar. The main thrust of the study is to analyze the status of these elites in their own community as also in the

wider local community. Findings shows that the evidence of politicization has touched the Harijan elite but the scheduled caste masses are not very much touched by this process. The government policy of protective discrimination further widens the gap between Harijans and the rest of the community and there by hinders the process of integration between the two. The only way out of the dilemma is to hasten the pace of development by fixing the deadline to be reached in a couple of decades and thereafter put an end to protective discrimination.

Lalita Chandrashekar's work on "*Social Mobility of the Scheduled Castes: Mid- nineteenth Century to the Present Day*" (1977) examines the avenues of social mobility available to, and pursued by, the untouchables during the last century of British rule, and in the post-independence period. The changes occurring at the societal level, such as introduction of a cash economy, institutionalization of parliamentary democracy, policy of "protective discrimination" etc. while the changes in the society may be regarded as exogamous changes, the social movements of the untouchables themselves, be they Sanskritization or politicization, may be viewed as instances of endogamous change (M.Phil, J.N.U).

The caste system played a significant role in determining the content and direction of the processes of political socialization, political mobilization and institutionalization within the framework of modern democracy. The dynamics of caste and class were at the root of the complexity of Indian politics in its functioning.

References

Web links

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