

Caste in Indian Political System

A functional democracy has its own contradictions and compulsions and it naturally facilitates the interplay of various forces in the society and in the body politic. In the process, politics of a society sometimes take simpler or narrow form in the sense that it starts to have a baneful impact over the total system, simultaneously influencing the value system of the country. India has been a unique society to recognise ascriptive caste system to determine social status of people. Being a dominant influence in the society, caste started affecting the Indian political system in a major way, whose repercussions we can see in different agitations and Mandalised politics of today's India.

The term 'caste' has been derived from the Portuguese word 'Casta', meaning breed, race or kind. A caste society signifies a population with a common general culture, divided by social barriers into endogamous units, each of which possesses some peculiar cultural specificities. Caste in India may be defined as a homogeneous, endogamous social control organisation with distinctive rituals, especially those pertaining to religious purity. Today, it pervades almost all strata of our society so much so that it is found among other religious orders like the Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

The caste system received a shattering blow when the British administration put an effective check on its horizontal tendency by introducing new means of transport and communication, law and justice and bureaucratic organisation. The civil and criminal law abolished caste panchayats and established the principle of equality before law irrespective of all caste considerations. But after the Mutiny of 1857, British rulers realised that the safety of their regime was connected with the keeping of Indian people divided on the lines of religion and caste and so, once again caste gained prominence for the British masters who knew it well that in our society, it divided the people into small groups and, thereby, obstructed the emergence of nationalist sentiment.

However, after independence our forefathers wreaked an irreparable damage to caste politics by abolishing untouchability and prohibiting discrimination on various grounds including caste. But caste has risen from its ashes thanks to the doctrine of "affirmative

discrimination." Today, caste has entered so deep into Indian society as to intermingle with several other trends such as communalism, regionalism and linguism. The reason for this lies in the fact of interaction between caste and politics. It confirms the impression that where a democratic polity consciously resolves to build a modern nation, the upshot is a progressive transformation and mobilisation of various elements to suit the new atmosphere. It is for this reason that while caste has been politicised, in the process it has provided Indian politics with processes and symbols of political articulation.

Caste in contemporary Indian politics plays a very important role behind the facade of parliamentary government. The political behaviour of people is influenced by caste considerations as is quite evident at the time of distribution of election tickets and composition of ministries. It is found that members of a particular caste vote in bloc for a candidate of their own caste, if so available, or for some other candidate in pursuance of the decision of their caste panchayat or some other body. As far as possible and practicable, the people prefer a candidate of their own caste irrespective of his merits and demerits. Hence, while selecting a candidate to a particular constituency, it is foreseen whether he would be able to get the support of his caste or not. Similar attention is paid when the list of party's office bearers is prepared.

Moreover, when a single party is not in a position to have its own candidates, alliances are formed on the basis of caste to recommend the name of a person after arrangements of give and take are made to the satisfaction of the constituents. It is only in a strife-ridden situation that people have the unusual cause of shaking off their caste orientation and, what is euphemistically termed, vote according to their conscience.

But the fact remains that caste politicisation is not at all a one-sided affair. If caste orientation involves politics, politics in turn leaves its effect upon caste solidarity and hierarchy. A caste conscious of the fact of social stratification strives to better its position for the sake of modernising the life of its members and thereby saving itself from the onslaught of social injustice.

Believing that it is quite eligible for participation in a representative democracy like other advanced castes, a caste asks even for representation in government through the membership of a political party irrespective of its position in the traditional social stratification. A successful assertion of privileges made by a caste is in many ways comparable to the extension of corporate liberties characteristics of the growth of English Liberalism. For instance, the Shanans (traditionally low caste South Indian tappers of today) had a series of riots until the feudal potentate of Travancore conceded that their women folks could cover their bosoms in any way, but different from the women of the upper castes.

A study of the caste politicisation in India has a salient characteristic of its own in this regard that while it has a major role at the local and regional levels, it is marginal at the all-India level. It is also found that while sub-castes tend to decrease, caste groups increase in importance at the higher levels in the political system. One more striking feature in this direction is that while no state of the Indian union may be said to be free from the shackles of caste politics, it has been of maximum intensity south of the Vindhyas. But today it is North India which is the focus of caste politics.

Indisputable is the fact that caste has demonstrated itself as an undesirable, even harmful asset of Indian politics. It has cultivated and invigorated the evil of caste patriotism by putting group loyalty above merit and competence and narrow selfishness over public well-being, all set for jeopardising the effectiveness of government's vital functions.

In a word, new conditions of independent India have given a fresh vigour to the politicisation of caste as a result of which it has begun to manifest itself as regional rather than a local force increasingly independent of competitiveness in relation to other castes rather than a natural social group. W.B. Morris Jones in his book "The Government and Politics of India" says,— "The central discovery is that politics is more important to caste and castes are more important to politics than before." The fact remains, as long as the liberal democratic values don't seep through all the echelons of Indian society through constructive negotiation of educational, social, economic and political egalitarianism, caste shall continue to be an important factor in Indian society and politics.

Salient Points

- Caste affects the Indian political system in a major way like Mandalised Politics.
- Caste in India may be defined as a homogeneous, endogamous social control organisation with distinctive rituals.
- Britishers kept Indian people divided on the lines of religion and caste to ensure the safety of their regime.
- Despite tools like elimination of untouchability, caste has risen from its ashes due to "affirmative discrimination".
- If caste orientation involves politics, politics in turn leaves its effect upon caste solidarity and hierarchy.
- Earlier, Caste politics has been of maximum intensity south of the Vindhyas. But today it is North India which is the focus of caste politics.
- While it has a major role at the local and regional levels, it is marginal at the all-India level.
- Till liberal democratic values don't seep through all the echelons of Indian society caste shall continue to be an important factor.

Glossary

Baneful: destructive

Endogamous: marrying within a specific community

Euphemistical: the substitution of a mild or vague expression for one thought to be offensive and harsh

Bosoms: the breast of a human being

Invigorated: fill with life and energy