

CASTE AND POLITICS IN INDIA

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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 on Indian politics. In present paper reviewed that, the current situation of politics while concerned with the caste in India. This trend of politics in India is harmful for national integration, social harmony and development.

Key words: Caste, Politics, India

INTRODUCTION

As explained by experts in the field such as Dr Susan Bayly, caste is not the essence of Indian culture and civilization. It is rather a contingent and variable response to the enormous changes that occurred in the **subcontinent's political landscape** both before and after the colonial conquest.¹

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines Caste as "a Hindu hereditary class of socially equal persons, united in religion and usually following similar occupations,

distinguished from other castes in the hierarchy by its relative degree of purity or **pollution**."² The term Caste is commonly used to refer to two distinct concepts of **corporate affiliation: the 'Jāti'** (birth group) and the Varna (order, class or kind). The term Jāti is used for the units of thousands or sometimes millions of people with whom one may identify oneself for such purposes as marriage.

There are thousands of titles associated with specific Jātis in different parts of the country: Rajput, Chamar and Jat – these terms have come to be widely recognized. But these terms are unfamiliar to people outside a limited geographical area. In contrast to this profusion of Jātis or birth-groups, the concept of Varma involves a scheme with only four divisions. Thus

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what would now be called Hindu society is conceived of as being divisible into four very large units which transcend specific regional associations. These are: Brāhmana, Kstriya, Vaisya and Sudra. They are commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence. Then there is **another caste called the 'fifth' one (called Pañcama)**, the so-called **'untouchable'** (the hill and forest population who are called tribals, inclusive). This group occupies a place below, outside this Varna scheme. The Brāhmanas are commonly identified with those who fulfil the calling of priests and spiritual preceptors.

The Ksatriyas (etymologically, the 'protectors') are usually rulers and warriors. The Vaiyas are those who have commercial livelihood, and are associated with other producers and wealth-creators as well. The Sudras are toilers and **artisans. People belonging to the 'fifth' group perform 'unclean' services such as cremation, killing animals for food, etc.**³ But in real life, these principles have often been widely contested and modified. The implication would be that all who are born into the so-called **'clean' castes, rank as high and pure**, regardless of wealth, achievement or other individual circumstances.

Dr. M.N. Srinivas has brought in the **'theory of Sanskritization', an historical process of a group moving upward socially through the embrace of the high or 'Sanskritic' practices, as opposed to local or popular forms of social and religious practices.** Thus in his view, caste society is mobile and fluid, rather than static and inflexible.⁴

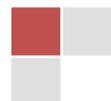
CASTE AND POLITICS

Caste has always been central to modern Indian politics. Even the power structure of mediaeval India was based on caste. Caste also operated as the central principle in the distribution of power and material resources in the colonial period. Colonialism in India created a democratic and modernist space; nevertheless this space was also predominantly captured by upper-caste groups.

The nationalist struggle against the imperial power was aimed at establishing the caste-class hegemony. Non-Brahmin and low-caste movements were active during the colonial era, broadly pursuing two aims: achieving upward caste-class mobility and annihilation of caste. The caste system played a significant role in determining the content and direction of the processes of political socialisation, political mobilisation and institutionalisation 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. Behind the seemingly religious and communal movements in post-independent India, it was the dynamics of caste-class hegemony that was the real operational factor. Both the anti-caste and the upwardly mobile caste movements are guiding the pro-preservation movement, which aims at upward class mobility of the hitherto excluded castes.

The pro-imperialist bourgeois policies of the ruling class and the struggles against these policies are also influenced and shaped by the tensions



and contradictions in caste-class dynamics. In the years following independence, the traditional upper castes continued to rule in most parts of India. For example, until 1977, upper castes continued to hold prominent elected positions in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in the Indian union.^{5,6}

Until 1962, as many as 63% of ruling Congress members of the Legislative Assembly came from elite castes.⁷ Soon, however, traditional peasant castes such as Ahirs, Kurmis, Koeri, Lodh Rajputs, and Jats began to dominate the political scene of northern India. In the southern state of Tamilnadu, the Vanniyars and Thevars have become assertive, and in Karnataka, control was wrested in the mid-1950s from the traditional rural elite within the Congress party by the Vokkaligas and Linagayats.^{8,9}

In the North Indian Hindi speaking belt, upper caste members of parliament fell below 50% for the first time in 1977. The challenge to the established Congress was mounted in Uttar Pradesh rather effectively in the late 1960s by a coalition of peasant castes led by Charan Singh. In Bihar, also, there was a significant decline of upper caste members of the legislative assembly after 1977.¹⁰

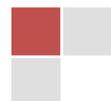
DALIT IN POLITICS

The binary relationship between caste and politics is trotted out for re-examination whenever there's a major election. That caste affiliation is a fundamental determinant of political calculation and voting patterns is a commonplace of academic and street discourse.

Even when the relationship is complex, and not easily reducible to a limited set of factors, it acts as a matrix which encloses the electoral field. This is usually denied or deplored by the urban upper class which occupies the apex of the social structure and whose concerns and ideology are reflected in the mainstream media. But for the overwhelming majority of the Indian bourgeoisie, attached in some way or the other to the countryside, caste considerations usually govern political affiliation either directly or indirectly.¹¹

The Republican party was founded by the legendary Baba sahib Ambedkar in 1957. He later led his people to renounce Hinduism and embrace Buddhism instead.¹² It is true that most of the votaries of the Republican party of India (RPI) belong to the Mahar caste because other formerly untouchable castes of the region, such as the Mangs, Matangs, and Chambaras, have stayed away from it. In fact, they often veer toward supporting the Bharatiya Janata party,¹³ which is, ironically, a right-wing Hindu organization. This is because many members of these other castes believe that the RPI is a vehicle of upward mobility for the Mahars alone. They have also desisted from becoming Buddhists.

Nevertheless, Baba sahib Ambedkar's shadow looms large even today in the politics of the former untouchables. They resent the term "Harijan" (children of God) that Gandhi used for them as they consider it too patronizing. They would rather be known as "Dalits," or the oppressed. Ambedkar was the first to use this term to denote the Scheduled Castes for its obvious combative edge.¹⁴



Ambedkar, today, has been deified among the Buddhist Mahars of Maharashtra and has a similar iconic status to Buddha in many Mahar families.¹⁵ Ambedkar's death anniversary in 1981 provided the occasion for Kanshi Ram to inaugurate the Dalit ShoshitSamajSangharshSamiti (or DS-4). In its attempt to attract as wide a range as possible, the DS-4 also called out to Muslims to help fight the privileges of the traditional elite castes.

According to Vora, no Dalit leader after Ambedkar paid any consistent attention to economic issues.¹⁶ Dalits are, however, very active when it comes to voting in elections. As Yadav notes, the turnout of Scheduled Caste (or Dalit) voters was as high as 62.2% in the 1998 elections.¹⁷ In all, caste has become an important determinant in Indian society and politics, the new lesson of organised politics and consciousness of caste affiliations learnt by the hitherto despised caste groups have transformed the contours of Indian politics where shifting caste-class alliances are being encountered.

The impact of these mobilizations along caste-identities has resulted not only in the empowerment of newly rising groups but has amplified the power of stimulating politics and possibly leading to a growing crisis of governability.

MODERN INDIA

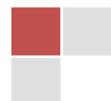
At the beginning of the twentieth century, caste rank was not a good indicator of material deprivation. It is highly unlikely that the heterogeneity within a caste and between castes sharing the same administrative rank would have diminished over time, while observed economic inequalities have been

very high clearly, the caste-based public policy lacks empirical foundation. However, the Indian state is actually conveying the benefits to the privileged by treating the rich and the poor belonging to the caste categories as equals. Thus the ruling coalition co-opts the elite of the lower castes, strengthens itself and weakens the depressed groups.

At the same time the policy and its regular extensions, by persistently focusing on caste, keep the poor divided along caste lines. Thus caste quotas are extremely useful as a tool of governance. It is hypocritical to argue that this policy does anything to eliminate acute, long standing deprivation.¹⁸ Relationships between castes have become more relaxed today. There is more food sharing between castes and a lot more eating done at local restaurants where caste distinctions are less likely to be made. One of the biggest changes that took place in India was occupational pursuits among men¹⁹ (and women later on). Earlier, most men did not veer away from their caste-linked occupations, such as blacksmithing and pottery making.

Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs, teaching, retail and services, and machine repair. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before, and landownership has become more diversified.¹⁹

Also, the idea that purity and pollution is caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. It has, however, only somewhat diminished in the public, whereas behind closed doors and on ceremonial occasions, purification



rituals related to caste status are still observed. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for competing for access to resources and power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and improvement in life chances. This trend is associated to India's favored policies and the execution.

CONCLUSION

We have to come to certain conclusions and offer viable solutions to the problems created by a wrong understanding and application of the standard of Caste in India. What has been there for centuries cannot be undone in a day or two. Therefore there is change all over the place – in the thinking of people about caste, community, religious and philosophical values. Nothing is objectionable so long as there is no compulsion, hatred, animosity. The world is created by God in a wonderful and mysterious way. Diversity is the Art of Nature; but Unity is the Heart of God. This is what the Rgveda (I.164.46) declared ages ago: 'ekaḥ sad viprābahudhāvadanti' (What exists is One but wise men call it by different names). Let people do what they think is right and good for them; but let them not battle in the name of religion, philosophy, race, caste, class, community or political affiliations.

This trend of politics in India is harmful for national integration, social harmony and development of the nation.

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