



Politicization of caste in India

Dr. Silky Tyagi

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report in 1990 and the anti- Mandal agitation by upper castes youth and parties have, according to Kancha Ilaiah, politicized and homogenized Dalits. According to Ilaiah, after the demolition of Babri Masjid minorities have started looking towards backward castes formation for a security belt. He point out that when Hindutva school is appealing to the sense of the religious community, the Dalit Bahujan school is trying to woo the sense of caste community^[1].

Now, this caste politicization did not always lead to coalitions. In fact, the caste by its very nature is a divisive factor^[2]. It separates one backward caste from another and makes them compete among themselves. Each caste thus gets organized for its own politics and develops its own leadership where commonalities are forgotten. The backward caste party gets factionalized in the process^[3]. It sometimes even becomes difficult to keep track of factions of splits within splits, for instance in the case of Janta Dal^[4]. This caste logic not only separate the backward castes from one another but also brings in the hierarchy element i.e. the castes which are little ahead of with regard to income, educational and organization capture and deny any share in power to others.

Keywords: dalits, backward castes/ classes, politicization, caste mobilization, coalition

Introduction

One of the important features that emerged with respect to caste after independence was the mobilization of intermediate caste. The intermediate caste is caste that exists in between the elite and the lowest castes. They are mainly both agricultural and artisan castes, some of who are economically disadvantaged as the 'low caste'^[5]. These intermediate caste acquired opportunities through increased voting power and abolition of zamindari^[6] system. But their leaders resented the fact that the central government, most state governments and the Congress organizations were dominated by the upper caste Leaders. Intermediate castes with the economic resources sought not only political power but educational benefits and urban jobs for their children. As they acquired opportunities, they came into conflict with persons from upper castes. Later this conflict became most intense when resources opportunities have been denied or have been perceived as going to other group or Locality rather than one's own group^[7].

With caste mobilization began the upsurge in the participation of marginal groups (though it was initially in the intermediate castes which later spread to the lower castes) which also gave rise to factional politics where various political parties facilitated participation on ethnic appeals. This process continued in the later period too.

Caste Mobilization and Politicization

The caste mobilization that began in the post Nehru period took another turn after the Second Backward Class Commission report or Mandal Commission report (of 1990)^[8]. The Mandal commission in 1990 extended the scope of reservation from SCs/STs to OBCs or other backward classes (which was not a homogeneous category) aimed at extending power to the backward castes. Infact, according to Hasan, "the growing power of backward castes in the wake of the Green revolution obliged the states in north India

most notably U.P. to initiate the Mandal Commission Reforms^[9]."

Thus beneficiaries, in the above case, are only the upper echelons of the backward caste. Aware of the logic of democratic politics in which the majority is won by the numerical strength, encourage dalit leaders to launch their own platform^[10]. However, this too did not leader to any substantial change either. The main aim of these dalit leaders revolved around capturing power as the only means of getting social justice^[11]. Benefits have thus followed to privileged minority within the Lower castes, the dalits still remain the most dispossessed and disadvantaged group^[12]. Here, according to Hasan, "A point worth nothing is that low Levels of income and education rather than just under-representation and non-recognition is the major constraints on access and spread of social opportunities. Yet most of the newly mobilized people in U.P. continue to see themselves as members of caste and communities..."^[13]. By concentrating on a single cause of pursuing political and state power) various backward castes and Dalit political parties have failed to develop any structural transformation or an egalitarian project.

The two subjects that have the capacity to influence the well being of subordinate groups; law reforms and education cannot be addressed without structural reform^[14]. In fact, according to Hasan, "Equality in distribution was never a priority of any government. Thus, for instance, in Uttar Pradesh, despite of the fact that Dalit upliftment has been conceptualized as social justice that is both retributive in character and meant exclusive for dalits. On the other hand no clear agenda have been emerged 'mere symbolism' to obtain support and have depleted to resources of the state contributing to the fiscal crisis, without addressing the longer terms deprivations faced, particular by subaltern Dalits^[15].

Another issue that arose after the Mandal report and during agitation against it, was redefinition of the concept of 'poverty' and 'backwardness' by a section of dominant elite [16]. This redefinition led to the argument in favour of economic criteria for affirmative action. The phenomena of 'backwardness' is viewed in purely economic terms thus poverty and the issue backwardness are no longer seen in the structural setting of political and social context. The specificity of the Indian situation has been lost sight of which is characterized by economic backwardness resulting from social stagnation and governmental neglect which had their original in colonial rule [17].

As a result, for example, the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha argued that all Kshatriyas should be considered backward because they were economically backward and the various castes among the kshatriyas share a common culture and social customs. According to Rajputs, particularly those who are unable to compete openly, should get the benefit of reservation. Similarly, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas communities, realizing that they would not get backward status, as caste, insisted that the Chinappa Reddy Commission adopt economic criteria to identify social and educationally backward classes [18].

But here, Sheth argues that poverty in India is essentially a group phenomenon (a characteristic of group). It is the consequence of their social backwardness and not its cause. The source of backwardness is the unjust and iniquitous status system, which has over a long period of time systematically prevented the ritually low ranking caste groups from acquiring any significant role in the system of knowledge, political power. Even with the rapid progress in modernization and development (established since independence) resulted in the benefits being appropriate by the upper echelons while leaving the lower echelons of the social hierarchy with little or no access to knowledge and political power have not been able to reap benefits [19].

This unevenness of distribution of the benefits of change to the different layers of social hierarchy has been further heightened by the yawning chasm between a stagnant and virtually homeostatic structure on the one hand and on the other the powerful impact of cultural and economic influence from without [20].

Further, the social factor, which is largely ignored in the rubric of economic criteria, cannot be ignored because the socially backward is at a more disadvantaged situation than those who is merely economically backward. Thus reservation becomes relevant in the case of Scheduled Castes then economically disadvantaged. For example Richard Pais, who has done research on scheduled caste employees in government jobs in Mangalore in Karnataka observed that the attitude in any work organization towards the Scheduled Castes is that they enjoy their preserve positions because of their caste status and the policy of reservation. The majority of the Scheduled Castes (about 73 percent) on their part also attributed to their present employment to the reservation faction. They said that they would not have got the job due to the caste discrimination in Hindu society [21].

Moreover, along with the growing stress on economic criteria, there has been a growing trend giving weight to the idea of 'merit'. It is considered that the 'merit' should be preferred than reservation. But merit is viewed as an inherited 'virtue' of the upper caste class groups and is counter posed against 'numbers which are generally

represented by groups occupying the low rungs of society. In such a context democratic assertion (i.e. as democratic political rights) by the socially deprived but numerically strong groups is seen by the dominant political rights is seen by the dominant elites as a destabilizing influence [22]. This factor, however, is argued by Parekh and Mitra. According to them "the merit argument as advanced by the anti reservationists is a historical and arrests history at a convenient and arbitrary point. It prevent the emergence of merit in hitherto untapped areas. For centuries SCs/STs have been oppressed and denied opportunities for growth. There is no evidence to support the unarticulated but the are naturally and inherently inferior and widely held racist belief that they are naturally and inherently inferior and endowed with Low intelligence. If we are therefore to tap their unutilized intellectual potential, enable them to break out of the cumulative cycle of deprivation and thereby increase the nationally available pool of merit, we must obviously give them additional facilities. Reservation of place is one of them.

Lastly, the economic criteria may offer an approach that is neither anti-non-secular nor caste in character yet it failed to register any significant impact on the India's traditional structure. The use of social criteria on the other hand, would enable groups occupying a Low status in the traditional hierarchy to overcome structural obstacles militating against their social and economic mobility [23].

Conclusion

What has been observed with regard to contemporary developments with regard to politicization of caste is the mobilization of caste groups for garnering votes and creating factions concentrating only on getting reservation and political power or/and stress on the economic criteria (or economic backwardness) for reservation. Social justice seems to be missing in all these cases.

Amidst such trends, Hasan observes that:

"Despite the steady increases in participation in elections from the lower social order. Still there remains a central contradiction at the heart of Indian democracy: an inclusive polity has so far not made for a more just and equal society [24]."

She further argues

"What then is the meaning and significance of greater political participation? What is the relationship between democracy and social and economic equality? What are the consequences of appealing to the electorate in ethnic and group terms, or making group demands on the state? Do political parties merely mirror divisions or do they help to deepen and extend them? [25]"

Today no major political party in India is publicly opposed to the demands of the special interests, no political party in India is opposed to the strong movements demanding large cast quotas in public sector jobs and admissions to higher education for the so-called backward castes [27]. Moreover, this does not end here, recently there have been growing demands for reservations in private sector and reservation to Muslim population. Thus Weiner rightly remarks:

"Today, politicians pick and choose which identity they want to use as the basis for political mobilization and socialization. Whichever identity they emphasize, the rhetoric is invariably of 'social justice' and equality [27]."

References

1. Vora in Vora and Palshikar(eds.), 2004: 278
2. Vora in Vora and Palshikar (eds.), 2004: 279
3. *ibid*
4. There seems to be around 10 splinter groups of Janta Dal. The Samajwadi party of Mulayam Singh Yadav, Rashtriya Lok Dal of Ajit Singh, Samajwadi Janta Party of ChandaShekhar, Indian National Lok Dal of Om Prakash Chautala, JD(U) of Secular, Rashtriya Janta Dal of Laloo Prasad Yadav, Biju Janta Dal of Naveen Patnaik, Smata Party of Nitish Kumar and he Lok Shakti of Ramkrishna (ed.) See. *Ibid*.
5. See. Brass, Paul R., 'The Politics of India Since Independence' in Gordon Johnson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Indian IV.*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, 206.
6. Landlordism in India.
7. *Ibid*: 206-207.
8. It was not until 1978 when the Janta coalition displaced the Congress power at the centre, with considerable support in north India from Backward Caste groups that the central government again took up the issue of the preferential treatment for the backward castes by appointing the Second Backward Classes Commission (with B. P. Mandal as the Chairman). The Second Commission explicitly recommended 'caste as criterion' and identified 3248 castes as backward. But by the time the commission submitted its report in December 1980, the Congress had returned to power. The report was placed only in April 1982. The Congress government neither took a decision nor rejected the report. In August 1990 Prime Minister V.P. Singh, the leader of fragile non-Congress government in need of solidifying his electoral base announced 27 percent of reservation to OBCs (Other Backward Classes) in addition to 22 percent set aside for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The Government of India appointed the Backward Classes Commission in 1953. The Commission reported in 1955 identify in 2399 castes as socially and educationally backward classes. The government, however, did not accept the recommendations on the grounds that the Commission had not applied any objective tests for identifying backward classes.
9. Hasan Zoya, Representation and Redistribution The New Lower Caste Politics of North India, in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Partition and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, 2002, 378.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Pai, Sudha, 'Dalit Question and Political Response — Comparative Study of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in *Economy and Political Weekly*, 16th March 2004, 1142.
12. Hasan in Hasan (ed.), 2002, 389.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*: 380
15. Pai in *EPW*, March 2004, 1141.
16. Sheth, DL. 'Changing terms of elite discourse: The case of Reservation for Other Backward Classes' in TV. Sathyamurthy (ed.), *Social Change and Political Discourse in India — Structure of Power Movements of Resistance. Region, Religion Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press,1996:3:234.
17. *Ibid*.
18. Shah, 2002, 399.
19. Sheth in Sathyamurthy (ed.), 1996, 324.
20. *Ibid*.
21. Louis, Prakash, 'The Scheduled Castes and Tribes — The Reservation Debate' in *Economic and Political Weekly*,2003:2476-2477.
22. Sheth, DL. in 'Changing Terms of the Elite Discourse: The Case of Reservation from 'Other Backward Classes' in T.V. Sathyamurthy, (ed.). *Social Change and Political Discourse in India- Structure of Power Movements of Resistance, Vol.3, Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, 325.
23. *Ibid*.
24. Hasan in Hasan (ed.), 2002, 370.
25. *Ibid*.
26. Bardhan, Pranab, 'Sharing the spoils: group equity, development, and democracy' in Atul Kohli (ed.), *Contemporary South Asia in Indian Politics — The Success of India's Democracy*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001, 232-233.
27. Weiner. Myron, 2001, *The Struggle of India's Contemporary South Asia in Indian Politics*. Oxford University Press in Koh (ed.), 2001, 208.