

The Caste System in Indian Politics

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Abstract: *Cast is an important issue in Indian politics. The concept of cast is not new because cast has been known since ancient times. In ancient times there were four divisions of the caste. There are people of many castes in India today and most of them are marginalized and very poor. So the political parties use them for their own interests during the polls only to hold on to the vote bank. Although various state governments in India have implemented some projects for these marginalized or backward people but they have not been implemented properly in many cases. I have tried in this paper to show how the caste system evolved in Indian politics and the caste system is still Indian context as well as how relevant in politics.*

Keywords: cast, Indian politics, political party, vote bank

1. Introduction

Caste-based divisions have been prevalent among Hindus in India since ancient times. At the top of this caste system was the Brahmins and on the other hand the Shudras were considered untouchables. This caste system later became a permanent caste system and this system has spread not only within the Hindu society but also among the people of Muslim Christian Buddhism and Jainism. No other country in the world has a caste system like India. Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity have hurt the Indian system, but it has not weakened the caste system, but it can be said that these religions have also been included in the caste system. Although Islam entered India with the message of equality, it later became part of the caste system. In fact, the extent of caste system is observed everywhere in India.

In order to analyze the politics of India, one has to evaluate the role of caste, because as a democratic state, India wants to deny the caste system in the provisions of the Constitution, fundamental rights and state guiding principles. One person has expressed interest in building a democratic society on the basis of one vote. Equality and brotherhood among all citizens have been repeatedly mentioned. So in a word, the role of caste in Indian politics is not less today. One of the foundations of Indian politics is caste. Not only social life in India, but also economic and political aspects has developed around the consideration of caste. The caste system is the main basis of social stratification. However, the developments of industry, Western education, urbanization, communication, modernization, democratic environment and socialist ideology have greatly reduced the rigidity of the Indian national flag, but contemporary electoral politics has revived the system. Many theorists have elaborated on the role of the caste system in Indian politics, notably GS Ghure, MN Srinivas and others. Explaining Indian politics following them can lead to a scientific outlook. It is clear that caste system in India is a significant feature of Indian social structure.

Definition of cast

The literal translation of the word “caste” in most of Indian languages is jati. The term caste is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word casta which means race breed or lineage the Portuguese who first used the term caste in the

context of Indian society, in 16th century. The complex nature of the term makes the definition of the term a difficult task. The writers and thinkers are not unanimous with regard to the definition and characteristics of caste. Therefore, the term has been defined differently by different writers. Some of the definitions on the term follow-

It is very difficult for the Indian nation to come up with a definite solution. So sociologists have tried to define a nation based on characteristics. The definition of E.A.H Blunt is the most significant of all the definitions of race that are available. According to him, a caste is an endogenous group and collection of groups having a common name, membership of which is heredity, imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse, either following a common traditional occupation for claiming amount origin, and generally regarded forming a homogeneous community.

Indian sociologists DN Majumder and T.N Madan say that race is a closed group. No member of a nation can come out of his nation, but when he comes out, that nation becomes so. **According to Maclver and Page when status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste. Cooley says that when a class is somewhat strictly hereditary we may call it caste.**

Following Andre Betaille, a nation is a system in which a small group of people with different names exists, and the members of each group follow intermarriage, hereditary membership, and a specific life. This life is generally more or less associated with a particular type of scholarship or with different religious ranks under a classified system. On the basis of this practice the idea of purity and impurity prevails.

From the above definitions we come to know that caste is a social system that stratifies the people living in a society into divisions and such divisions or ranks are generally on the basis of decent, marriage and occupation. Historically the caste system in India consisted of four basic categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

Main traditional features of the caste system

Hierarchical Division of Society- One of the main features of the caste system is that it divides the members into different grades. For instances, in the Hindu caste system the Brahmins enjoy the highest grade and hence they are placed at the top of caste hierarchy. Likewise, the so-called “untouchables” are placed on the lowest level of caste hierarchy.

Restrictions on Food Habits-The caste system imposes certain restriction on food habits of the members. Basically the restrictions are on who should accept what kind of food and from whom. For instance, a Brahmin in North India, would accept on ‘pacca’ food i.e. food cooked in ghee only from some castes lower than his own. However, he would accept kachcha food i.e. food prepared with the use of water from Brahmins only. Since, Brahmins are placed at the top of caste hierarchy; any kind of food made by them is accepted by all castes. Moreover, there are restrictions on use of vegetables like onion, garlic, cabbage, carrot etc. this restriction is even today followed by many Brahmin families.

Restrictions on Social Relations- In the traditional caste-ridden society, there is the idea of “pollution.” It means the touch of a lower caste man (particularly an “untouchable”) would “pollute” a man of a higher caste. Even his shadow is considered to pollute a higher caste man. For instance, in Kerala, a Nayar could approach a Nambudari Brahmin but would not touch him. This practice continued for a long time. In Tamil Nadu, the Shanar toddy tapper had to keep a distance of 24 paces while approaching a Brahmin. All this resulted in the practice of “untouchability”.

Restriction on Marriage-The caste system imposes certain restrictions on marriage. Being an endogamous group, it imposes the rule of endogamy. According to this rule of marriage an individual has to marry within his or her own group.

Caste and Indian Constitution

1) Acts & Constitutional Provisions for a Casteless Society: India has one of the best constitutions, but it is rarely fully implemented. The below provisions are the results of the sincere efforts taken by the Great Indians.

- Protection of Civil Rights Act-1976
- Prevention of atrocities against SC & ST’s Act -1989

2) Fundamental Rights – First Right is the Right to Equality:

- Article 14 – Equality before the law.
- Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, gender, and colour.
- Article 16 – Equal opportunities in public employment.
- Article 17 – Abolition of untouchability.
- Article 18 – Abolition of titles.

Article 38 – To promote the welfare of the people by securing a social order permeated by justice – social, economic and political – and to minimize inequalities in income, status, facilities, and opportunities.

Article 46 – To promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs and other weaker sections of the

society and to save them from social injustice and exploitation.

Article 330 – Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha for SC and ST’s.

Article 332 – Reservation of Seats in State Assembly for SC and ST’s. Measures to be taken

Cast in Indian politics

The various interpretations of the cast in Indian politics are briefly discussed below

Cast Best Political Parties-An important factor in Indian politics is race. The presence of many caste-based political parties in Indian politics since independence has been noticed and these parties were formed in the interest of the development of their respective cast. DMK, AIMMK, Akali Dal etc. are some of the important political parties in Indian politics. During the election, every political party uses this nation for their campaign for the vote bank. At present, the same thing is happening in West Bengal between the two main parties, the Trinamool Congress and the BJP.

Caste-based pressure groups-There is many such pressure groups in India who put pressure on the government for their own interests in various ways. Some of the pressure groups can be mentioned here such as scheduled caste federation, Arya Samaj Sabha, Sanatan Dharma Sabha etc. All pressure groups work for their own interests.

Nomination of candidates during the time of vote-Caste is an important issue in Indian politics during elections. An important reason for this is that political parties field candidates according to the number of people living in a constituency and the population of a particular caste so that they can take advantage of electoral politics. Muslim candidates are deployed and in areas dominated by jats and Jat candidates are also deployed. Even secularist parties like Congress, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal take into consideration cast fact in selecting there candidates during the time of vote.

Caste violence- Caste-based violence often finds its way into politics. The traditional differences between higher and lower castes become vigorous and have turned into a violent and fierce struggle for power in society. The growing terrorization of the lower castes by the higher or even intermediary castes has been becoming a part of rural India’s political reality. In states like Maharashtra, Bihar, Gujarat and U.P caste violence has raised its head even in some urban areas. However, until today most of the caste based violence continues to characterize rural politics.

The demand for reservation by other communities- The provisions of the reservation made in the constitution have proved counterproductive also as the non-scheduled castes; have also started putting pressure on the government to make provisions of reservation for them.

In addition to the above discussion, some important points are written below-

- 1) The basis of the reservation should be economic not caste so that all the poor section of society are benefitted to it.
- 2) Media should play a neutral role.

- 3) Caste-based violence must be eliminated through well-organized efforts.
- 4) The recognition of caste-based political parties should be withdrawn.
- 5) The politician should rise above the politics of caste.
- 6) The education system should be remodeled on secular lines.
- 7) All schools must encourage community living by organizing community meals and all students should be included in it.
- 8) School textbooks should be carefully revised. The study material should teach the students that the caste system is made by man.
- 9) By promoting Inter-caste Marriage and by providing special offers for people whom do inter-caste marriage can bring changes in the next generation people.

2. Conclusion

An analysis of Indian politics and the caste system shows that the two have a very close relationship. Caste in India is an important feature in the field of social system and in different ranges. Judging by the current situation, it can be seen that this caste system has challenged democracy in India. On the other hand, another important thing is that during elections, various political parties take part in elections for their own self-interest. Caste based violence can also be noticed during elections. Establishment of a liberal democratic system in India based on justice, freedom and equality. But caste stands for inequality based on birth. One thing is clear, since the castes belong to a much marginalized population; the use of political parties for their own interests is creating a distance between the people in the mainstream of society. However, in the end, it is important that the government does not politicize these activities too much and bring them back to the mainstream through various projects.

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