

Political Nature of Caste System in India : Some Observations

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Emergence of electoral democracy in India created a very fertile ground. Democracy is based on equality and it was thought that there would be no place of caste in India. However, it did not materialize. Instead of decreasing importance of caste in Indian society, it assumed significance as politicization of caste in started playing a very important role in developing party politics. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the political nature of caste system in India, i.e. its role in Indian politics. It has been shown that both caste and politics in Indian society are not only related to each other, but both take recourse to organize themselves.

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1. Introduction

The caste system is a social evil and serious problem in India today. Every day, the prominent leaders of our country say that it is

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necessary to eradicate the dreaded problem like casteism at the earliest. But, every caste constantly tries to get some facilities from the government. After independence in India, there has been a lot of discussion about caste discrimination and democracy. Is casteism a curse for democracy? Scholars have different views on this question. Some thinkers are of the opinion that casteism has not only hindered the progress of democracy, but its basic elements are being attacked. Democracy means governing by the subjects itself, that is, the system of governance is in the hands of the subjects. There are also different forms of democracy. The best definition of democracy is given by Abraham Lincoln in these words, "Democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people." Democracy is a system based on equality, which has the following three main principles :

- Equality rather than inequality is the first principle of democracy. In other words, in a democracy all citizens are equal.
- Every citizen of the country enjoys reasonable liberties.
- Every person can be elected to every electef posts on eligibility..

Keeping in mind the principles of caste and democracy, we can say that there is a fundamental opposition between the caste system and democracy. These two are opposite to each other. The basis of caste system is inequality, whereas the basic basis of democracy is equality, liberty and fraternity. The caste system hollows out the feeling of equal treatment with all the people of the nation. Hereditary superiority has no place in democracy. Everyone has full right to rule. The principle of caste superiority in a democracy is unscientific and impractical. It is very difficult to create any kind of cooperation between the two. Both are always trying to cut each other's roots, as Narmadeshwar Prasad¹ (1956) had said in this regard that though there may be disparity in democratic ideal and practice, but when we consider democracy and caste system, then basically they are two conflicting institutions and two kinds of ideals.

For the successful operation of democracy, the citizens must be democratic. But caste distinction is completely opposite of democracy. Democracy considers everyone equal from birth and gives complete freedom to use the rights equally. But on the basis of the spirit of the caste system, this difference is made right from birth and members of some castes are considered inferior.

2. Caste and Politics in Indian Society

The orgy of casteism is clearly visible today in the elections to rural panchayats, municipalities, district councils, legislative assemblies and even the Lok Sabha. Casteism has completely affected the various political parties of the country. There, too, there is a lot of conflict on the basis of caste. Political parties distribute tickets on the basis of caste and ask for votes by inciting caste sentiments. Therefore, they use this arrangement to straighten their owl. In fact, caste is a curse for national unity and democracy.

But there are some scholars who have told an important role in strengthening caste politics and democracy. For example, according to Rudolph and Rudolph², a traditional institution like caste has encouraged the uneducated people for political participation in India. Caste has strengthened democracy and along with national development, it has also been helpful in modernization. That is why the idea of some scholars that the democratic system will end the caste system has not been proved to be true. Tushar Gandhi, great grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and chairman of the Mahatma Gandhi Foundation has said that "Caste is cancer and if we are infected by a disease and if it is not cured, it will eventually kill us."³ Similar vies were held by, late D. R. Gadgil, Deputy Chairman of Planning Commission of India.

First of all, when M. N. Srinivas⁴ drew our attention to the important role of caste in Indian politics on the basis of the study of several states, most of the people found it very strange and then his ideas could not get much support. people raised the apprehension that Srinivas had exaggerated the importance of caste in politics. but soon Srinivas's views were confirmed by studies done on the second general elections onwards. since then, many studies have been done to understand the interrelationship between caste and politics. on the one hand, some scholars have said to study Indian politics only on the basis of caste, while on the other hand some scholars do not consider caste to be helpful in understanding politics in all aspects.

Prominent Scholars who have studied the interrelationship of caste and politics in India include M. N. Srinivas, A. C. Mayer, Rajni Kothari, Andre Beteille, Edmund Leach, Kathleen Gough, F. G. Bailey, L. I. Rudolph, T. K. Oommen, Yogesh Atal, M. S. A. Rao, Harold Isaac etc. All of them have considered caste as an important variable in election related studies.

In fact, from the very beginning there has been a debate about the role of caste in politics. The following views have been expressed regarding the role of caste in politics :

- Politics in India is a reflection of caste and politics is only a means. A. R. Desai⁵ has supported this ideology but Rajni Kothari⁶ has not called it helpful in understanding the reality.
- In India both caste and politics are free and caste should be protected from the vices of politics. Rajni Kothari⁷ has also refuted this view because caste and politics in India have never been completely polarized.
- Caste is more important than politics in India because caste revolves around politics. If a person wants to rise above in politics, he has to take his caste along with him. Various political parties in India also take the help of caste groups to get power. Scholars like Weiner, Jones and Tinker etc. have given their support to this view.
- Caste and politics in India are related and both influence each other. Politics needs power to fulfill its goals, for which many types of manipulations have to be done. Ethnic groups are used in these manipulations. Politics also affects caste because it is through politics that caste protects its interests.

Today, most of the scholars are cautious about the role of caste in politics, as empirical behavioral studies have begun to support either ideology. But most of the political scientists still consider caste as a major variable in the interpretation of politics. Sociologists have generally emphasized the role of caste in political development and processes, while political scientists have attempted to see how political events and processes are affecting the caste system.

B. S. Baviska⁸ has discussed the relationship between caste and politics in another way. According to him, scholars have tried to answer the following three questions about the relationship between caste and politics at the theoretical level :

- Is it legal for ethnic groups to participate in political activities? Do castes remain castes after activism in the political field?
- What is the impact of caste on Indian politics? Does caste make a positive and favorable contribution to the democratic process in India? Has it caused any hindrance to the general

process of modernization and democratic politics in particular?

- What is the fundamental and decisive factor in the mutual interaction of caste and politics? Does caste influence politics or is politics changing the nature of the caste system?

In answer to the first question, Leach, Gough and Bailey have argued that ideally the main feature of the caste system is interdependence and cooperation and there is no place for competition among different castes for political power. Competition or politics for political power is limited only to the dominant castes, but according to André Beteille, this type of view of the caste system is not based on empirical studies but on the ideal-type of caste. On the basis of only a few characteristics of caste, we cannot say that politics has no place in it. They have emphasized that political competition and struggle among different castes is a reality today and earlier also such struggles must have been in castes. Castes do not perish as a result of activism in politics, but maintain their existence.

With reference to the answer to the second question, it is generally assumed that the nature of caste (which gives importance to stratification) is opposed to the sentiments of the democratic system (which is based on egalitarianism). But Rudolph has refuted this argument. According to them, the traditional institution like caste has encouraged the illiterate people for political participation in India. The caste system is not a hindrance in the process of modernization but its only agency.

In the context of the answer to the third question, many scholars have given more importance to caste than to political processes in studying the relationship between caste and politics. But Rajni Kothari has disagreed with the views of all these scholars and has clearly tried to tell us that both caste and politics affect each other equally. Therefore, it is inappropriate to give more importance to any one of these two. According to his view, political structures have their own separate autonomous and independent existence. If politics is influenced by caste, then the nature and structure of caste also changes due to the influence of politics, which has been termed as 'politicization of castes'. Gould has also rendered the 'caste model of Indian politics', giving equal importance to caste and politics. They say that there are many inequalities found in the caste system and political structures (such as factions and political parties) such as unity, interdependence, heterogeneity and ethnicity.

Rajni Kothari's view seems more appropriate that caste and politics affect each other equally and both have an important place in influencing each other. In fact, the whole controversy is the result of the importance of political variables in political science and the importance of social variables in sociology which has been resolved to a great extent by political sociology. According to Rajni Kothari, there is also a secular side of the caste system, due to which the dominance of any one caste has not been established over the politics of the country. Caste integration has also been helpful in giving allegiance to the democratic system because different castes form some alliances together and their loyalty remains towards the democratic system. Due to political participation and activism by castes, the consciousness of their members also increases. In fact, politics has provided a medium for castes to raise their social status.

The following changes have taken place due to the politicization of castes :

- Competition for power and influence has developed among different castes; The lower castes have been able to establish their influence only partially in this process.
- The feeling of competition and factionalism among different castes and sub-castes has intensified and there has been a sudden increase in the attempt to get political benefits from them. They strengthen their faction in the elections, as a result of which their 'new leadership' is also coming to the fore.
- Politicization has loosened caste bonds. The allegiance to the caste system has diminished. This has increased the importance of political values. Education and urbanization have also played an active role in this.
- On the basis of casteism, now new pressure groups are also being formed.

It becomes clear from the above discussion that caste is not only a social organization, but it is also a group that has influenced politics in India to a great extent.

It has also been observed that the role of casteism on the politics of the states was stronger and more influential than that of the Center. On the one hand, our social and political system has broken the walls of casteism and on the other hand new pressure groups of casteism have affected the politics of the states. It has also been seen

that whenever the question of national importance has arisen in politics, the role of casteism has become negligible. Casteism is the only element in Indian society which mixed with communalism, regionalism and linguism and its interaction has politicized all.

3. Conclusion

Evaluating the role of caste in Indian politics is a very difficult task. Some scholars consider the caste system as an obstacle in the path of national unity because it awakens the feeling of isolationism among the individuals. Caste sentiments have hindered the growth of democratic traditions in India. It has also been seen that inspired by casteist sentiments, common citizens have also started giving more importance to their caste interests than national interests. Caste and politics are closely related in Indian society. Caste has played an important role in Indian politics, which can be understood as follows :

- ▶▶ Castes have organized and influenced the political and administrative decision-making process in India.
- ▶▶ Political parties select their candidates on the basis of caste in the elections. Tickets are given to candidates on the basis of caste composition of a constituency.
- ▶▶ Casteism is also used to influence election campaign and voting conduct. Caste has played an important role in the elections of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.
- ▶▶ Even in the formation of cabinets, caste basis is adopted directly or indirectly so that all the major castes can get representation in it.
- ▶▶ Many ethnic and caste-based groups have influenced politics in India in many states.
- ▶▶ The caste system also affects the practice of administration. The policy of reservation in vocational courses (such as medical and engineering courses) and reservation of Scheduled Castes in appointment and promotion to the posts of Central and State Governments are examples of this.

It becomes clear from the above discussion about the interrelationship of caste and politics that in Indian society both are related and both take recourse to each other to organize themselves. The view of some scholars that the democratic system will end the

caste system has not been proved to be true. This question seems reasonable only at the theoretical level because in reality it is quite the opposite. Some people try to ask the question about the relationship between caste and politics, whether the role of caste in Indian politics is a blessing or a curse? This question cannot be answered unambiguously because of the disagreement in the views of different scholars. Some scholars consider it an obstacle in nation-building, national integration and modernization, while some other scholars have called it helpful to strengthen political development, modernization and democratic system.

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