

“IMPACT OF CASTE POLITICS ON DEMOCRACY AND NATION BUILDING: AN ASSESSMENT”

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Abstract:

Of all the Indian social institutions caste has attracted the widest attention and it is not only the social scientists who have dealt with it, but novelists, dramatists and short story writers have also made caste and caste dynamics their dominant themes. The chief reasons for this are twofold: in the first place, the persistence and indestructibility of the caste system and secondly, the impact it has on virtually every aspect of Indian life. There are relatively a large number of works on the Indian caste system and there are as many theories about caste as there are authors who have written on the subject. The recent tendency is to study caste in terms of relations, tensions and integration and its social dynamics. Moreover, castes and their organizations are no longer confined to a local base but have spread out horizontally with urbanization and the franchise so that the sentiments of caste affiliations are used in an ever increasing range of civil, social and political activities.

Key Words

Caste Politics, Democracy, Social Institutions, urbanization

Research Methodology

Most of the existing published material pertaining to the topic has been studied in order to extract pieces of information that were found relevant for the Research work. Along with that, historical method has been used to have in-depth insight for the background and nature of the work.

Objectives

To study the impact of caste system on democracy;

To study how caste system has been exploited by politicians;

To study how Caste victimization as a discriminatory process creates agony in a society.

Introduction

Democratic system of Government, adult franchise and Panchayati Raj has brought political consciousness to all the castes. In fact, India's constitution, adopted in 1950, inaugurated the world's oldest and farthest-reaching affirmative action programme, guaranteeing scheduled castes and tribes - the most disadvantaged groups in Hinduism's hierarchy - not only equality of opportunity but guaranteed outcomes, with reserved places in educational institutions, government jobs and even seats in parliament and the state assemblies. These "reservations" or quotas were granted to groups on the basis of their (presumably immutable) caste identities. The logic of reservations in India was simple: they were justified as a means of making up for millennia of discrimination based on birth.

The castes which were slowly and had in the near past no advantage or had in the past enjoyed political power are now contending for it. They have the advantages of numbers through which they can make their influence felt. These factors have sought to strengthen the castes as politico-economic pressure groups. In some places certain castes have perpetuated their power to the extent that other castes remain in the state of subordination and constant fear.

Taking into consideration what was described about distinguishing characteristics of Indian society, it is quite useful to mention here the outline that Rashiduddin Khan suggests in his book, *Federal India* (1992: 19); "The mosaic of Indian federalism is composed of 'segments' constituting language and dialect groups, religious communities, denominational sects, castes and sub-castes, regional and sub-regional configurations, ethnic formations and defined culture-pattern. While recognizing the fact that India is a historically evolved unified civilization, it is necessary to remember that the making of such a civilization many strands of races, languages, cultures and religious communities have mingled to render it the hallmark of an authentic and classic plural society. This truth, that fundamental unity of India as predicated on its capacity to coalesce its much diversity, in pattern of autonomy and harmony, for peace and progress of this continental polity requires reiteration."

Origin and History

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. The religious theories explain that according to the Rig Veda, which is the ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created (Daniel). For example, Brahmins, who were derived from the head of Purush, are considered

the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. In the same way, Kshatriyas, considered the warrior caste, were created by arms, which represent strength. Another religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world in Hinduism. Rajni Kothari mentions its origin in Hindu mythology and ancient Vedic scriptures which tried to give a theological justification of division of labor and status of a person on the basis of the quality of work he performs. It is unique system which, from the ancient times till now has justified social segregation and exploitation. It is highly rigid and closed social system where rigidity is maintained to the principles of heredity, endogamy, restrictions of food and specific economic, social, cultural, and religious practices, norms and regulations. However, caste is also not merely about occupational specialization and division of labor. It encapsulates within the features of a structure and normative religious behavior and even provided a fair comprehensive idea of caste society (Rajni Kothari, 12).

Impact of Caste on Nation Building

The caste system very much impacted the economic structure in the Indian village. The village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste family. This system was known as the jajmani system, which survived in India up to the arrival of the British. W.H. Wiser in his Hindu Jajmani System shows the mutuality of relationship in a village community based on the exchange of goods and services between different castes (Velassery, 7).

The fluidity of the caste system was affected by the arrival of the British. The British brought with them their own traditional form of government, and as Christians, they did not have much sympathy for the Hindu institutions (Ghurye, 270). During the initial days of the British East India Company's rule, caste privileges and customs were encouraged, but the British law courts began to disagree with the discrimination against the lower castes (Alavi, 5).

Impact Of Caste on Democracy

These dominant castes have been functioning as vote banks for the political parties in India. The caste composition of our society has been broadly exploited by the political parties and the caste has become the center around which politics in India moves. The various caste and caste groups have become the source of political power and now it is difficult to conceive of politics without caste. The Indian society, in spite of multiple caste composition was homogenous in its nature but it has not become heterogeneous due to exploitation of caste in politics.

Historically it has been very hard to change the structure of caste politics in India. More recently however, there has been a flux in caste politics, mainly caused by economic liberalization in India. This upsurge in lower-caste empowerment was accompanied in some regions by a spike in the level of corruption. This was partly due to lower caste perceiving development programs and rule of law as tools used by the upper caste to subjugate lower castes.

Caste and Caste Politics

In the 1951 election, three ethnic parties challenged the Congress party: the Ram Rajya Parishad, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. These three sought to gain support from the Hindu majority. The All India Scheduled Caste Federation bid for support from the ex-untouchable castes. Three of the four ethnic parties gradually disappeared because they were not able to obtain enough votes. In the late 1980s, the Congress began to decline. More non-congress parties started to challenge the Congress dominance. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) descended from the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. It attempted to pit Hindus against Muslims. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Janata Dal (JD) tried to seek support from the Scheduled Castes, and Muslims against the upper castes.(Krishna, Anirudh ,2003, 1171–1193.)

The intense party competitions that started in the late 1970s have also weakened the influence of caste in Indian politics. Traditionally, Indian political parties have been constructed from top-down. Party leaders relied on preexisted patron-client networks to collect votes. Hence, no parties established fixed organisations to keep constant contacts with the village-level. Since 1977, the number of youth participating in politics has significantly increased. Due to the lack of fixed organisations, political parties had to rely on the young village members for political mobilisation. Often, these young villagers exerted more political influence than the upper caste leaders and patrons. The status of these young people in the village depended on how much he could contribute to the economic development of the village. 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 and clientelism on Indian politics(Ghanshyam Shah, 2004, p. 261).

Conclusion

Contemporary India, however, has seen the influence of caste start to decline. This is partly due to the spread of education to all castes which has had a democratizing effect on the political system. However, this "equalising" of the playing field has not been without controversy. Castes may have a useful role in the formation of identity and, as such, may help in the formation of the nation and state.

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