

Power Structure in India: Caste, Class and Patriarchy

Caste

Caste and class are the two forms of social stratification. Caste is found in Ancient Egypt, Japan, Burma, Persia etc. But, though it is found in those societies yet caste stratification is unique for Indian society. It is one of the major criteria to determine the social stratification in India. Caste system cannot be separated from Indian society. It is connected with the Hindu religion, custom, tradition marriage, morals, manners, foods cloths occupations etc. It has been dominating in every sphere of social life i.e. socio-political and economic life of the people.

Meaning of Caste

The term 'Caste' was derived from the Spanish or Portuguese word 'Casta', which implies the 'breed'. Along with English men the Portuguese also migrated to India and came to the touch of Indian society. They used the term to denote the division in the Indian society. The word 'caste' also means the 'race' or 'kind'. In Sanskrit the 'caste' is used as 'Varna', means the 'color'. The society which is divided on the basis of 'race', color, occupation etc is called 'caste'. Caste is also sometime used as 'Jati'.

Origin of the Caste system

The origin of caste system in India is found in 'Chaturvarna' system. According to the Hindu mythology, the Chaturvarna system, the Hindu society is divided into four varnas by Brhama, the God. These varnas are Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The God has created the varnas and bestowed the functions of the state to these varnas. This varna system prevailed in Vedic period. The functions of society were divided on the basis of occupations. The Brahmins performed the functions of religion and advised the Monarch in administration, the Kashtrias were the soldiers, protected the territory and maintained the law and order of the state, the Vaisysas did the business and the Sudras had to do the down trodden activities of society. This division was done only to run the smooth functioning of the state. It was based on functional specialization of work. But gradually the system became tight and many restrictions were imposed on castes law. In caste stratification there is no scope of social mobility. Present caste system is the degenerated form of traditional system. Now there are more than 3000 castes and sub-caste in India. But the difference between the traditional and modern caste system is that the former was mostly social and the later is both social as well as political in nature.

Caste as Power Structure:

Polity is closely related to other system of human relationship. It works with the situations created by other system. Among these systems, social and economic system occupies a very important place. Polity is influenced by these systems and in turn it also influences them. In every social system there are numerous such constituents which are not only active but also determine the power structure of polity. The constituents of caste, religion, language and regionalism are vital in the social system and among them the caste plays a significant role to shape political process.

Caste is the fundamental constituent of Indian social system. The social stratification of Indian society is done on the basis of caste, it is caste ridden. According to Rajni Kothari, "No social system can be completely destroyed." Therefore as social constituent can system which is deeply rooted in Indian society cannot totally vanish. It is deeply influences Indian political system. In India the role of caste in politics or caste as power structure can be understood from pointing out the following points.

- 1. Caste and Democracy at grassroots:** In Indian polity, self-governing bodies have been established at grass root level. In rural areas, Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishads work. Caste is the basic unit of rural society. Every village is inhabited by twelve to twenty castes. Originally, the panchayat elections are caste - ridden. Persons belonging to majority caste of a village are elected Panches and Sarpanches. The Panchayat

while working, keeps caste considerations uppermost in view. Caste influences the organization and functioning of Panchayat Samitis and Zila Parishad.

2. **Recruitment of Leadership:** Caste influences the process of leadership recruitment. This is particularly true of highly 'caste conscious' people of some states like Haryana, Bihar, UP, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In Haryana, the leadership comes either from the Jats or from the Bishnois or Brahmins. In Andhra Pradesh, the Reddys, Kammas and Valamas provide state leaders.
3. **Caste and Party Politics:** Caste factor is a constituent of the Indian party system. Some political parties have a direct caste basis while others indirectly bank upon particular caste groups. In particular, the regional political parties stand predominantly influenced by the caste factor. The DMK and AIADMK are non-Brahmin rather anti-Brahmin political parties of Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, Akali Dal has a community identity but stands influenced by the issue of Jats vs. non-Jats. All political parties in India use caste as a means for securing votes in elections. While the BSP banks upon the support of the Scheduled Castes, the BJP largely banks upon its popularity among the high caste Hindus and the trading community. In fact, while formulating its policies and decisions each political party of India in India almost always keeps in vision the 'Caste Angle'.
4. **Caste and Elections:** The caste factor is an important factor of electoral politics in India. All political parties give great weightage to the caste factor in selecting their candidates, in allocating constituencies to their candidates and in canvassing support for their nominees in the election. In constituencies predominated by Muslims, Muslim candidates are fielded and in areas predominated by Jats, Jat candidates are fielded. Even avowedly secularist parties like the Congress, the Janata Dal, the CPI and the CPM take into consideration the caste factor in selecting their candidates. In the election campaigns, votes are demanded in the name of caste. Caste groups are tapped for committed support. No one can disagree with N.D. Palmer when he observes that "Caste considerations are given great weight in the selection of candidates and in the appeals to voters during election campaigns." In elections, caste acts as the most important political party.
5. **Caste and the Exercise of Power by a Political party:** Since caste is a major feature of the Indian society and acts as an important factor in various processes of politics, it also plays a big role in the decision-making process. Even the issue of re-organisation of states is handled with an eye upon the prevention of undue predominance of a caste group in a particular territory.

Caste factor influences the policies and decisions of the state governments. The party in power always tries to use its decision-making power to win the favour of major caste groups. The Congress has always tried to nurture people belonging to the Scheduled Castes as its vote bank. Regional political parties, whenever they get the chance to rule their respective states, always use political power for furthering the interests of the caste groups which support or can support their regimes. Recruitment to political offices is mostly done with due consideration to the caste of the persons. Caste factor influences the process of ministry making and the allocation of portfolios. Each big caste group always tries to secure ministerial berths for such elected representatives as belong to their caste.

6. **Caste Factor and the Local Government:** The role of caste in the working of the Panchayati Raj and other institutions of local self-government has been a recognised reality. We can go to the extent of recording that caste based factionalism in the rural areas of India has been one of the biggest hindering factors in the organization and effective working of the Panchayati Raj. In the Indian rural context, caste has been a plank of mobilization, a channel of communication, representation and leadership and a linkage between the electorate and the political process.
7. **Caste and Indian Constitution:** Though the spirit of secularism stands clearly affirmed in the Constitution, yet in a limited and indirect way, it recognizes the caste system in the form of providing for caste based reservations. Reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Union Parliament and the state legislative assemblies (Art. 330 and 332) as well as in public services reflects this feature. It enabled from the lower castes to emerge as leaders, while elite from the middle castes due to their improved educational and economic status. Thus caste system which had only ritualistic function assumed the new role regulating political behavior of the people.

- 8. Caste and Political Leadership:** Caste has been emerging as a factor in the process of leadership recruitment. The leadership of Sh. Kanshi Ram and Ms. Mayawati is caste based. So was the leadership of Ch. Charan Singh in UP, Karpoori Thakur in Bihar and Dev Raj Urs in Karnataka. The leadership of Sh. Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar is again an example of caste based leadership.
- 9. Lobby System:** In villages also, caste assume great significance in emerging power structure. In offices, universities, secretariats, etc. we hear of Jain lobby, Rajput lobby, Brahman Lobby, Yadav Lobby, Kayast lobby, reddy lobby, etc. If activist operates as casteist in social and occupational life, how we can think in term of operating as non-casteist political life? Our political elite, thus, may talk of secularism and denounce caste and casteist politics but in practice they function under the pressure of caste, since their own emergence as leaders has a caste background.
- 10. Caste and Voting Behavior:** Where as the polity has fostered sense of co-operation among different castes by bringing them in closer contact with one another, there are political parties, to capture political power, have tried to use them as their vote bank by organizing them against each other. The political parties appeal to sentiments of different castes, establish caste leadership among them so that they may get collective votes of those caste during elections.
- 11. Caste and formation of Ministry:** Castes are also kept in view while forming ministries. Efforts are made to give ministries berth to the representatives of dominant castes. The Scheduled Caste, the Scheduled Tribes and the Backward Classes are give due representation in the ministry. The office of Chief Minister goes to that caste which enjoys majority in the state. The leader of the other caste can never be made the Chief Minister.
- 12. Caste and Making Policy:** Many a time's governments at central and state levels frame such policies as benefit particular caste. In 1990, the Prime Minister V.P. Singh government, while accepting the recommendation of the Mandal Commission, decided to keep 27% government jobs for the Backward Classes. Consequently many states government included different sects of society within the periphery of Backward Classes. Particularly it happened in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana.
- 13. Caste and Pressure Group:** Different castes in India have their different federations which work as pressure groups. In order to promote their vested interest, these caste based federations pass resolutions and memorandum to the government, and use their political methods. They reservation for their members in educational institutions and government services. The Scheduled Caste Federation is one such pressure group in India.
- 14. Mobilization of caste:** Political parties also mobilize caste support. In fact the problems of mobilization of masses today are the same as they were four decades ago. Just as in the 1930s and in 1940s social reformers believed that without the enlightenment of masses, their mobilization for political activity was not possible, Similarly today also politicians try to get support from the caste leaders and at the same time drive home to them the utility of political means in achieving their goals. Some scholars have studied mobilization of castes by political parties in different states in the last three or four decades. All these studies showed that political parties mobilize castes for their functioning and seek their support in winning elections.
- 15. Emergence of Caste Elite:** Caste has become a determinant factor of 'political elite' status. Studies conducted on political elite by scholars like Sirsikar, Sachchidananda, Ram Ahuja, S. k Lai, etc. have pointed out in the emergence of elite, and higher castes have an extraordinary over the middle and lower castes. Before independence, generally the upper caste groups' center of political in the Congress party engaged in freedom struggle but after independence, individuals from middle and the lower castes also entered into political field.
- 16. Struggle for power among different Castes:** Casteism exercises its greatest influence on the state politics. A struggle for power is always going on between Brahmins and Kayasthas in Bihar, Kamas and Reddis in Andhra, Lingayats and Okkaligas in Karnataka, Namboodris and Nayyars in Kerala, Brahmins and Maratha in Maharashtra, Rajputs and Jats and Ahirs in Haryana. These caste also try to win other vcastes to their sides to capture political power.

Conclusion

Thus caste is an important constituent of Indian society. It is very active in all levels, especially at rural and the regional levels, and directly influence the vast population of India. Jaya Prakash Narayan once observed, "Caste is the most important party in India." This observation seems quite true. Now in each level caste system is influencing Indian politics. As a power structure caste system it is deep rooted and each political party design political strategies to motivate the castes at the time of elections. The ministerial berth and policy making are also done on the basis of caste. But it should be remembered that casteism is not a healthy tendency for our democratic set-up. It is harmful for national unity and integrity, and is not consonance with democratic spirit. Caste system divides the people into unequal sectors on the basis of birth and occupation. The government should review its policy of granting special facilities to some people on caste basis. No caste but economic parameters should form the basis of one's backwardness.