

Essay on Caste Politics in Elections

"Caste has polarised the national politics and caste politics breed caste parties. Not a single party, however, avowedly opposes casteism, is free from the dominant influence of caste. During election time when the question of number games becomes most important, candidates seek to mobilise the support of not only their own caste but also those belonging to backward caste and the Dalits."

Caste is a gift of centuries in the history and its origin goes back to 3 or 4 millennia. It goes back to a past when like all other humans, the tribal Aryans roamed the plains of Central Asia before reaching India. The Caste-based stratification displays very different characteristics. To begin with, it is impossible to construct a uniform hierarchy of caste-based on the notion of purity and pollution. No caste would acquiesce to its placement among the so-called 'untouchables'. No caste would agree that members of other castes are made up of substances better than theirs (Gupta 2000: 72-85; see also Appadurai 1974). No caste would like its people to marry outside the community. No caste would like to merge its identity with any other caste. No caste accepts that it has originated from a shameful act of miscegenation. Any suggestion of being half-breed is dismissed haughtily across the board by all castes (see Gupta *ibid*).

Castes always differentiate themselves from other castes on multiple fronts: on how they get married, how they conduct their funeral ceremonies, the cuisines they cook and prefer, and even on the basis of gods that each caste considers to be special to its members (Gupta 2000: 77-85). Each caste has a clear idea of which caste it considers to be below it and which ones roughly equal. Endogamy, or marrying

within one's jati, is a strict rule that all castes hold dear. It is not at all true that poorer castes are less punctilious in observing their caste norms. Each caste inspires its own variety of caste patriotism for which reason jati Puranas or origin tales are such an important aspect of their cultural legacy and heritage. All dominated castes explain their subjugation not on the basis of purity and pollution but on the basis of lost wars, chicanery, and deceit by kinsmen and fair-weather friends. Sometimes the Gods too are blamed for being fickle, inconstant, and temperamental in bestowing their favors (ibid: 73-78, 116-129).

Other castes had to acquiesce to this or face brutal consequences. They dared not express their version of the true hierarchy. With the growth in commercialization, urbanization and democracy, poorer castes are becoming bolder and now have the courage to openly express what they have always held dear but dared not manifest in any form in the past.

The distinguishing characteristic of the caste order is the discrete character of its constituent units that resist being forced into a single hierarchical frame. As these castes are discrete and semaphore their separation on multiple fronts, caste competition is built-in at various levels. It is only by accepting the reality of multiple hierarchies that we can conceptually make room for the existence of caste politics. If one were to go by the traditional understanding of a single hierarchy of purity/pollution, with brahmins at the top, then any evidence of caste conflict should have meant the dissolution of the caste order.

It is not true that caste politics is a recent phenomenon. All through traditional and medieval India castes have fought and slaughtered each other to gain worldly preeminence. Once a caste is politically and economically powerful it can then live out its own

belief-in hierarchy. This is as true of the Gujara Pratihara and Rajput kingdoms in medieval India (Chattopadhyaya 1976: 59-82), as it is of supremacy in Punjab several centuries later, and of baniya ascendancy in Rajasthan and Gujarat today (see Babb 1998; Shah and Shroff 1975).

The difference between traditional and modern display of caste politics is not that there were no power struggles between communities in the past, but that the format for such competition and strife has now changed. Democracy and commerce have created new avenues that were not available to caste antagonists even in early colonial India.

If one is to understand caste politics in its vivacity and depth it is necessary to appreciate that in the caste scenario there are multiple nodes. Jats are against guj ars, together they are against urban castes; kolis are against patidars; thevars oppress pallars or the devendrakula vellalas; the vanniya's torment adi dravidas, even as many of them may be against, or for, brahmans in their local settings (see Radhakrishnan 2001).

Caste alliances such as the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harij an, and Muslim) and AJGAR (ahir, jat, Gujar, and Rajput) are made and then cast aside. New alliances come into being with quite different caste friends and enemies. Even as castes may enter into political alliances, however ephemeral, they do not drop barriers of endogamy, though they may occasionally ease up on inter-dining restrictions.

As castes operate on the basis of separation into discrete categories, which then fashions multiple hierarchies, the single hierarchy principle of race would be quite alien to it. Consequently, caste politics would be imbued with a logic quite different from what obtains in racist politics. It is because many members of India' s

literary did not quite appreciate this and perhaps unconsciously applied the race model to caste politics that they let the Mandal recommendations pass without too much opposition.

In the view of these pro-Mandalites, caste politics in India is really between powerful brahmins and the oppressed rest, just as in race politics it is whites versus blacks. In fact, brahmins do not always occupy the top spot in most hierarchies. And whenever brahmins hold such a position it is because they have the economic and political power to match. But this would still be a very small and a typical part of the entire caste and politics scenario. If caste politics is seen only in terms of superior brahmin versus the suffering rest then the atrocities that Yadav has inflicted on ex-untouchables, what the vars do to pallars, and what rajputs did to the jats, would be unnoticed and brushed aside. This would impoverish and distort our understanding of caste politics in India and would allow for the intellectual acceptance of dangerous and retrograde policies such as those recommended by the Mandal Commission.

Caste has played very important role in the success of Indian Democracy by mobilising India's mass electorate to participate in the election process effectively and meaningfully. The use of caste for political purposes has begun long before the introduction of the adult franchise. Organisations based on caste for social, economic and political system came into existence even before the Constitution came into force. The illiterate people who didn't understand politics were mobilized to organize themselves by appealing to their caste sentiments by the self-interested politicians.

Casteism has penetrated Indian Politics so deeply as to shape and reshape not only the political parties but also their manifestos for the elections. The various caste groups, like Nair, the Christian and Ezhava in Kerala, the Brahmin and non- Brahmin in Tamil Nadu, The

Khamma and Reddy in Andhra, the Vokkaliga and Lingayats in Karnataka, the Maratha and Mahar in Maharashtra, the Patidar and the Rajput in Gujrat, the Jat, Rajput, Meena, Brahmin and Vaisya in Rajasthan, formed likewise in all states and determine the political scenario in the states to a great extent.

In Bihar, there is a communal triangle formed by the Bhumihara, the Rajput, and the Kayastha. Caste politics in U.P varies from region to region. The Thakurs from the majority community nurture strong anti-Brahmin feelings. Not only the group among the caste, a strong lobby of Dalits and Non-Dalits further exists now-a-days with the active support of their so-called Dalit leaders, making propaganda, against so-called Manuwadis or other Castes. Caste has polarised national politics and caste politics breed caste parties. Not a single party, however, avowedly opposes casteism, is free from the dominant influence of caste. Even the National parties, whether Congress or BJP while allocating tickets to the candidates, allocating portfolios to the Ministers, a proper analysis of caste factor is made. Caste tends to determine electoral nominations, voting behavior nowadays. Numerous castes have started making numerous demands, whether for reservation, or categorise them in OBCs etc, vitiating the representative principles envisaged and emphasised under the democratic pattern of our country.

See the flagrant example of demands for reservation put forth by Gurjars, Rajputs, Brahmin, and Vaisya communities in Rajasthan, on the eve of elections.

Congress and BJP both parties have assured to fulfill their demands as per their capabilities. Several regional parties are advocating the justification of the demands made by these castes and communities, knowing well, that it is not possible to get any demand fulfilled before the elections but to fish in troubled water of

elections.

Every Government oriented its policies on caste lines as it was found most convenient and politically expedient keeping the caste factor in view not only while forming ministries but also while deciding the placement of individual members in Government organizations and institutions.

Caste which has a past of three thousand years in our country, can't be abolished altogether so early. The future of democracy and the system of parties in this country depends upon the willingness of the society to change according to the demands of democracy. Illiteracy among the backward castes, poverty among the downtrodden, lack of awakening among the rural folk is some of the factors responsible for the prevalence of casteism in elections. The so-called Dalit leaders or caste Headmen are encashing the votes of their members with their vested interests.

Political parties have an enormous role to play in the social awakening of India on the democratic pattern. Instead of being influenced by caste and their current interests, they must endeavour to educate the people as per the ethics and demand of democracy and organise public opinion to regularise the progressive changes and withdrawal of privileges based on castes. For the real success of democracy, casteism is a big obstacle.