

Caste and Politics in Contemporary India

Caste system in India has been prevalent since ancient times. According to evolutionary theory the caste system did not come into existence all of a sudden or at a particular date. It is a result of a long process of social evolution. Although caste is a Hindu phenomena, yet it is prevalent in other religions too. The caste system existed and still exists in some parts of the world. Right from birth an Indian citizen inherits a caste and grows up as a member of that caste group. He or she belongs to either of one of the higher castes or backward castes or scheduled castes. The saddest thing of the caste system here was that it designated certain groups as untouchables and outcastes. It denied access to ownership of land, entry into temples, access to common resources such as water from the village tank or well. In the villages, the untouchable castes performed all the menial jobs such as those of scavengers, water carriers, skimmers of hides of dead animals etc. Under the jajmani system, they received a fixed share of the produce from the landowning families as payment for their services.

From the late nineteenth century, breaches began to appear in the caste system. Economic changes, especially the commercialisation of agricultural production and agrarian relations, emergence of contractual relations, new employment opportunities outside the village in factories, mandis, government service, the army, all contributed to a shift in position of the untouchables. Social reform movements such as those of Jyotibhai Phule in Maharashtra and Sri Narayan Guru in Kerala, also began to question the caste system and caste inequality. Dr B.R.Ambedkar emerged a major leader of the Depressed classes by the late twenties. By the early forties, Ambedkar realised that his effort to build an alliance against the Congress was not making much headway and he decided to

focus on the Scheduled Castes alone and formed the Scheduled castes federation in 1942.

With independence major initiatives in the area of removing caste injustice and inequality were to be attempted. The Constitution extended political rights to all citizens irrespective of religion, caste, sex, language, race, and this included the Scheduled Castes. But it also specifically mentioned in Article 17 which declared that 'untouchability' is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability shall be an offence punishable with law'. In 1955 parliament passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act which further specified that any offences were punishable with a fine, cancellation of licenses and public grants. In 1976, the protection of Civil Rights (Amendment) Act was passed which provided for enhanced and stringent punishment, appointment of officers and special courts to deal with offenders, legal aid for victims etc. The Constitution also made provisions for reservation of seats in agriculture and educational institutions and of government jobs for Scheduled Castes. The reservation were initially made for a period of ten years but have been extended continuously since then.

After Ambedkar's death, Republican party was founded in 1957 and it fought elections in Bombay Legislative Assembly in the same year and won a few seats. In the early seventies, a new trend identified as the Dalit Panthers. Dalit meaning downtrodden, which now the Scheduled Castes prefer to call themselves. By the eighties, the Dalit Panthers had developed serious differences over issues such as whether or not to include non-Dalit poor, non-Buddhist Dalits, primacy of cultural versus economic struggle, as well as over personalities. Prakash Ambedkar grandson of B.R.Ambedkar in 1990 made an effort to unite all Dalit organisation for contesting the Maharashtra State Assembly elections and a huge morcha of 500, 000 people was organised in Bombay but later differences cropped up again.

In North India , a new party, the Bahujan Samaj Party emerged in the eighties under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and later Mayawati who became the chief minister of UP. Though initially there was talk of Dalit and Backward classes and minorities coming together as a Bahujan Samaj, in practice the BSP has become a Dalit based party ready to ally with BJP, Congress, Samajwadi party to be in power.

Non- Dalit parties and groups taking up issues of concern to Dalits have also played significant role in their empowerment. The agricultural labour unions set up by different parties and NGO'S thus have taken up agricultural labour issues such as wage demands, demands for employment guarantee schemes, right to work, house sites, abolition of child labour, right to education etc, have all contributed to a new Dalit self confidence. It must however be recognised that despite all efforts of Dalit parties and other political groups the majority of Dalits still vote for the Congress.

Sociologists have found that despite the claims of the leaders of the Dalits the Buddhists converts in the villages have not given up their old Hindu gods and goddesses, but have only added photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha. Thus despite conversion, we find that Dalits feel equality with caste Hindus only when they are able to practice that same religious rites and concerns which the upper castes had denied to them.

Reservation and educational institution at a higher level have made marginal difference. Reservation of seats for Scheduled castes in legislatures has had some effect, as they are now able to take their issues. A more recent problem is the competition between different SCs, the disadvantaged ones begin to demand like the Malhars and Mangs in Maharashtra, Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, Chamars and Chauhras in north India. As the benefits of reservation are inevitably availed of by the better off castes among the SC's, the disadvantaged ones begin to demand quotas within quotas.

There is no doubt however, the overall position of Scheduled Castes has improved considerably. But the causes are not to be found mainly in either conversion or reservation, the two highly visible strategies. The extension of primary education and health facilities, the anti poverty programme, the rural employment guarantee schemes, rural income generating schemes such as subsidies and loans for dairying and goat rearing , the literacy campaign, the campaign for abolition of later by other governments have benefitted them. Untouchability in urban areas have virtually disappeared, while in rural areas have declined considerably. However great inequalities still remain in access to education, to employment, to other economic and social opportunities.

The issue of Backward classes or castes was taken up by Mandal commission, and after long years of struggle, they are entitled to 27 % reservation. India has been identified with thousands of such Backward Castes mostly found in the middle and lower rungs of caste hierarchy but above the SCs and STs. As the backward castes in Bihar as elsewhere in India is a heterogeneous community ranging from the peasant castes to the service and artisan castes. Besides the Sanskritization movements among Yadavas- Kurmis also helped for their upward mobility. Many caste such as Ahirs, Yadavs, Kurmis, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Lodhas etc have gained considerable economic advantage in the country as a whole.

Caste is a dominant factor in Indian politics. Many of the political parties have direct caste basis, while some indirectly bank on some caste groups. In Punjab for an example Akali dal have a community identity. Their Jat vs non jat too play a dominant role in politics. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK is presumably non-Brahmin and anti Brahmin party. The BSP banks upon the schedule caste vote, the BJP till recent times have been banking upon trading community vote. In the election campaigns votes are demanded on caste lines. The violence in elections are generally based on caste lines. Since caste is a major feature in the society, it

plays a very important role in decision making process too. It acts as a both decisive and cohesive force.