

CASTE: A POTENTIAL POLITICAL TOOL IN MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

In one of his articles on caste, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has defined caste as the chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of Endogamy. According to him democracy, which is a mode of community living, a value associated union of society, is not compatible with caste system and can only be achieved in a casteless society which gives and proffers equality at all level.

In acceptance of his views the constitution of Independent India guaranteed equality of status and opportunity to all Indian citizens and article 17 abolished untouchability for ever within Indian realms. To further the cause preferential positive discrimination was adopted in the form of reservations in government jobs as well as educational institutes and social welfare measures were adopted to uplift marginalised population.

Democracy thus sought life through promotion of equality, fraternity and justice in a society reputed to be completely devoid of it all. But did this really happened? 63 years of republic – have we been able to root out caste identity from our lives and society? Has democracy become a tool of caste system or has caste system been utilised by democracy as a tool of convenience for promoting political aspirations?

This paper seeks to delve into all this and analyse contemporary scenario with all its political upheavals in this context. It also seeks to answer the question that will we ever be able to extricate caste from our identity- intricately woven as it is in our everyday conscious and sub conscious presence.

Democratic forces that took shape in modern India were indirectly moulded by the vision of Macaulay's education. The upper caste conveniently donned the shoes of middle class and played a dominant role in national awakening. Although in outer sphere the caste identities were hardly visible yet private life of this new emergent and assertive middle class was and is closely woven with caste practices and observations.

Democracy enforced equality – forgetting that values cannot be enforced but have to be inculcated. Upper middle class kept on thriving, maintaining a distinct identity of its own across the globe. Availing benefits of being second or third generation English educated elite they continued to control economic as well as political helms. Change was felt in south with the rise of non-brahmanical movements – but north- the political heart of India – continued to through in traditional manner. Pattern of change was observed only in public assertion of caste where it was almost negligibly visible.

Then came the change in governance. The agricultural middle class, which had acquired riches during the start of green revolution and had started following the footsteps of urban elite through education and investments in cities, started asserting its might as a political force. Ch. Charan Singh was one such leader, so was Ch. Devi Lal – who rose to prominence on the basis of caste politics. Thus caste identity became as essential part of rising political class from rural areas.

Failure of Janta Government did not mean with drawl of caste politics. In fact congress now started using the caste card even more strongly. Nomination of candidates started being done on the basis of caste spectrum of the area. Jat for Jat belt an Ahir for Ahir dominated area, a Brahmin for Brahmin dominated area – became a major consideration in democratic politics.

Death of Mrs. Gandhi saw flaring of religious violence – massacre of thousands on the basis of religion gave platform to regional – religious politics. Then came Vishwanath Pratap Singh with his Pandora Box of Mandal Commission and Upper Middle Class Youth, who had carried him to the throne, agitated on streets burning alive in protest. Media discussed the anomalies and implications – but the government knew that competent media is dominated by upper middle class aka upper caste intellectuals and so would support the agitation at all cost. But now the political equation had changed and they who agitated did not matter. The rural agriculturist middle class had arrived to stay as decisive force in Indian politics. Democracy – while denying equality of opportunity to deserving upper middle class and maintaining the concept of positive discrimination – was now fast becoming a caste-based game to be played on regional lines.

Rise of regional parties is often seen as positive factor in Indian federal structure but we often forget that in India regionalism is very often closely associated with caste power play in those areas. Mulayam Singh, Lalu Prasad, Chautala all are examples of such forces who have risen to power on the basis of caste game – playing the caste card very openly and conveniently and often disregarding developmental factors and equations of cohesion in personal interests.

1990's onwards the upper middle class elite was marginalized to nongovernmental sectors – thriving and surging ahead- but devoid of direct political presence. The NDA government's failure in getting re-elected even after the claims of "Indian Shinning" was failure of upper middle class aka upper caste elite to mark its presence despite of having a global presence through control of IT sector and success stories of NRI's success in US.

2007 saw another protest – as central government under UPA in order to strengthen its vote bank among backward classes and regional voters announced 27% reservation in admission in elite becoming institutions like IIT's and IIM. Media debates the downfall of Indian image. Pros and Cons of reservation at this level and giving preference to caste over competence were largely debated. But to no avail - as Upper middle class had long lost its chain as voter for all these parties due to its political liberation.

Caste identity dominates the day. Democracy is run and controlled by caste groups. The pyramid may be a bit tilted now as depressed classes are no longer politically weak. Even when are not holding a discourse on caste, even when meritocracy, competency etc. are being discussed – the undercurrent is caste politics. An educated, literate Lalu dressed up like a rural idiot is nothing more than an appeal to depressed caste group as being identifiable as their own.

Coming to the questions we started with : 2013 - we find caste a very dominant feature of middle class elite society. No matter how much they try to shy away from their ancestral linkages caste prejudice find an expression in the fuming frustration on denial of recognition as deserving meritorious administration in a land which had given reverence and preference to likes of them for centuries. Hopelessly at unease both in Indian society and European world they seek to find refuge in candle marches, in demonstration in favour of Homosexual relations. Middle upper class is tramping around in vein, out crying of rampant dishonesty and mismanagement at all levels. They seek change – they demand fair play – not because they themselves are fair – but because they feel happy in the throughout that those who control society and polity now are dishonest – as they are meritorious. As they owe their rise – to political changes at rural level – to caste vote bank so easily fluctuated from one side to other yet so vital to capture Delhi. They are happy in being the Aam Aadmi, donning the cap and claiming honestly. They are climbing down from glittering thrones of private sector, vowing to free India from corruption, they are ready to tread the red carpet leading to power once again – they are lashing out at all that has taken shape during their hibernation from politics.

The upper middle class is ready to reassert itself. Claiming a place beneath the sun is not what it desires, it can have that whenever it desires – it wants to claim the sun itself as right fully its own. What is it if not caste politics – knowingly or unknowingly the urban upper middle class elite aka upper caste is a part of

caste politics. A status it kept on denying, a position it kept on declaiming declining-after years of living in margins of political life of the nation, after years of trying to lead the economic front and doing so successfully, after years of proving itself competent to win – it has now decided to re-enter the race of what matters – the race of political power. Denying caste yet asserting supremacy – common man – yet not so common.

Caste in India is a bond of similarities, an identity which can appeal to the society to stand up united beyond family – beyond locality – transcending all economic barriers – unifying under battle cry all bonded under a caste umbrella. Lenin had once opposed Marxist concept of stateless society, stating very clearly that those who revolt against the state and take its place acquire the characteristics of state. So in India as upper middle class revolted against the political/social and religious milieu it slowly acquired a ruling position and started controlling the three. The very nature of middle class revolt has been same throughout the world the only difference in Indian scenario is that here urban middle class elite class composed of upper caste educated elite who were also traditionally powerful in the society. As the struggle advanced through early 20th century the caste character, though subdued by political overtones, became characteristics mark of Indian National Congress and association like Hindu Mahasabha and later RSS. Congress consciously tried to negate the caste identity of its leaders but popularity of dalit leaders standing apart from congress was a testimony to the fact that they had failed to shed off caste mantel. Post independence ruling parties tried to project themselves as messiah of lower caste people not because they cared for their upliftment but because they were a sizeable vote bank for them. Right from Nehru's period of we view the list of candidates we will find the dominance of caste composition among the deciding factors, with passing years the dominance of upper caste was regularly challenged by the rural landed people who started visualizing themselves in the political realms on the basis of the same vote bank that Urban elite had so far exploited for their benefit. Post emergency period and toppling of Desai's govt. was infact result of that challenge only and from there onwards urban middle class started receding from political strong hold. Post Indira period saw rise of regionalism and emergence of regional parties. These parties had roots in regional issues and were closely connected to the caste composition of the state. The Yadav belt of UP & Bihar, the Jat belt of Haryana and Rajasthan. The Kanshi Ram and his appeal to Bahujan, literally meaning majority, rise of Jayalalitha, Mamta Banerjee all attribute to the rise of regional identities based on caste structure. So the period hailed as positive democratization in India actually is a period where caste identity became every much visible in the game of democratic politics. The urban elite was thrown out of power by its own tools, people like V.P. Singh toyed with sensitive issues of reservations to OBC to gain political mileage. Upper caste revolted but to no avail and slowly they were defeated in this game of caste by the very democracy which they has fostered for so long. This is also the period that saw rise of BJP, a party identified as political mouthpiece of RSS and associated with upper caste politics. Educated urban elite who still aspired for political power were attached to it and it emerged as a strong challenge in urban areas of predominately hindu belts but real voters were rural based and so although BJP under Vajpayee remained at the helm of power for six years yet it failed to get re elected because of its upper caste urban identity in the 2004 elections. Indian shinning was urban upper caste India – the Bahujan was not impressed. Coalition under Congress was predominately caste based regional structure. Mayavati in UP, Laloo in Bihar – all a matter of caste vote-development-governance-everything took back stage.

Then suddenly we saw the upsurge of urban elite. The youth, the bureaucrats, the reformers all were out on street opposing the state and out crying for reforms. The upper caste was back – although donning a reformist cap of common man – accusing those who had displaced it from its position as dishonest and corrupt. It was not lamenting the loss of power, nor licking its wounds of yester years but asserting its might through power play and staged shows. Caste – even though not a direct agenda – still remains a subdued bond. The urban elite has learned in its years of exile and now is wanting the throne of Hastinapur. Elections of 2013 has given them a foothold- but will the accusing – blaming-mudslinging politics – help them in long run. The battle cry of common man – the cleaner than though attitude- is it

not a lash back of upper caste on those who had played the caste card and toppled its positions. After all common man never rules – it is always the elite among them which gains power riding on their aspirations & hopes. The elite in this group and the other most formidable opponent – both sides is the urban upper caste – the traditional ruler of the caste society. Caste remains a ruling factor in Indian democracy – politics thinks that it has shaped and moulded it into a tool of convenience and yet caste very subtly uses politics to further its motives in a casteless democracy where equality is a fundamental right.

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