



THE ROLE OF ASSOCIATION AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN NORTH KARNATAKA

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Abstract:

The rise of democratic institutions and egalitarian values in the twentieth century had to face lot of challenges and contradictions in India due to the unique features of the society based on principles that were in deep conflict with egalitarian values. Disparities between superior social groups and a large majority of the population living in conditions of disadvantage and disabilities were historically pervasive in Indian society. A major reason for the disadvantageous position of these groups was their status ascribed to them by birth in certain castes, creeds and tribal groups. Indian society was made of a multitude of relatively closed status groups, with unequal ranks, each with its own privileges and disabilities supported by traditional sanction. This article reviews the role of association and organizations in the struggle for freedom in north Karnataka.

Key words: Association, Freedom, Organizations

1. Introduction:

The colonial approach to the caste system was ambivalent. The introduction of uniform legal and judicial system under the British Raj radically redefined social relations expressed in the caste system in spite of the avowed policy of non-interference in social issues. At the same time through the development of Anglo-Hindu legal system, the fixation of certain roles in religious rituals in general and within the temple practices in particular and census enumerations that led to defining and redefining caste categories the colonial state attempted to uphold caste system and its privileges and deprivations. In spite of such ambivalence the scope for individual and collective mobility increased and identities came to be significantly recast. The new sources of secular education, modern employment and opportunities that came to be delinked from caste affiliations and the participation of the masses in the political arena slowly undermined traditional sources of legitimacy which upheld hierarchical values of caste system and patriarchal authority.

The developments mentioned above created in the late nineteenth century and early years of twentieth century a social atmosphere in which certain sections of Backward Classes of society became aware of their basic civic rights and felt too that they should protest against their conditions of disabilities and deprivations. (Their voices of protest came to be heard in different parts of the country and in politically effective ways first appeared in Bombay and Madras provinces of the British Domain and in the Princely State of Mysore. Conflicting relationship between Brahmins and non-Brahmins began to develop in these regions, as the Brahmins were the first to exploit modern educational and employment opportunities. The non-Brahmin elite began to organize themselves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and demanded positions in political parties, legislative bodies, the cabinet and public institutions. At the same time they pressurised the government for reservation in Government jobs and educational institutions. Later this awakening spread to other lower ranks and depressed classes too. Consequently, the second quarter of the twentieth century saw both the government and the Indian National Congress constantly engaged in negotiating with these social strata on issues of the enlargement of opportunities in public life for the latter.

2. The Backward Classes of Karnataka:

The Backward Classes in the former Mysore State were one of the earliest to lay their claim to public employment and representational considerations in India. Initially this movement was led by the elite among non-Brahmin dominant communities like Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Muslims through such organisation as the Praja Mitra Mandali and later by Praja Paksha, To some extent colonial authorities and the native princely government also seemed to have extended support for the movement and tried to pitch it against the Indian National Movement on the plea that the later was led by the Brahmins. However, the main outcome of Backward Class Movement at this stage was to limit Brahmin monopoly in the field of education and employment. The movement succeeded in breaking the monopoly of Brahmins in these fields to some extent. The opposition to Brahmin dominance did not come merely from the leaders of powerful rural dominant castes. Other Backward Classes, minorities and dalits joined them due to shared grievances against the Brahmins. However, the lower caste non-Brahmins and minorities could not succeed in reaping the benefits of preferential policies extended by the state due to their utter poverty, organizational and structural disabilities. When they attempted to form their organizations the non-Brahmin party came to be merged with the Congress and the non-Brahmin cause was subsumed under the larger national movement. Over a period, the outcome of such a situation caused dissatisfaction among non-dominant backward classes who felt that a major share of the reservations and other facilities given to the Backward Classes were appropriated by entrenched castes like the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas. At this juncture Devaraj Urs gave a new political alignment to such aspirations by splitting the non-Brahmins into Backward Classes and forward castes when he became the Chief Minister in 1972. Urs gathered a number of persons around him from the non-dominant backward classes, dalits and minorities and made them to occupy positions of great public importance. However, the political alliance of OBCs, dalits and minorities that he wielded together was far too fragile and was fragmented immediately after the fall of Urs Government in 1980.

Gundu Rao, the successor of Devaraj Urs, hailed from a Brahmin caste and lacked a long-term socio-political vision. In 1983 assembly elections, the Congress Party was voted out of power and the Janata Party, which was then by and large identified with dominant caste interests, came to power. Ramakrishna Hegde, who ascended to chief ministership in 1983 with the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the left parties initially showed his concern towards Backward Classes. But after securing absolute majority in the Assembly

Elections of 1985 he seemed to act contrary to the interests of real Backward Classes. He rejected the Venkataswamy Commission Report in 1986, buckling under the pressure of forward communities that were excluded by the commission from its list. In October 1986, a government order was issued considering 92 per cent of castes and communities in the state as backward. By diluting reservation policy he diluted the Backward Class Movement too. The dilution of backward class category eventually led to a 'catch-all' type of politics in 1990s. The Backward Classes seemed to have lost their edge over Karnataka politics inspite of their formidable numerical strength. The liberalisation and globalisation process further weakened the bargaining power of Backward Classes during 1990s and after. Today, the state is increasingly disowning the Backward Classes by creating a larger socio-economic space for the entrenched castes and leaving the Backward Classes in the lurch. Such a situation has urged on the Backward Classes the need to consolidate their planks afresh and reorient their movement so as to make the state accountable and responsive towards their marginalised condition.

3. BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENT:

Although the backward class consciousness developed mainly during the colonial rule, caste system did not go unchallenged even during the pre-modern period. In the medieval period of Indian history many reformist Bhakti movements arose challenging the priestly order¹ that defended the caste system. Bhakti saints wrote in vernacular languages and not in Sanskrit, the hallowed language of priestly class. They extended Hinduism to all levels of society.² Saints such as Kabir, Ramdas, Meerabai and Raidas in the North, Chaitanya in the East, Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram in the West, Ramanuja, Basava and Akka Mahadevi in the South India and others challenged the oppressive caste system in their own ways at this juncture. They proclaimed that all are equal before God and He is equally predisposed to all in bounty and love. It did not undermine the caste system as social equality and equality before God was not one and the same thing. However, it made social ranking confined and qualified.³ The political system of pre-British India was characterised by narrow territorial cleavages marking off the territory of one chieftain from the territories of the others and thereby imposing serious limits on the horizontal extension of caste ties. The relative absence of new economic avenues also limited their occupational mobility at the local levels.

4. Emergence of Backward Class Movement:

A Cultural Revolt the Backward Class Movement was widespread in the Indian Sub-continent as a whole and was particularly strong in peninsular India, where it had a distinctive ideology and pervaded every area of social life. Maharashtra was one of the first states to witness the organised protest movements among the low-castes. There were mainly two trends in the social reform and protest movements in Maharashtra. Dadoba Pandurang Tharkhadkar represented the trend of humanism and Mahatma Jotiba Phule represented the trend of mass-line. Dadoba Pandurang (1814-1832) had founded "Manava Dharma Sabha" at Surat in 1844. Later in 1848, he founded 'Paramahansa Sabha' at Bombay, which was the continuation of the Surat Sabha. The Sabha preached 'One God, One Religion and One Caste' for the whole humanity. The striking feature of the Sabha was universalism based on rationalism. Emancipation from caste and caste restrictions was the distinctive mark of the Sabha.

5. Role of Caste based Organizations:

The process of the formation of a constituency and the making of the common political identity was facilitated by the emergence of multiple caste associations and caste federations among the low-castes all over India. From 1880's hundreds of such organisations were formed acquiring sizable membership gaining much official and public attention. While they turned to the state for furthering their purposes their initial claims were aimed at raising their caste status in terms of the values of and ranking in the caste order. Many of them claimed a higher ritual status by developing appropriate genealogies of Kshatriya or Brahmin origin. They demanded entry into temples, prestigious caste names and honourable occupations and designations in the census etc. The case of the Yadavas and Noniyas of North-India, Vannikula Kshatriyas and Nadars of Tamilnadu illustrate the same.³¹ The census acted as a catalytic agent in this process when Risley, the Census Commissioner decided in 1901 to provide in the census an accurate record of ranking of castes in local hierarchy as well as Varna affiliations. A survey of reports from 1901-31 indicates that a large number of petitions were filed before the census authorities by the respective castes demanding higher ritual status.

But as liberal and democratic ideas penetrated to wider sections of the population, the aims of the caste associations began to shift from sacred to secular goals. As a result, they began to press for places in the new administrative and educational institutions and for political representation. They became effective mediators between tradition and modern political

democracy. They adopted the new forms of organization and leadership pattern suitable to their new demands and objectives. The modern means of transport and communication have had the effect of broadening caste consciousness and structures binding together jatis that had been relatively autonomous into geographically extended associations so that they could possess organizations parallel to administrative and political units - states, districts, taluks and municipalities. Castes like Kammas, Reddis, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, Nadars, Ezhavas, Marathas, Nayars etc. built strong organisations at all these levels upto the provincial level. Some caste associations forged countrywide links amongst similar caste-clusters such as the Rajputs, Thakurs, Kayasthas, Yadavas, Jats etc.

Apart from forming caste associations and caste federations, the lower castes took to yet another strategy to secure and safeguard their interests by establishing common fronts of the backward castes, first at regional levels and later covering the entire country. Jotiba Phule was perhaps the father of this grand experiment. He tried to forge a united front by bringing the backward castes like Malis, Kunbis, Dhanagars etc. together against Brahminism. In Mysore, the caste associations of Vokkaligas (1906) and Lingayats (1905) joined hands with Muslims (1909) and established Praja Mitra Manadali (1917) which pressed for concessions to non-Brahmins in education, government employment and political representation. In Madras, several non-Brahman castes formed the Justice Party in 1916. In Uttar Pradesh several backward castes came together in 1929 and formed Uttar Pradesh Hindu Backward Classes League. Almost the same was the case with the Triveni Sangh formed in Bihar four years later through the joint efforts of Yadav, Kurmi and Koiri Sabhas. However, one should admit that these caste federations or fronts were not strong because of their differing ideologies and weak. Organizational machineries. The Backward Class Movement and the non-Brahmin movements of twentieth century were basically anchored on these caste associations and caste-federations.

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