



A Commentary Note on Political-Economy Analysis of Dalit Assertion in Maharashtra

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Abstract

This commentary paper studies Dalit assertion in Maharashtra through the lenses of political economy, it describes Dalit political assertion as counter elite capture. The major argument the paper put forth is that the Dalit assertion as counter elite capture in Maharashtra was not successful because of the fragmentation and disunity among sub-castes existing within Dalit and wherever it has been successful to some extent the benefits are skewed in the favor of specific sub-caste groups.

Keywords- Dalit Assertion, Counter-Elite Capture, Elite Capture, Political Economy

Introduction

'It is very necessary that the political reins should come into the hands of untouchables. For that all of us should unite and secure a political status. Untouchability in India will not be eradicated so long as the untouchables do not control the political strings'- B.R. Ambedkar

Maharashtra has witnessed a series of non-Brahmin movements since the colonial period. Since the time of Jyotirao Phule, who attacked the religious domination of Brahmans in the British institution and administration, then taken over by B.R Ambedkar and people like Periyar E.V Ramasamy who became the prominent leaders of these movements against the caste system. The genesis of this movement mainly lay in the crisis that the oppressed people faced in the subcontinent, especially the severe exploitation they faced at the hands of the dominant caste groups. The denial of even the basic civil rights, such as taking water from any source like anybody else, walking on the street like anybody else, keeping names like anybody else, wearing any clothes and in any way like anybody else, etc. by caste Hindus, did not allow

the oppressed classes to believe that caste Hindus would represent their socio-economic and political rights in the evolving state of India. These movements by the oppressed masses against the caste system also led to their mobilization and development along the political lines during the colonial period. Over the decades after independence, those minority assertions have resulted in the formation of political parties which are fighting for rights as well as for political power.

Why was political power so important for the oppressed sections? It was B.R Ambedkar who visualized political power as a key to the social progress of Dalits. Ambedkar's concept of political power can be understood when it is related to two major aspects of power- a) Descriptive and b) Normative. The descriptive dimension involves the aspect of description regarding different modes of exercising power in a given society. The normative aspect entails an element of ethics that raises the question of value in the exercise of power¹ According to Ambedkar it was the latter that was important for human emancipation. He followed the normative aspect of power throughout his life and positively identified the ideals like freedom, justice, and equality with institutional arrangements like representative democracy with majority votes. He said "In India, the governing class (Brahmins and Banias) has misused the political power with no sense of responsibility. This power-hungry insatiable class posed a serious threat to democracy and created an imbalance in the political field"² Hence in his writings he suggests a political strategy to find a way out of this. To do so, he asks Dalits to unite as a third force by sharing power with other sections of the society that are equally deprived. According to Ambedkar, it was only through this force that the oppressed classes would be able to acquire effective bargaining power which would enable them to emancipate themselves from the historical exploitation by the privileged castes.

Unity among the Dalit hence became an important pre-requisite to organizing as a third force. But Dalit castes were never a socio-politically homogeneous community throughout India and Maharashtra is no exception. In Maharashtra one major line of divide among Dalit caste happened after Ambedkar's call for conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar community, a sub-caste among Dalits, hence though the path of conversion was open to all Dalit people the majority of people who participated were from the Mahar community. The remaining Dalit population continued to comprise the lower strata of the Hindu religious hierarchy. But merely belonging to this Hindu identity also did not stand as a cause of their common social identity.

Keeping this disunity in mind this paper intends to do a political economy analysis of the Dalit assertion in Maharashtra and put forth the argument that though the Dalit assertion in Maharashtra is a good example of counter-elite capture it was not successful because of the factionalism and disunity that existed within Dalit caste groups which in turn affected their political representation in the electoral politics.

¹ *Guru Gopal, Concept of Power in Ambedkar in Retrospect.*

² *Ibid*

Dalit Assertion as Counter-Elite Capture

With the historical backings of various Dalit movements and the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar Maharashtra became a frontal site of Dalit Activism in the first decade of independence. Dr. B.R Ambedkar founded the Republican Party of India which he considered a liberal mass-based political organization but his sudden death in 1956 left the party unprepared and vulnerable to face obstacles laid ahead. During its initial years itself, the party found it difficult to make an impact on the electoral politics of Maharashtra and was termed as 'Neo Buddhist Party' Congress was the first who tried to exploit the situation by influencing the prominent leaders of RPI to form a co-option through which an alternative Dalit leadership was formed. Congress, later on, allied with RPI to mobilize and influence Dalit voters. RPI formed a secular alliance with Congress to keep the rising parochial right-wing politics of the SS-BJP alliance out of power. But soon due to the tactical differences and personal ambitions of the leaders, there was a split in RPI. One faction of the RPI went ahead to form the party called Dalit Panther but, later on, they also followed the same trajectory of the RPI and couldn't gain the desired results in politics. Currently, many RPI and Dalit panthers have many factions in Maharashtra, other parties like Bahujan Samaj Party are also the co-competent for Dalit representation but none of these parties have been successful in establishing themselves and gaining power in the state. Hence Maharashtra became a hotbed of Dalit assertion which had the features of counter-elite capture especially when Marathas have consistently remained as the political elites handling the resources and having a strong nexus with the capitalist. But this potential assertion wasn't successful because of some of the following reasons-

1. Social identity stands as the most important requirement for any counter-elite capture to happen. It's needed that people identify themselves as a group facing similar issues. Social identity can be anything caste, class, etc. Most of the research studies when analyzing the political situation of Maharashtra consider Dalits as a homogeneous group but this is not true. Dalits in Maharashtra like in many other states in India are not a homogeneous group. They are heterogeneous as well as highly stratified within themselves. There are 56 sub-caste groups within Dalit in Maharashtra among which five are prominent namely Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Bhangi, and Dhor. Even among these five sub-castes, the major population is Mahar. Even when Ambedkar made a call for conversion to Buddhism only Mahars came forward while the other sub-caste remained with the Hindu identity. Conversion to Buddhism and Dr. Ambedkar's identity as a Mahar kept other sub-caste within Dalits away from joining hands with Mahars or the Neo Buddhists.
2. Though the seeds of Dalit politics were sown in Maharashtra but Ambedkar's writ did not run over the entire Dalit community. Hence certain sections of caste Dalits who did not identify with Ambedkar responded positively to the appeal made by the Hindutva forces such as Shiv Sena and became their foot soldiers. However, such alliances mostly treated them as a means to impress Dalit voters rather than as a representative body of the Dalit constituency.

This gave rise to major disunity among Dalits which did not allow them to assert their political power.

Dalit Assertion and Competitive Populisms

After decades of political transformation, it's been clear for all the political parties that Scheduled caste and Scheduled Tribe are the major vote banks. And to win the elections, their votes are immensely important. Due to the benefits of the reservation policy, certain sub-castes like Mahars and chambers were able to rise above in terms of class which also made them the medium voters. In Maharashtra, the major parties that compete for the elections are Congress, NCP, Shiv Sena, and BJP there are other parties that are gaining prominence recently like Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Congress-NCP and Shiv Sena-BJP are prominent alliances. When RPI supported the Congress-NCP alliance the coalition government of Sena-BJP used different social sites to repress the Dalits, particularly Mahars and Neo-Buddhist because the Sena-BJP coalition wanted to consolidate its hold over the other Dalit constituency of mangs, and Chambhars by making the Mahars and neo-Buddhist the negative reference point (1997, Gopal Guru). While the same Shiv Sena gave the call for Shivshakti-Bhimshakti in 2003, which goes against its earlier stance of opposing Neo-Buddhist based on conversion. Hence with the changing political circumstances the stance of the political party changes.

Effects of Counter Elite Assertion

The Dalit political assertion was not very successful in Maharashtra. But some specific sub-caste groups gained out of this. The Elite political group still holds the power hence the decision about the distribution of public goods is in their hands. However, in the case of private goods, the benefits mostly go to those, who were successful in being the allies of the ruling party. Especially when we talk of something like education, or employment the benefits have been consistently and invariably going to the Mahar community and it's not a coincidence that they have been actively involved in politics as well. Many research studies show that Mahar has been availing of most of the reservations provided to scheduled caste. Where the remaining population among the scheduled caste, and especially those who did not convert to Buddhism and remained within the ambits of Hindus are been used as voters in the time of election by all the parties and alliances but when it comes to resource distribution, they are the last ones to receive benefits. Though even during the colonial period Mahars were soldiers in the British army the major changes happened only after their conversion to Buddhism and inclination towards politics. Hence the effects of this assertion are skewed in the favor of Mahars though other communities are involved as well.

There is no change in the state of corruption as the structure remains the same. The nexus between Political leaders, and Corporates continue. There is an increase in corruption as prominent Dalit leaders are now seen having nexus with corporate companies and are also linked to scandals.

Due to their increase in political participation Dalits have become a major vote bank and hence cannot be neglected. They also became more aware of their rights (though this is not true for all sections) which is a sign of the deepening of democracy. Also, distribution of private goods to them now becomes very important which also results in some human development.

Conclusion

Though Dalit assertion in Maharashtra could have been a successful counter-elite capture had there been unity within the Dalit sub-caste groups. There has been no potential party so far in Maharashtra which has been able to bring all Dalits under one roof. In the wake of gaining leadership, some parties have even sacrificed their non-communal stance. Hence rather than becoming a strong force against the dominant political parties, Dalits are seen submitting to their power and negating Ambedkar's call to become the third force comprising all the marginalized sections of the society.

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