

Caste, Religion and Ethnicity in Indian Politics

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Abstract: India is pigeonholed by more ethnic and religious groups as compared to other countries of the world. Many intellectuals viewed that India is a captivating country where people of many different communities and religions live together in harmony. Indian Population is polygenetic and is an astonishing merger of various races and cultures. Besides, numerous castes, there are eight "major" religions, 15-odd languages spoken in various dialects and a substantial number of tribes and sects.

Politics is the science of government and that part of ethics which has to do with the regulation and government of a nation or state, the preservation of its safety, peace, and prosperity, the defense of its existence and rights against foreign control or conquest, the augmentation of its strength and resources, and the protection of its citizens in their rights, with the preservation and improvement of their morals.

Key words: Manu Sruthi, Ancient Period, politics. Nationalism, Bodo, Schedule tribe and caste. Communalism.

Introduction:

Politics as a notion generally applied to the art or science of running governmental or state affairs, including behavior within civil governments, but also applies to institutions, fields, and special interest groups such as the corporate, academic, and religious segments of society. It consists of "social relations involving authority or power" and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. Modern political discourse focuses on democracy and the relationship between people and politics. It is thought of as the way people choose government officials and make decisions about public policy.

All over the world, the political processes have ascended out of social environment. Tribes, clans, castes, classes have existed around a social organization. Economy, polity, religion, family

and kinship networks have operated under a social structure. Famous philosopher asserted that man is a political animal. He had in mind the social element. When elaborating the Indian society, it is multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious. Indian religions are pantheistic in which the nature is visualized as a manifestation of theology. There is an immense significance of Politics in India such as to run the country more efficiently, to manage the country with good rules and norms, to look in the internal affairs about the development of the country, to represent the country to the outside world, to issue different policies for the country.

Caste:

In contemporary Indian scenario, caste mobilisation has become an important factor in determining Indian politics. According to Risley Caste, is a collection of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, divine or human and professing to follow same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community. It is described caste as localized group having a traditional association based on one's birth in a caste, though at times associated with particular occupation (N.D. Arora, 2010). Caste, through a joint effort of its members to assert themselves, has presently intervened in both politics and administration mainly through franchise and institutions like Panchayati Raj. Whether it is the factionalism of Indian political parties or the nomination of candidates and the mode of election campaign, most things can be explained through caste interests and caste balance.

Ideally, caste and democratic political system signify opposite value systems. Caste is hierarchical. Status of an individual in caste-oriented social system is determined by birth. It has religious sanction by various holy texts, reinforced by priests and rituals. Conventionally, upper castes had been given certain privileges not only in religious area but also in economic, education and political spheres. Customary laws differentiate individual by birth and sex. That is, certain rules are austere to women and Shudras and soft to males and Brahmins. Conversely, democratic political system backs freedom to an individual and equality of status. It stands for rule of Law. No one regardless of status is above law. Indian democratic system under the Constitution stands for liberty, equality and fraternity among all citizens. It struggles to build egalitarian social order. There are three consequences of such interaction between caste associations and political parties. One, caste members particularly poor and marginalized who were previously remained untouched by the political processes got politicized and began to participate in electoral politics with an expectation that their interests would be served. Secondly,

caste members get split among various political parties weakening hold of the caste. Lastly, numerically large castes get representation in decision-making bodies and strength of the traditionally dominant castes get weaken. This explains the rise of middle and backward caste representations in most of the state assemblies.

How caste affects politics.

The interest and mindfulness of various castes in politics may be studied in terms of four factors: interest of castes in politics, political knowledge and political awareness of castes, identification of castes with political parties, and influence of castes on political affairs. Rajni Kothari (1970) scrutinized the relationship between caste and politics through evaluating the issue as to what happens to political system because of the vote of castes. He found that three factors such as education, government patronage, and slowly expanding franchise have entered the caste system because of which caste system has come to affect democratic politics in the country. Economic opportunity, administrative patronage, and positions of power offered by the new institutions and the new leadership drew castes into politics.

The caste system, which is based on the philosophies of purity and pollution, hierarchy and difference, has despite social mobility, been overbearing towards the Shudras and the outcastes who suffered the disgrace of ritual impurity and lived in abject poverty, illiteracy and denial of political power. The basis of confrontational identity politics based on caste may be said to have its origin on the issue of providing the oppressed caste groups with state support in the form of protective discrimination. This group identity based on caste that has been reinforced by the advent of political consciousness around caste identities is institutionalised by the caste-based political parties that acknowledge to uphold and protect the interests of specific identities including the castes. Subsequently, political parties have the upper caste dominated BJP, the lower caste dominated BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) or the SP (Samajwadi Party), including the fact that left parties have implicitly followed the caste pattern to extract distance in electoral politics. The Aggregate result of the politicisation can be precised by arguing that caste-based identity politics has had a twin role in Indian society and polity. It comparatively democratised the caste-based Indian society but simultaneously destabilised the development of class-based organisations.

Historical data indicated that Caste-based discrimination and domination have been a malicious aspect of Indian society and after independence, its implications with politics have not

only made it possible for previously oppressed caste-groups to be accorded political freedom and recognition but has also raised consciousness about its potential as a political capital. In fact, Dipankar Gupta has emotionally exposed this ambiguity when he elaborates the differences between Ambedkar and Mandal Commission's view of caste. While the former designed the policy of reservations or protective discrimination to remove untouchability as an institution from Indian social life and polity, the latter considered caste as an important political resource. Actually, the Mandal commission can be regarded as the intellectual inspiration in transforming caste based identity to an asset that may be used as a basis for safeguarding political and economic gains. Though it can also be said that the upper castes by virtue of their major position were already occupying positions of strengths in the political and economic system, and when the Mandal intensified the consciousness of the 'Dalits' by recognising their disadvantage of caste-identity as an advantage the confrontation ensues.

Religion: Another type of identity politics is that produced through the development of a community on the shared link of religion. Religion is a collection of belief systems or cultural systems that relate humanity to spirituality and moral values. Many religions may have organized behaviours, clergy, adherence or membership, holy places, and scriptures. The practice of a religion may also include:

- Rituals

- Sermons
- Sacrifices
- Festivals
- Funerary services
- Matrimonial service
- Meditation
- Prayer
- Music
- Art
- Dance
- Public service
- Other aspects of human culture.

Religions may also contain mythology. It can be used to enhance oneself financially or spiritually. It can also be used to manipulate and control others for good or evil ends. It has been used as an effective political and commercial tool as evidenced by the many historic records of

religious wars. Religion has great influence on political pattern in Indian society. Politicians use religion as their loopholes. They hide their black money in the names of religion and trusts. Politician use religion to gain success in politics.

The rise of Hindu national decisiveness, politics of representational government, persistence of communal perceptions, and competition for the socio-economic resources are considered some of the reasons for the generation of communal beliefs and their change into major riots. Identity schemes based on religion have become a major source of skirmish not only in the international background but since the early 1990s it has also become a challenge for Indian democracy and secularism. The growth of majoritarian assertiveness is considered to have become institutionalised after the BJP that along with its 'Hindu' constituents gave political cohesiveness to a consolidating Hindu consciousness, formed a coalition ministry in March 1998. However, like all identity schemes the falsifying of a religious community polishes over internal differences within a particular religion to generate the "we are all of the same kind" emotion. Thus differences of caste groups within a homogenous Hindu identity, linguistic and sectional differences within Islam are shelved to create a homogenous unified religious identity.

It can be evaluated that In the Indian culture, religion has significant role. Political leaders realized that to retain unity in India, there is a need to remain secular. Therefore, Gandhiji had been preaching brotherhood among the different religious groups. Nehru was a strong supporter

Ethnicity: Ethnicity refers to physical characteristics as well as social traits that are shared by a human population. Some of the social traits often used for ethnic classification include:

- Nationality
- Tribe
- Religious faith
- Shared language
- Shared culture
- Shared traditions

Ethnicity denotes to selected cultural and physical characteristics used to categorize people into groups or categories considered to be significantly different from others. In some cases, ethnicity involves merely a loose group identity with little or no cultural traditions in common. In contrast, some ethnic groups are coherent subcultures with a shared language and body of tradition.

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