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Changing Nature of Caste in India: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

Caste in traditional Indian Society was a localized, hierarchical group of hereditary occupation. Rituals of purity and pollution governed relations among different groups. However, economic and political changes after independence have transformed caste to serve as an instrument for levelling inequalities of the old order. Erosion of ritualistic-moral edifice of caste has enabled rural people to empower themselves through institutions of political democracy. A 'dual Culture' of tradition and modernity now characterizes situation specific behaviour in rural society, where reverence for kith and kin exists but notions of purity and pollution have gradually weakened.

1. Introduction

Caste is an important feature of Indian society. It defines the social, economic and political relationship of an individual based on factors like hierarchy, commensality, restriction on marriage, foods and hereditary occupation. Castes also differ from each other in ritual, socioeconomic and political positions. Traditionally, caste existed as a rigid socioeconomic system of inequalities determined by birth with consequent features of inhumanity and injustice. However, after independence, modernization and industrialization have reduced occupational and hierarchical rigidities of ritualized politics, economic and social interdependence. However, they have not reduced caste to a mere category. It has in effect demonstrated a remarkable ability to respond to parliamentary politics of interest articulation and aggregation through associations and affiliations, which symbolize a new caste consciousness and unity. It has acquired a new dimension after independence. A changed political context has undermined its vocational basis, economic rationality, interactional restriction and spatial-political isolation. Democratic polity based on principle of adult franchise has reinforced caste with vigour which has resulted in the emergence of Caste association, the most common type of community in contemporary Indian politics. Self-exploration of caste groups has resulted in redefinition of their identity, and given currency to the idea of caste unity.

2. Changing Nature of Caste

The term Caste was first used by the Portuguese to refer to the varna system of social hierarchy in India. They described caste on the basis of practical experiences of daily life instead of doctrinaire accounts of religious scriptures. However the caste was reconstructed by the British with the help of ancient religious scriptures, who defined it as the most static and rigid feature of Indian social life. Caste in traditional Indian society was not a static phenomenon, but changes within the system were either underplayed or received in a 'surreptitious' manner. However, the British not only redefined caste but also altered its nature through modern state structures, which were introduced to administer a vast country like India. They invented techniques of measurement to carry out surveys of land-crop output, mineral prospects as well as measuring Indian brains, bodies, diets and life span. In this process they mapped up, classified and quantified the history, culture and society of India. In 1780, population count divided communities into religious and caste groups, which became a regular exercise in subsequent censuses where people had to specify their religion and caste. The British policy of giving representation to Indians in legislative organs increased political relevance of enumerating communities. In 1935 the government used the term 'Scheduled Caste' to identify disadvantaged caste groups for affirmative action. Thus, communities that in pre-independent India were fuzzy became entrenched during British India through enumeration, labels, names and ranks around which people organized themselves to represent their interests in politics.

After independence, modern democratic institutions were expected to have a destructive influence on caste structures, where logic of modern democratic citizenship and industrial economy would dissolve primordial identities. But Rudolphs termed these perceptions as a misdiagnosis of traditional societies and misunderstanding of modern societies, which produced an analytic gap between tradition and modernity. Similarly, Rajani Kothari argued that modern political institutions cannot function in a vacuum and have to find a base in the society. A democratic Society concerned with legitimacy therefore must proceed through a conversation between old and the new. Traditions in his view need not always be old because new ones emerge and become central through assimilation with the ongoing traditions.

He further argued that traditional Indian society was differentiated along caste, religion and tribe, which have displayed flexibility in the face of new changes. Older differentiations have taken new organizational forms like modern associations and become part of a new structure of power and status. Ideological factors like reservation of jobs, representation and new openings in education have contributed in the mobilization of these groups in a changed context. In this process of change, caste has not disappeared but transformed, its apolitical context has assumed a new Avatar- a politicized form. As the most flexible primordial feature of Indian society, caste has responded in an extraordinary way to changing economic and political conditions. In many parts of rural and urban India, conventional markers of identity like caste, dress, occupation have become less useful in identification of caste as individuals can conveniently pass off as members of other castes.

Thus, electoral democracy instead of marginalizing the caste identity has resulted in revival of the same through popular appeals to traditional belongingness. Most political parties now invoke caste to the exclusion of other identities thus infusing complex dynamics to caste. The entrenched castes were the first to operate in power play of politics as they enjoyed a dominant status in caste, education and social hierarchy and were followed by a corresponding assertion of other higher castes- the ascendant castes that suffered from a feeling of deprivation and antagonism, resulting in inter as well as intra-caste conflicts for resources, power and benefits. The low caste, tribals and other formal groups that emulated higher castes in rituals, beliefs and lifestyle demanded representation in jobs, educational institutions and political bodies instead of their earlier demands of entry into temples, prestigious caste names and honourable occupations. Their influence extends to state cabinets, legislative assemblies and administrative arenas. Clearly, there is a shift from the sacred to the secular. With improved means of communication, western education and economic opportunities, caste associations have emerged enabling members to pursue social mobility, political power and economic advantage. As agents of change, these associations undermine traditional forces and unite similar jatis to press for extension of privileges and rights. Caste loyalties thus have transformed from traditional authority structures to modern forms like government, power and elections. Group leaders are individuals who wield power not by lineage but by merit of articulation, education and administration in modern democratic politics. A significant change that caste as an adaptive instrument has achieved is the fusion of traditional and modern culture by socializing a large mass of illiterate population in Indian politics through various types of mobilization

Today caste survives as a community which forms alliances with other communities that share common political interests. Political parties fuse caste interest with caste identity to expand their social bases in a competitive electoral arena rather than focusing on any one of them separately. Thus, Competitive electoral politics has incorporated caste into its fold by recasting and reorganizing elements of traditional hierarchy and separation into new horizontal power relations. The Congress party played a key role in politicization of castes by treating them as socio-economic groups seeking new identities in a changed context. It mobilized them and skillfully projected itself as a national party representing issues of development and integration. It earned a dominant political space in the country for three decades after independence as a party of consensus for a large number of English speaking upper castes, middle castes and the lower castes. Such a patron client relationship between the upper-intermediate castes and numerous client castes at the bottom of the system though unequal was reliable. Later a class of upper caste elite living in urban areas and the rural social elite belonging to dominant peasant castes and upper castes living in the villages fused together to form a new power group in politics. However numerous lower castes, small and marginal peasants and artisans at the bottom of the hierarchy which had no means to enter the modern sector in a significant way remained loyal to the Congress reinforcing its politics of consensus.

After nearly three decades of independence signs of dissent in the consensus were evident as lower castes of peasants, ex-untouchables and the tribals expressed resentment against the patron client relationship. Growing awareness of their numerical strength and the role they could play in politics resulted in political assertion of these groups. A serious challenge to upper caste hegemony occurred during the 1970s and reached a climax in the 80s with Mandal Commission report that enhanced reservation of jobs for other backward classes at the centre, state and union territories.

Post Mandal politics has changed the social basis of Indian politics. Congress hegemony has ended. It is no longer the party of consensus that can accommodate the growing interest of lower castes. Shifting alliances have also resulted in organization of separate political parties among these groups which are wooed by national parties, for garnering political support. The OBCs, SCs and the STs have assumed an important socioeconomic status at micro level and demand political power for themselves directly rather than through their patrons indirectly. Thus a new kind of stratification has emerged which represents a fusion between old status system and the new power system. While members of the upper castes have resources of traditional status those belonging to lower castes are armed with affirmative action. Modern education, patterns of consumption and economic assets have led to the disintegration of traditional caste structure and emergence of new middle class, i.e., the Kurmis, Koeris, Yadavs, Jats and the Okkaliggas and Lingayats. It is no longer the upper caste western educated monolith middle class of pre-independence period, but a vast conglomerate of one fifth of Indian population politically and culturally unified but diverse in terms of its social origins.

At the time of independence middle class in India was composed of upper caste, English educated elite. Today it has expanded to include upwardly mobile dominant castes of rich farmers. Although the members of the dwija upper castes and non dwija dominant castes account for about a quarter of the middle class, there is still a reduced presence of upper castes in today's middle class. About half of the middle class population now comes from different lower caste social formations- the dalit, tribal, or backward communities of peasants, artisans and religious minorities because when they acquire modern means of social mobility, such as education, wealth and political power, their ritual status does not come in the way of their entry into the middle class or acquiring a consciousness of the same. It is a social-cultural formation in which individuals and communities enter and acquire new economic and political interests and meanings.

3. Conclusion

Caste continues to be a critical feature of Indian society. It now exists not only as a marker of social identity, but also as a form of organization for electoral politics. Fundamental changes in occupational structure of society have pushed caste out of the traditional system of stratification by breaking down the nexus between heredity, ritual status and occupation.

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