

CBCS B.A. POLITICAL SCIENCE HONS

SEM II CC4 : POLITICAL PROCESS IN INDIA

TOPIC-V : Caste and Politics - Caste in Politics and the Politicization of Caste

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INTRODUCTION :

The relationship between caste and politics has been analysed at two levels:

- i) **How caste affects politics, and**
- ii) **How politics affects caste.**

First take up the relationship in terms of awareness of castes in politics.

The Awareness:

The interest and awareness of various castes in politics has been 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.**

These four aspects were studied by Anil Bhatt in the 1970s by studying persons of high, middle, and low castes with different backgrounds in four states (Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh).

Analysing the political interest by taking all castes together, it was found that about 25 per cent castes had high interest in politics, 45 per cent had moderate interest, and 30 per cent had no interest at all. With regard to the awareness of political changes and major political problems in the country, it was also found that higher castes had more interest than the middle and the lower castes. However did not find any relationship between caste status and identification with political parties. Lastly, it was found that some higher castes are politically influential while middle and low castes dominate only in few villages. Although subsequently over the period scenario has changed.

The Relationship:

Rajni Kothari (1970) examined the relationship between caste and politics by analysing the issue as to what happens to political system because of the vote of castes. He found that three factors—**education, government patronage**, and slowly expanding franchise (including 18-21 year old young persons in electorate)—have penetrated the caste system because of which it (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.

This involvement of castes in politics resulted in two things:

- The caste system made available to the leadership the structural and the ideological basis for political mobilisation, and
- Leadership was forced to make concessions to local opinion and organise castes for economic and political purposes.

The use of caste in politics was analysed in two different stages.

The first stage involved intellectuals, and antagonism and resentment between higher castes (like Reddi in Andhra Pradesh, Pattidars in Gujarat, Lingayats in Karnataka, Bhumihars in Bihar, and Rajputs in Rajasthan) and high ascendant castes (like Kayastha in Bihar, Jats in Rajasthan).

The second stage involved factionalism and fragmentation within the competing (entrenched and ascendant) castes as a result of which multi-caste and multi-factional alignments develop. The lower castes also are brought in to support higher caste leaders and to strengthen a faction.

In the first stage, only three components of caste are involved—**the power structure of caste, distribution of economic benefits, and caste consciousness**. But in the second stage, other components of castes like **caste consciousness, client loyalties etc. also come to be involved**.

Further, three sub-stages are pointed out by Kothari in the first stage. In the first sub-stage, the struggle for power and benefits is at first limited to the entrenched castes, i.e., those which exercised preponderant influence economically and politically but not necessarily numerically. In the second sub-stage, ascendant castes (i.e., unsatisfied castes wanting higher roles) also start competing for power.

In the third sub-stage, there is not only competition between entrenched and ascendant castes (for power and benefits) but also within these castes. In the second stage, called as the stage of caste fragmentation or factionalism, the leadership cleavages are created and multi-caste and multi-factional alignments come into being. This also creates the problem of rival caste leaders in politics. These leaders come to involve masses too because they (leaders) want to appeal to wider identities. There is also change in leadership in this stage.

Kothari has talked of the third stage also in relationship between caste and politics. While in the first stage, 'entrenched' high castes are first politicised and 'ascendant' high castes respond with resentment and feeling of relative deprivation (e.g., entrenched caste of Brahmins and ascendant caste of Marathas in Maharashtra) and in the second stage factions emerge within the competing (entrenched and ascendant) castes and lower castes are also brought in for support, in the third stage, identifications other than those of caste are likely to become more important with advancing education, urbanisation and adoption of modern achievement orientation. There, thus, emerge cross-cutting alliances.

The process of fusion of castes is illustrated by the DMK in Tamil Nadu and Republican Party (consisting of Mahars and other untouchable castes) in Maharashtra. The former

party is politically powerful but the latter party has not yet wielded much political power.

In panchayats at the village level these days, elections are often contested on cross-cutting votes. Large landless castes now have the power of voting strength; so they challenge the traditionally dominant caste which has power derived from land control. Dominant castes as well as ascendant (higher) castes are usually tied in with the important political parties of the region and upward mobility through the political party organisation takes place. Thus, today on the one side caste ceases to be an exclusive political support-base and on the other it greatly affects politics.

Kothari draws four conclusions from the present relationship between caste and politics:

(1) New elite structure has emerged in politics which is drawn from different castes but shares a common secular outlook and is homogeneous in terms of some values.

(2) Castes have assumed new organisational form Thus (i) caste associations are now functioning at various levels (universities, hostels, clubs, government offices, and so forth; (ii) caste conferences have become broad-based; and (iii) caste federations have emerged.

(3) Castes have started functioning on factional basis. These factions divide not only political groups but also social groups.

(4) The caste identifications have given a new relevance to the electorate system. It is not only the large castes which affect politics but also the smaller castes which have become important in seeking votes.

Caste and Voting Behaviour:

Voting provides an opportunity to castes to assert their influence. Scholars like **Rajni Kothari** (1970), **Lindzey Gardner, Miller** (1950), **Key** (1955), **Campbell** (1960), and **Norman Palmer** (1976) have referred to caste as a voting determinant. Just as in Britain, voting is class-determinant, in United States, it is race-determinant, in India it is caste-determinant. For those castes which are at the bottom of the hierarchy, voting right serves as a powerful activity. The lower the social and economic status of a caste, the higher the importance of the vote.

Several studies like those of **Kothari, Mayer, Verma and Bhambhri, Ramashray Roy, Cohn**, etc., have shown that castes exert influence and have gained a bargaining power because of their voting strength. **Andre Beteille** has also said that loyalties of caste are exploited in voting.

New alliances cutting across caste are also formed. Rudolph is of the opinion that caste association has given caste a new vitality and democracy has enabled caste to play an important political role in India. D.L. Seth conducted a study in 1967 and interviewed persons from different constituencies of India and found that among various factors, voting behaviour was determined on the advice of caste leaders only

in 1 per cent cases, by family in 46 per cent cases and by voters' own decision in 49 per cent cases. In 4 per cent cases, the determinant could not be traced.

Another study conducted among 1,000 voters in Puna in the same year (1967) revealed that caste affected voting in 58 per cent cases. Subsequently in Lok Sabha elections as well as in the Vidhan Sabha elections caste was found to be an important factor in voting. Harold Gould however, is of the opinion that caste has ceased to be a determinant of politics in India.

Political Elite, Political Parties and Caste Mobilisation:

Caste has become a determinant factor of 'political elite' status. Studies conducted on political elite by scholars like *Sirsikar, Sachchidananda, Ram Ahuja, S.K. Lai*, etc., have all pointed out that in the emergence of elite, higher castes have an extraordinary advantage over the middle and the lower castes.

Before independence, generally the upper caste groups occupied the centre of the political stage in the Congress party engaged in the freedom struggle but after independence, individuals from the middle and the lower castes also entered political power field.

The reservation policy enabled individuals from the lower castes to emerge as leaders, while elite from the middle castes emerged due to their improved educational and socio-economic status. Thus, caste system which had only ritualistic function (including determining occupation and social status) assumed the new role of amendable political behaviour of the people.

In villages also, caste has assumed great significance in emerging power structure. In offices, universities, secretariats, etc. we hear of Jain lobby, Rajput lobby, Brahmin lobby, Yadav lobby, Kayasth lobby, Reddy lobby, etc. If activists operate as casteist in social and occupational life, they cannot think in terms of operating as non-casteist in political life. Our political elite, thus, may talk of secularism and denounce caste and casteist politics but in practice they function under the pressure of caste, since their own emergence as leaders has a caste background.

Political parties also mobilise caste support. In fact, the problems of mobilisation of masses are the same as they were several decades ago. Just as in the 1930s and the 1940s social reformers believed that without the enlightenment of masses, their organisation for political activity was not possible, similarly today also politicians try to get support from the caste leaders and at the same time drive home to them the utility of political means in achieving their goals.

Some scholars have studied mobilisation of castes by the political parties in different states All these studies showed that political parties mobilise castes for their functioning and seek their support in winning elections.

People's Perception of the Use of Caste in Politics:

We can classify people in three groups on the basis of their perceptions:

- one, who lament this role and think that politics should be free of caste and casteism;
- second, who think that political relationships have no independent capacity to influence social relationships;
- lastly, who claim the autonomy of either caste or politics or both.

Since in India social system is organised around caste structure, therefore, caste and politics are difficult proposition to separate. Thus, casteism in politics is nothing but politicisation of caste. As regards the second view, politics is seen as an instrument to consolidate or raise its position. As such, politics does not affect the structure of society. As regards the third view, this includes progressive economists, indologists and political and social anthropologists.

It was desired to protect caste and free caste from politics and politics from caste. This view also criticised since there never was a complete polarisation between the caste system and the political system. Politics has used caste and will continue to use it for socio-political purposes.