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Social Structure of India and Role of Casteism in Indian Democracy

Abstract

India social structure is based on caste system. It is matter of shame that the Indian culture, which gave the message of world-brotherhood, but call some of its own brothers untouchables. After independence, the influence of caste in political field has increased. Whereas, the influence of casteism in social and economic life (such as the standard of living of dalits, poverty, education, literacy, income, employment, health) has decreased to some extent, in politics it has increased. The study has been framed with the objective to access the influence of casteism on social and economic life of the dalits and with special reference to Indian politics. Indian politics changed dramatically after the Mandal commission issue hit the national consciousness. In the present paper we have tried to explore movements of dalit in India and provisions made in the constitution of India for improving the conditions of dalits to bring them at par with other members of society and with the objective to access the influence of casteism not on social and economic life of the dalits and with special reference to Indian politics. For this purpose data was collected through secondary sources. We have found that as the development movements of dalits is increasing day by day and the role of casteism is also influencing Indian democracy.

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Introduction

The post-independent India while adopting her constitution put affirmative action as a part of its objective to alleviate the poverty, unemployment and the miseries of the so called untouchables (SC and ST), other backward classes and the adivasis. The castes eligible for this treatment were identified and included in the schedule for quotas and reservation in education and employment. These castes came to be known as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled tribes (STs). The other eligible castes for reservation and quotas came to be known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Jotirao Phule was the first modern thinker to characterize the productive castes of India as 'Sudras and Ati-Sudras'. Those castes other than Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisyas were called by him as Sudras. Ati-Sudras is the so-called untouchables and according to Phule they are the ones who predate the Varna scheme. But now many of the Sudra castes have been elevated into neo- Kshatriya category. Hence to denote the people who still languish in the drudgery of caste system had to have a word to rally all men and women from these castes and fight for their emancipation.

B. R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the productive castes of pre and post- independent India started using the term dalit, a concept that is rooted in Marathi language to refer to the so-called lower caste people. The word dalit means suppressed and exploited people. The concept has emerged from the people's usage in Maharashtra. Dalit has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. The term dalit became popular after the emergence of *Dalit Panthers* movement in Maharashtra. Dalit is usually used to denote the SCs. After the emergence of *Bahujan Samaj Party* in Uttar Pradesh, the use of the term Bahujan to refer the SCs, STs and OBCs gained acceptance of the people and the government. This term was first used by Buddha and then by Phule. The term *Bahujan* simply means majority and does not qualify the nature of the population. Hence dalit scholar-activists like Kancha Ilaiah use the term Dalit bahujans to refer to so-called untouchables and the Other Backward Castes.

Myth and Reality about Caste System in India:

The orthodox view on the origin and sustenance of caste system in India relies heavily on the sacerdotal texts and on the brahmanical interpretation of the same. This originates from a monolithic understanding of caste system and considers the reality as one that continues for

three millenium without any significant mutation. According to the *Purusasukta* legend, the Brahmans and Kshatriyas emerged from the head and shoulders, respectively, of Purusa, the primeval being. Consequently they merit high-caste status. Next came the Vaisyas from the thighs of the primeval being. The same legend goes on to say that the lowly Shudras deservedly occupy a subordinate position because they were born from Purusa's feet. The so-called untouchables who bore the burnt of this mysterious system for generations are beyond this four-fold Varna scheme. The dominant lay understanding and academic point of view on caste phenomenon is that a single caste hierarchy is universally acknowledged and accepted by everyone in the caste system. To believe that there is a single caste order to which all castes from Brahman to the untouchables adhere would not match the realities. The emergence of Rajput and Gujar-Pratihara kingdoms in the medieval India and the rise of Jats from the thirteenth century onwards, the assertion of Izhavas and later of Mahars in the modern period are the example to prove this view-point. But no castes other than the Brahmins adhere to this origin story and hence there-by accept their current status in the caste hierarchy. The entire so-called untouchable and other castes have their own origin tales that are totally against the orthodox view. For example, the Kahars, a backward caste of Central Bihar claim that they are descendents of the lunar dynasty – the moon, which are the eyes of Purusa. This story tries to establish the superiority of Kahar's over and above the Brahmans and Kshatriyas by stating that they are made up of superior and finer material. In medieval India, the *Bakhti movement*, which was anti-caste and anti-brahmanical, lasted several centuries. This could not have been possible if the brahmanical view of caste hierarchy was accepted by all. The present day caste wars, uprisings and demands for more shares in economic and political power would not have arisen if brahmanical-textual view were accepted uncritically by all. The caste system is being viewed as a rigid hierarchy based on purity and pollution. But no caste, even those placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy do accept the upper-caste notion that their bodies are made of impure substances. No caste willingly agrees that its members are defiling and charge other castes to be polluting them. A Chamar i.e. Leather worker believes that he or she is being pushed down the caste ladder unjustly but at the same time condemns other so called untouchables to lower caste status. But at the same time every caste (jati) practices its own purity–impurity rituals. This is the story of the myth and reality about the caste system in India.

Dalit Politics:

After post-independent, the oppressed classes of India i.e. the Dalits have awakened to assert their space in the economic and political arena. The mightier their assertion, the fiercer the resistance put up by the dominant castes. Hence we have group clashes, burning down of villages, killings, rapes, naked parading and so many other horrendous crimes meted out on the Dalits. It is in the 1980s that the Dalit parties emerged as a force to reckon with. *The Mandal Commission* report recommending reservation and quotas for dalits in a systematic fashion, and the movement for and against it gave an added impetus to the dalit movement and helped its consolidation.

The Concept of Social Exclusion

As a definition, social exclusion reflects the multiple and overlapping nature of the disadvantages experienced by certain groups and categories of the population, with social identity as the central axis of their exclusion. The value addedness of the social exclusion approach is its emphasis on the role of relational features in deprivation. (Sen, 2000) Social exclusion can therefore be explained in terms of group interactions aimed at maximizing value and minimizing costs. “Individuals are most vulnerable when they have fewest personal capacities and material resources...but none of these threatens their survival so long as they enjoy the protections afforded by membership of an inclusive group that co-operates productively and redistributes its product” (Jordan, 1994). He further writes that all interactions take place in the context of norms, practices and institutions that steer, stabilize and regulate them. Members regulate each other’s actions by reinforcing norms of social obligation, and offer mutual support and assistance on a reciprocal basis. “All social formations have rules about rights as well as obligations, which determine when, where and how the goods for final consumption will be distributed. These rules are laid down collectively, but result in individual entitlements” (Jordan, 1996).

Social Exclusion as a Human Rights Issue

The effectiveness of policies and programmes in addressing the issue of social exclusion relates to the discussion on human development and human rights. The development approaches from the 1950s to the 1980s primarily focused on social and economic development as an outcome of the development process and were less concerned with civil and political rights. During this period, government policy and the development community were

also less concerned with the quality of the process by which the outcomes were achieved. In contrast, the human rights based approach to development recognizes both the achievement of a desirable outcome and the establishment of an adequate process to achieve and sustain the outcomes. “Participation, local ownership, empowerment and sustainability are essential characteristics of a high-quality process (Jonsson, 2003). A rights perspective is based on principles that emphasize accountability of those with obligations to realize the rights of children; the universality of rights; the indivisibility and interdependence of rights; and also the principle of the best interests of the child and taking into account the views of the child. The state and the other duty-bearers e.g. parents and teachers have obligations to fulfill these rights. As rights-holders, children are entitled to demand that the duty-bearers meet their respective obligation to respect, protect and fulfill their rights. (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2002). This global shift in development towards a human rights perspective has important implications for addressing social exclusion in education as it encourages one to take a broader, systemic and more holistic view of the issue and not interpret it only as a failure of the education system alone.

The Overall Position of Schedule Caste in India

According to the Census 2001, the total population of the Scheduled Castes (SC) in India is 166,635,700, which is 16.3 per cent of the total population (Registrar General, 2005). The population of SCs is unevenly distributed among the states in India, with nearly 60 per cent of all SC children of primary school-going age (6-10 years) residing in the following six states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The latter five states are among the most disadvantaged states in India across most social indicators.

Historically, the caste system classified people by their occupation and status. “Each caste had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status. Although in “scriptural terms” social and economic status was supposed to be separated, the economic and social status of the various castes tended to coincide (Shah, 2006). However, since the 19th century, the link between caste and occupation has become less rigid as it became easier for people to change occupations. This change has accelerated with the economic boom which has taken place in India since the early 1990s i.e. after economic reforms or liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. There has not, however, been a corresponding fluidity in caste, as intermarriage is very rare. Privileged sections of society tend to be from upper castes while the disadvantaged sections by

the so called lower castes. Caste can be seen as the institution that has been structuring and maintaining for centuries relations of power among different communities and seeks to legitimize these power relations through systematically dispensing mixes of economic and cultural assets/opportunities and deprivations to different communities (Sheth, 2004).

The specific structure and hierarchy related to castes is specific to various states and regions in India, with only the highest caste, the Brahmins, consistently faring better throughout the country. Not only are there differences in the names of the various castes, but also the hierarchy between them may also be different between regions. However, castes who traditionally suffered discrimination based on untouchability, which was an element of the caste system throughout India, have been identified, enumerated and incorporated in the schedule of the Constitution. The implicit criterion for inclusion in the SC list is the social and religious disability suffered by a caste on account of untouchability i.e. being at the pollution end of the social hierarchy. In defining who would be included in the Schedules, the government originally used the 1931 census report and to a large extent duplicated a list created in 1936 (de Haan, 2005). Currently, the National Commissions for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) are vested with the responsibility of considering castes for inclusion or exclusion from the Schedule, which then needs to be ratified in Parliament. The discriminated communities are then officially designated as Scheduled Castes (SCs). Included in the SC category are communities from three different religions, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, all having within them communities traditionally suffering from untouchability.

The Government of India's approach to historically marginalized groups draws on provisions made in the Indian Constitution, which contains explicit state obligation towards protecting and promoting social, economic, political and cultural rights. ***“The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation” (Directive Principle of state Policy, Article 46).*** The Constitution mandates positive discrimination in government services, state-run, and sponsored educational institutions. Amendments to the Constitution also enabled representation of SC men and women in local governance structures. (de Haan, 2005).

Table 1 shows that on an average for India, 27.09% of the population live below the poverty line in rural areas, compared to 36.25% of the SC population and 23.62% in urban areas compared to 45.86 per cent in rural areas and 34.75 per cent of ST population living below poverty line in urban areas.

Table 1: Population below poverty line in India, SC and ST (NSSO, 1999/00)

| Population Below Poverty Line | India | SCs | STs |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Rural Areas | 27.09 | 36.25 | 45.86 |
| Urban Areas | 23.62 | 38.47 | 34.75 |

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation

Mehrotra recognized that there has been political and social mobilization of SCs in India, particularly in certain poor states such as Uttar Pradesh, which is one of the poorest states in India. However, this mobilization has failed to translate into positive change in the social sector for this excluded group of population. As Mehrotra wrote, “while UP’s mobilizers of the dalits (SCs) have focused exclusively on capturing power, the gains to the lowest castes have been entirely of a symbolic nature.” (Mehrotra, 2006).

Table 2: Percentage of children completing primary school (various sources)

| Survey | % Completed |
|-------------------|-------------|
| NSSS 52 (1995-96) | 32.8 |
| NSS 55 (1999-00) | 36.8 |
| NFHS-II (1998-99) | 37.7 |
| RCHS-II (2002-04) | 37.8 |

Source: Different Surveys of Govt. of India.

Using completion rates of five years of schooling as a key indicator of educational status, Table 2 shows that SC population are disadvantaged when compared to ST and other castes of India. It should also be noted that ST children are in some ways even more disadvantaged than SCs in terms of education status. Regarding the accessibility of the education system for ST children, issues such as the language of instruction, remoteness of their habitations, poverty and other factors are barriers to access for this disadvantaged group.

Table 3: Completion Rate of 10-12 years by caste

| Social Group | SC | ST | Others |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Male | 36.3 | 32.6 | 44.8 |
| Female | 32.3 | 26.6 | 44.1 |

Source: RCH, 2002-2004

The Approach of National Common Minimum Programme of UPA Government towards the Dalit People:

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (Keep Your Promise Campaign): is a national initiative to hold the government accountable to its promise to end Poverty, Social Exclusion & Discrimination. This campaign emerged from the consensus among human rights activists and social action groups who were part of the World Social Forum 2004 (Mumbai) on the need for a forceful, focused and concerted effort to make a difference to the fact that one fourth of the world's poor live in India and continue to experience intense deprivation from opportunities to learn, live and work in dignity.

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan works to ensure that the concerns and aspirations of dalits, adivasis, denotified & nomadic tribes, women, children, youth, the differently abled and people living with HIV-AIDS are mainstreamed across programs, policies and development goals of the government. We are represented by a network of more than 900 rights action groups across 15 states of India, who have come together to link social groups and engage policy makers on issues of strategic relevance.

The fifth principle of the National Common Minimum Programme of UPA speaks to provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs and religious minorities. However this does not mean that the other five principles have nothing to do with the dalits, adivasis and other minorities. Since the government accepts the principle of the Special Component Plan, the rights of the Dalits must be considered and integrated across all the basic principles. The Inter-Ministry Task Force Report highlights several provisions within the National Common Minimum Programme that have special relevance to Dalits.

Conclusion:

Educational development constitutes the major programme of the government i.e. about half of the central government spending on the SC and ST population. The main educational problem of SC and ST relates to low literacy rate, high drop out at primary school and higher level, low quality education and discrimination and exclusion including the admission in educational institution. Government educational schemes therefore include measures such as: to improve educational infrastructure particularly in area populated predominantly by SC; admission in educational institutions through reservation of seats and other measures ; financial supports at various level of education, including scholarships/fellowship national and international; remedial coaching to improve quality of education and capabilities; special hostel for boys and girls and in all these schemes special focus on girls education. If the government is serious about keeping its promises to the dalits, it needs to ensure that special efforts, resources and provisions are made – both in relation to the mainstream programs of the National Common Minimum Programme as well as with regard to dalit specific schemes and initiatives. Similarly, while it has been making all the right noises in support of reservation legislation and private sector reservations for the dalits, there is still a long way to go before the seeming intent is translated into practice. The need of the hour is for the government to take bold, decisive action in favour of the dalits and marginalized communities. This is not just a survival issue for the dalits, but a matter of survival for the government itself – which was brought into power at the centre on the strength of its promises to make a difference to the dalits and marginalized communities.

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